Teacher Leader Development
Literature Review

> "Within every school there is a sleeping giant of teacher leadership, which can be a strong catalyst for making change."
>
> Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p. 2

Introduction

Effective school leadership is pivotal in shaping the lives, progress and achievement of students. In recent decades, teacher leaders have increasingly been recognised for their ability to influence change and promote best practices within the school environment. With their deep understanding of the intricacies of teaching, they are uniquely positioned to contribute to school leadership by fostering teacher collaboration, sharing best practices, promoting professional learning, assisting with differentiation, and addressing content-specific issues.

Education systems in the US, Europe, Australia and New Zealand have increasingly promoted teacher leadership as a lever for improving student outcomes. Teacher leaders can merge the roles of both teaching and leading, impacting positively on their students, colleagues, and the broader school community.

This paper seeks to understand what is known about teacher leadership in the literature. It constitutes a scoping review of the teacher leadership literature, intended to complement and expand a narrative review undertaken by the School Leadership Institute (SLI) in 2020. During a scan of literature from 2019-2024, the SLI identified and reviewed published literature on teacher leadership, building upon the key themes in the earlier review about the evolution and impact of teacher leadership.

Executive summary

Effective school leadership is crucial for student success. Teacher leaders are a significant component of school leadership and are uniquely positioned to influence change, promote best practices, foster collaboration, and contribute to school improvement.

Teacher leaders are educators who lead within and beyond the classroom, influencing school culture, improving teaching practices, mentoring peers, and contributing to decision-making processes to enhance student outcomes and support the overall development of the educational community.

Research on teacher leadership highlights three phases: from administrative roles to recognising teachers' expertise beyond the classroom and finally, viewing teacher leadership as a process where teachers act as agents of change, collaborating, building self-efficacy, and pursuing growth.

Three main themes are identified about the importance of teacher leader development and their value to the profession, including:

- Giving teachers a voice, recognition for their contributions, and opportunities to lead enhances job satisfaction, supports career renewal, and builds their capacity to drive school improvement.

- The development of teacher leadership, supported by effective school leaders, strengthens the whole school through enabling professional development, collaboration, and a strong feedback culture.

- Supporting leadership development for teachers at all career stages, with an equity focus, creates a diverse pool of motivated, capable teacher leaders, and increases the capacity of the system to drive positive impacts on student outcomes.

Long-lasting improvements in school performance can be achieved by nurturing and empowering teacher leadership, which fosters educational excellence and equity for all students.

What is teacher leadership?

Teacher leaders are highly skilled educators whose influence extends beyond their classrooms, offering professional guidance to colleagues and the broader school community. They play a key role in shaping the educational climate, designing both their own and others' professional learning, and fostering an environment where students can thrive.

As central figures in teaching, learning, and the daily operations of a school, teachers are integral to student success. Developing strong teachers into effective leaders not only elevates the profession but also ensures that students receive the high-quality education they deserve. By taking individual or collective responsibility, teacher leaders drive improvements in teaching practices and enhance student outcomes.

Importantly, teacher leadership does not always require a formal leadership title. Through their actions, teacher leaders demonstrate the skills and influence that may indicate readiness for formal leadership roles. Research highlights that teacher leadership is essential for effective teaching and school success, as these educators shape school culture, enhance student learning and well-being, and positively impact their peers' instructional practices.

> "All teachers have the right, capability and responsibility to be leaders."
>
> Lambert, 2003, p. 422

Research describes three 'waves' of evolving notions of teacher leadership, focusing on (1) teachers assuming administrative leadership roles; (2) teachers' roles beyond classroom practice which acknowledge their instructional expertise, and (3) teacher leadership as a process rather than a positional construct. This third wave speaks to an integration of teaching and leadership, emphasising that teachers should lead within their professional practice and act as agents of change.

Three themes and nine sub-themes emerge from the research literature, highlighting the importance of developing teacher leaders and their value to the profession. The development of teacher leaders is central to strengthening and empowering teachers, schools and the education system by:

- strengthening teachers, in terms of:
  - voice and agency
  - recognition
  - opportunity

- strengthening schools, in terms of:
  - professional development
  - collaboration and networking
  - culture of feedback

- strengthening the system, in terms of:
  - competency building
  - equity building
  - capacity building for the system.

These three key themes in literature are now explored in turn.

Strengthening teachers: teacher development as empowerment

Empowering teachers through providing development opportunities is vital for generating and sustaining high quality teacher leadership. It enables teachers "to innovate, lead and network [and so] contribute to the design, development and implementation of practices to support school and system priority goals" (Campbell, Lieberman, & Yashkina, 2015, p. 104). Offering opportunities for teachers to be heard and recognised for their achievements, and be motivated to apply for and attain leadership roles are essential aspects of this empowerment.

The focus on leadership development for teachers builds their leadership capacity while providing opportunities for career renewal and has been linked to enhanced job satisfaction and student motivation. Recognising teacher leadership work can create opportunities for reflection and development through self-determined commitment, competence and autonomy. Teacher leaders need a voice and agency, recognition for contributions, and opportunities to grow into leadership roles and demonstrate leadership.

Teacher voice and agency

Including teachers in school decision making significantly enhances both teacher satisfaction and school performance. With first-hand experience, teachers bridge the gap between policy and practice, contributing valuable insights to school improvements. Supporting teacher agency – ownership and engagement in school change and improvement processes – also strengthens their capacity to learn and teach, positively impacting overall school improvement.

Engaging teachers in decision making increases their participation in leadership and professional development and motivates them to assume leadership responsibilities. Conversely, teachers may feel that their ideas and talents are undervalued when their opinions are overlooked. Empowering teachers through voice and agency fosters greater commitment to school initiatives and encourages collaboration. It also boosts teacher enthusiasm for professional learning, enhancing

Key points about strengthening teachers

- **Voice and agency:** Involving teachers in school decision-making and supporting their agency enhances teacher satisfaction, promotes school improvement, and encourages leadership participation, collaboration, and professional growth.

- **Recognition:** Teacher recognition, a supportive school culture, and opportunities for leadership are crucial for job satisfaction, teacher confidence, and professional growth, which leads to teacher retention.

- **Opportunity:** Distributed leadership, where all teachers can take leadership responsibilities, has been identified as a powerful internal driver of school improvement and change, with professional development and career pathways supporting leadership growth at all stages of their career.

"Teacher leader identity is shaped not only by one's ability to skilfully act in the role as leader, but also through the acknowledgment of their leadership by others in their community."

Reid et al., 2022, p. 5

their ability to contribute to school improvement. When teacher leaders collaborate and contribute to the school community, they cultivate a sense of agency that strengthens self-efficacy and expands their expertise.

Teacher recognition

Research shows a strong correlation between teachers receiving recognition for their work – both in and beyond their classroom - and job satisfaction. A welcoming school culture that fosters belonging and appreciation enhances staff participation, wellbeing and development. A recurring theme in the literature highlights teachers' desire to see the impact of their efforts, gain recognition for their contributions, and support colleagues in reaching and influencing more students. Additionally, confidence and initiative are essential prerequisites for effective teacher leadership.

A concern among teachers is that the respect and authority they hold in the classroom does not extend to the wider school context. It is reported that many teachers feel their opinions are rarely considered beyond their own classrooms. Creating opportunities for teacher leadership, involving teachers in decision making, and recognising their contributions are key to sustaining commitment to and enthusiasm for the profession.

Hunzicker (2022) highlights the importance of a framework that enables teachers to recognise and articulate their leadership, particularly when their leadership is enacted informally. To foster a culture of shared decision making among professionals, formal school leaders must establish this gradually by demonstrating their commitment to valuing teachers' contributions in shaping school improvement efforts.

Research shows that how teacher leaders are perceived by others significantly impacts their effectiveness. Support from school leadership can enhance a teacher's sense of recognition, but challenges may arise when formal leaders distribute and/or relinquish authority and responsibility. Informal teacher leadership is most effective when it is combined with recognition, endorsement and authorisation from executive leaders, such as the principal.

Research indicates that teacher leaders may also find it challenging to gain recognition from colleagues for their expertise and responsibilities. This can be due to underlying norms of equality and independence within the teaching profession. Effective leadership is essential to shaping a school culture in a way that strengthens teachers' capacity to lead.

Teacher opportunity

Research highlights the benefits of schools functioning as professional communities where leadership is distributed rather than confined to specific leadership roles, such as the principal. This aligns with the concept that all teachers are leaders, capable of learning from and teaching one another while working collaboratively. This form of distributed, shared or collaborative leadership has been found to be a strong driver of school improvement and change.

Teacher leadership can develop at any stage of a teacher's career through professional learning and collaboration with school leaders. Supporting leadership development early in a teacher's career is more effective than imposing arbitrary waiting periods before taking on leadership roles. However, research highlights a tension between newer teachers' leadership aspirations and progression, and the belief among experienced teachers that leadership should be earned through demonstrated competence over time before leading others. Providing meaningful challenges and professional development opportunities is essential to maintaining motivated teaching staff, promoting teaching as a desirable career and retaining outstanding teachers who are vital to school improvement.

Research shows that some teachers hesitate to embrace leadership as it is associated with formal roles or responsibilities, rather than a suite of capabilities and behaviours that can impact positively on the learning of students and colleagues. While teachers engaged in leadership activities may recognise their strengths and advocate for professional growth and improvement, they may not see themselves as leaders or seek formal leadership positions.

This highlights the need for career pathways that allow teachers to remain in the classroom while demonstrating both role-based leadership and "leadership to improve the system" (Coggins & Diffenbaugh, 2013, p. 43). In this context, teaching, learning and leading are integrated, enabling career advancement without leaving the classroom. However, it is essential to promote a shared understanding that leadership exists both as a process and as a formal position within schools.

Strengthening schools: teacher leader development as collective work

Fostering teacher leadership helps create collaborative classrooms and a shared culture of learning within schools and across the wider system, enhancing both student performance and teacher satisfaction. Formal school leaders are critical in this process as they are "well-positioned to foster a positive school culture, to set the academic vision, and to drive the quality of professional development and coherence of programs" (Yamashiro et al., 2022, p. 35).

Some argue that a traditional hierarchy persists in the organisational structure of schools, where principals make decisions independently rather than embrace distributive leadership to share leadership and learning opportunities. Others emphasise the principal's crucial role in fostering teacher leadership by setting a strong vision, building trusting relationships, collaborating on decisions, providing opportunities and mentorship and ensuring adequate resources.

Effective teacher leader development strengthens professional learning communities, communication networks, and collaboration across schools and the broader system. High quality professional development, teacher collaboration and networking, and constructive feedback are essential for creating a shared culture of learning for all teachers and enhancing overall school effectiveness.

Professional development

Effective professional development is embedded in school culture with clear, meaningful goals and outcomes that align with both school and system priorities. It empowers all teachers, including formal leaders, to contribute, take risks and accept responsibility for fostering a culture of learning. Lasting improvements in student performance and instructional practices require professional development that is collaborative, coherent, content-based, context specific, applicable, and sustained.

The professional development of teacher leaders drives school and system improvement in three important ways. First, it creates the conditions and expectations that support teachers in developing both their own leadership and that of their colleagues. Second, it provides formal and informal opportunities for teacher leaders to apply and expand their professional knowledge and practices, rather than focusing solely on organisational knowledge associated with formal school leadership. Third, collaboration, communication and mentoring enable teacher leaders to share and implement improvement practices with colleagues, while engaging in reflective, constructive feedback.

Key points about strengthening schools

- **Professional development:** Effective professional development, embedded in school culture, empowers teachers and teacher leaders to collaborate, take responsibility, and drive lasting improvements in student learning and instructional practices, while supporting both formal and informal leadership roles.

- **Collaboration and networking:** Collaboration is central to teacher leadership, fostering trust, shared learning and strong professional networks among colleagues, students and families. It promotes ongoing inquiry, innovation, and collective growth, enhancing both teaching and student outcomes.

- **Culture of feedback:** A culture of constructive feedback is vital for leadership development. Timely, relevant feedback strengthens teacher commitment, job satisfaction, and professional growth, while fostering collaboration and support within schools.

"Embedding teacher learning as the pulse of the profession makes professional learning interactions both the platform for and the pathway to leadership."

Lovett, 2023, p. 1014

Investing in teacher leadership does not diminish the need for formal school and system leaders. Rather, it shifts the focus and nature of school improvement toward building a supportive culture and infrastructure. This enables teachers to innovate, collaborate, and take on leadership roles, actively shaping and implementing practices that support and align with school and system goals.

Collaboration and networking

Collaboration is at the heart of teacher leadership, with trust among colleagues, students and families creating the ideal conditions for learning. This fosters a culture of shared learning where teacher leaders play a significant role in both their own and their colleagues' professional and leadership growth by sharing knowledge and building networks. The 'collaborative power of the group' has been recognised in research and increasingly promoted in approaches to teachers' professionalism, learning and development.

Schools are complex adaptive systems that flourish when there is a balance between change and stability. Continuous improvement is enabled by gathering information, learning and adapting through a process of inquiry. In a continuously improving system, individual and collective growth occurs through "creating, obtaining, and circulating meaningful information" (Margolis & Strom, 2020, p. 620) to improve teaching practices and student outcomes. Research demonstrates that high-performing schools cultivate a culture of creativity and risk taking, giving teachers and leaders the freedom and flexibility to innovate and push boundaries.

An essential element of this practice is collaborative problem solving, leading to job-embedded deep professional learning. Research underscores the importance of building networks across schools, often structured as professional learning communities (PLCs), communities of practice (CoP), and professional learning networks (PLNs). These networks enable teachers to share practices, discuss experiences and navigate challenges about teaching and learning, and shape their professional identities. Effective collaboration extends beyond individual schools strengthening the education system.

Research emphasises the importance of collaboration between system leaders (governments, unions, school leaders) and teacher leaders working together to drive teacher-led professional learning. By working together, they develop new knowledge and share innovative practices that extend beyond classroom.

Culture of feedback

Research highlights the value of a culture that fosters both giving and receiving constructive feedback to support leadership development. Timely, relevant feedback on teachers' efforts to influence student learning has been shown to contribute to effective change, the development of positive school cultures, and job satisfaction.

Developing a feedback culture builds strong support networks and critical friend relationships, among teachers, supervisors and mentors. Formal school leaders, such as principals and deputy principals, play an important role in evaluating and providing feedback to teachers. To support the development of teachers effectively, school leaders should ensure that evaluation tools and feedback processes align with research and best practices. Teachers' ability to receive and act on feedback is also pivotal to their professional growth.

Research underscores the importance of encouraging new teachers to develop positive relationships with mentors and other school leaders. This helps nurture professional growth, strengthen leadership skills, enhance collaboration, and contribute to overall school improvement.

Strengthening the system: teacher leader development as enabling excellence

Supporting leadership development for teachers at every career stage contributes to lasting, large-scale improvements in educational practice and policy, ultimately benefitting student outcomes across the system. Approaching leadership development with an equity orientation is critical to ensure the diversity of the student body is recognised and valued and that teachers from diverse backgrounds receive the support they need to grow as leaders.

Investing in building the leadership capabilities of all teachers – regardless of their experience, backgrounds or identities – enhances school performance and creates a larger pool of interested, motivated, diverse and prepared teacher leaders from which to fulfil system leadership requirements.

Competency building

Leadership is the second most important factor influencing student outcomes after teaching and learning. Teacher leaders innovate, collaborate, and lead within classrooms and school communities. Developing teacher leadership enhances individual teachers' effectiveness and contributes to systemic improvements. Student outcomes are more likely to improve when leadership is distributed across the school community and when teachers are empowered in areas important to them. Building the leadership competencies of teacher leaders within their expanding sphere of influence leads to better teaching quality, organisational conditions and student performance and engagement.

Investing in teacher leadership early in teachers' careers fosters a community of teachers that are prepared for leadership. An inclusive leadership approach, regardless of position or seniority, promotes collective, coordinated work, connecting early career teachers with their colleagues and ensuring their contributions are valued and nurtured. Supporting leadership development throughout teachers' careers cultivates a system of high performing leaders, ready to take on greater responsibilities and drive positive changes.

Empowering teacher leaders to engage in research of their own practice has emerged as a powerful approach to transform teaching, learning and school systems. Research participation enhances teaching competence, encourages continuous learning, and enables teachers to influence educational policy and practice. Viewing teacher leaders as both practitioners and contributors to educational knowledge aligns with the growing literature on teacher leadership. When informal and formal school leaders adopt a research-focused mindset, they drive innovation and advance their own and their colleagues' professional growth.

Key points about strengthening the system

- **Competency building:** Teacher leadership improves teaching effectiveness and drives systemic improvements by empowering teachers to innovate, collaborate, and lead. Focusing on leadership development early in teachers' careers and encouraging ongoing professional growth through research and continuous learning is key.

- **Equity building:** A diverse teaching and leadership workforce is essential for advancing equity, improving student outcomes and inclusivity in schools. Research shows that diversity among teachers and leaders enhances student wellbeing, academic performance, and retention.

- **Capacity building for the system:** Empowering teachers as instructional leaders and decision-makers fosters positive school cultures, increases teacher retention, and addresses teacher shortages. Promoting diversity in leadership creates more inclusive, supportive environments and enables a sustainable pipeline of educators and leaders.

"Empowered teachers are not content to narrowly focus on instructing their assigned students, but aspire to contribute systematically to the entire learning community"

Hite & Donohoo, 2021, p. 54

Equity building

A diverse teaching and leadership workforce is essential for advancing equity and ensuring the success of all students in NSW public education. Research shows that the teaching profession does not reflect the increasingly diverse student population with only a small percentage of teachers and an even lower proportion of leaders from diverse backgrounds, such as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, low socio-economic, or people living with a disability. A more representative workforce can enhance inclusivity in school communities and improve the wellbeing and retention of other teachers and leaders from diverse backgrounds. This supports the identification of equity-oriented teacher leaders as a priority for educational systems.

Research consistently shows that a diverse workforce improves student outcomes in areas, including retention, attendance, behaviour, wellbeing, and academic performance. Shared lived experiences lead to more innovative, responsive teaching that meets students' needs, especially when there is congruence between teacher and student identities. For example, Aboriginal teachers in Australia play a pivotal role in boosting Aboriginal students' academic confidence and providing culturally enriching pedagogies.

Teachers and leaders who reflect the diversity of their student populations are powerful role models and bring valuable perspectives that enrich the educational experience for all students. This diversity fosters an inclusive, supportive school environment, benefiting the entire student body and supporting aspirations of a wider diversity of students for higher education, including initial teacher education programs. This, in turn, contributes to a more diverse pool of future teacher leaders entering the profession.

Equity-oriented approaches to leadership and development include reflecting on leadership pathways, providing professional supports including sponsorship (creating opportunities for leadership development), mentoring, and creating culturally safe workplaces. Research highlights that these strategies improve retention and increase representativeness in the education profession. A leadership pipeline that reflects student diversity improves outcomes for all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, by providing access to role models and responsive teaching in inclusive, equitable environments.

Capacity building

Research shows that empowering teachers as instructional leaders and decision-makers is linked to building positive school cultures and improving teacher retention. For teachers to remain committed to their careers and schools, research suggests they require more opportunities to contribute to decision making and policy implementation and be empowered to take on leadership roles.

When teachers feel fulfilled in leadership roles, they foster a more supportive school culture. Sustainable leadership is achieved when targeted leadership approaches support ongoing development with teacher leaders and principals working together to enable effective professional learning. By promoting shared responsibility and continuous improvement, teacher leadership strengthens professional learning communities, enhances innovative practices, and improves student outcomes, increasing the effectiveness and sustainability of the educational system.

Representative leadership also creates more inclusive, supportive work environments for all teachers, helping address teacher shortages. Teachers from underrepresented groups are more likely to remain in these schools and foster strong connections with the communities they serve. Additionally, more diverse leadership has been demonstrated to be effective in recruiting and retaining a wider pool of teachers, contributing to a long-term pipeline of diverse and responsive educators and leaders.

Conclusion

Empowering teacher leadership transforms education by strengthening teachers, schools, and the entire system, leading to significant positive impacts in student outcomes.

First, when teachers are given a voice and agency, recognised for their contributions, and provided with opportunities for professional growth, they are more motivated and better equipped to innovate and adapt their practices. This empowerment fosters a culture where teachers feel valued and supported, ultimately enhancing their effectiveness as educators.

Second, within schools, a focus on professional development, collaboration, and a strong feedback culture creates environments where teachers continuously learn from each other and strive for excellence. This collaborative spirit not only improves teaching practices but also drives improvement and innovation, enriching the overall school culture.

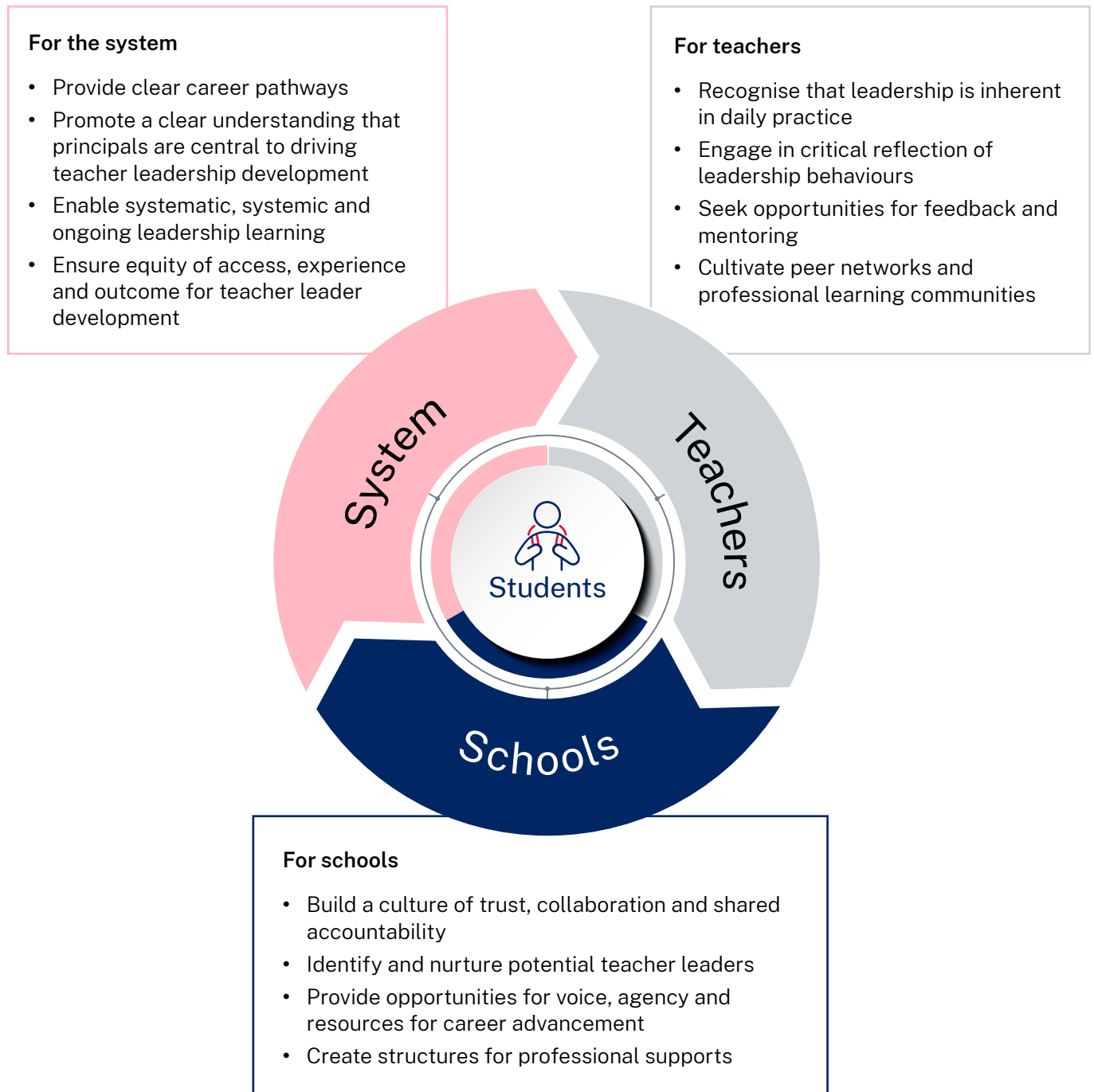Finally, at the systemic level, advancing equity, building capabilities, and enhancing capacity ensures that the benefits of teacher leadership extend beyond individual schools to influence educational systems. By investing in the development of a diverse range of teacher leaders and creating supportive frameworks, education systems can achieve sustained improvement in student achievement and educational equity.

Deep and long-lasting improvement in school performance stems from nurturing and supporting teachers. Teacher leadership development is central to shaping the future of education by empowering those who are closest to students and at the heart of the learning process. A collective commitment to recognising and providing opportunities for all teacher leaders enables the achievement of educational excellence and equity. By cultivating a culture where all teachers can lead, we not only elevate the teaching profession but also ensure every student receives a high-quality education.

Implications for Teacher Leader Development

The benefits of teacher leader development create a dynamic, interconnected cycle that strengthens the relationships between teachers, schools, and the broader education system. As teachers develop leadership behaviours, they become more effective in and beyond their classrooms, which improves the overall quality of education within schools. In turn, this fosters greater collaboration amongst teachers and contributes to the development of positive school cultures. The collective effect of improved school cultures is a stronger NSW public education system which is more invested in the development of teacher leaders. This continuous loop of growth and change at all levels positively impacts student learning and wellbeing.

The development of teacher leaders holds significant implications at multiple levels: for individual teachers, schools, and the broader education system.

For the system

- Provide clear career pathways
- Promote a clear understanding that principals are central to driving teacher leadership development
- Enable systematic, systemic and ongoing leadership learning
- Ensure equity of access, experience and outcome for teacher leader development

For teachers

- Recognise that leadership is inherent in daily practice
- Engage in critical reflection of leadership behaviours
- Seek opportunities for feedback and mentoring
- Cultivate peer networks and professional learning communities

For schools

- Build a culture of trust, collaboration and shared accountability
- Identify and nurture potential teacher leaders
- Provide opportunities for voice, agency and resources for career advancement
- Create structures for professional supports

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