Article

Teacher readiness for teacher leadership competences

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Abstract: In this time of ambiguity, change, and conflict, integrating teacher leadership into initial teacher education (ITE) programs is crucial. However, complexities exist regarding ITE quality globally and in Vietnam specifically. This study explores the perceptions of different ITE stakeholders in Vietnam towards teacher leadership and factors that impact prospective teachers' preparedness for teacher leadership based on the Teacher Leadership Model Standards. Using mixed methods, data were collected from surveys with pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and teacher educators in various universities that offer ITE programs in Vietnam. Statistical analysis was deployed to identify similarities and differences in the perceptions of the three groups of participants, highlighting that while pre-service and in-service teachers share similar viewpoints toward teacher leadership, those of teacher educators are significantly different in some key areas. Furthermore, thematic analysis of qualitative responses from in-service and pre-service teachers was employed to shed light on their beliefs about the importance of teacher leadership and explore how the ITE programs support or hinder pre-service teachers' preparedness in developing and validating their leadership skills. The findings of this study will have ramifications for the potential to restructure the ITE programs in Vietnam to better prepare the nation's future leaders for the education system and society as a whole.

Keywords: teacher leadership; leadership competences; Vietnam

1. Introduction

Teachers have been recognized as essential leaders in schools because they play a crucial role in driving educational reforms and directly influencing student performance (Darling-Hammond and Lieberman, 2013). Promoting teacher leadership is vital for student achievement and school improvement, as studies show that strong leadership in schools greatly boosts student learning and contributes to the overall development of the school community (Leithwood et al., 2019). In other words, teacher leadership has become a potent force for long-lasting improvement in education that benefits teachers, students and the community at large. However, in Vietnam, as in other Confucian-influenced countries, teachers often grapple with limited authority within the educational framework (Smith and Benavot, 2019), not to mention expectations for school effectiveness or systematic transformation. Since 2000, Decision 04/2000/QĐ-BGDĐT was established to foster democratic practices in schools; however, entrenched hierarchical values and social norms have hindered authentic teacher involvement in the decision-making process (Hallinger and Truong, 2016). In this context, school management is often viewed as authoritarian and hierarchical, and school leaders typically employ a top-down leadership approach to decision-making on various school issues (Truong, 2013). According to Nguyen and other researchers (2023), the functions of school principals are entwined with their

responsibilities as government officials and political representatives of the Communist Party within educational institutions. This persistence of hierarchical norms and centralised school leadership attached to political authority continue to limit teachers' genuine participation in teacher leadership. Moreover, some research underscores considerable hurdles in the Vietnamese education system, notably in the northern mountainous regions, where geographical isolation, low literacy rates among students, restricted access to resources, a scarcity of qualified teachers, and few job opportunities are prevalent (iSEE, 2011; Tran et al., 2016). In these underprivileged areas, teachers frequently struggle to implement teaching methods that resonate with their students (Bui and Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen and Bui, 2016) and to provide a curriculum that aligns with learners' diverse needs (Nguyen and Hamid, 2015). This condition seems to impede teacher leadership for educational transformation. As per Kataoka and colleagues in World Bank (2020), Vietnam must prioritise creating supportive conditions related to school infrastructure, the number of teachers, and their quality and job satisfaction to enhance its educational outcomes. However, teacher leadership training seems to be neglected within the context of teacher education (Ngo, et al., 2022), which casts some critical questions about the efficacy of the ITE programs in Vietnam. In this study, the Teacher Leader Model Standards model was adopted as guidelines for teacher credentialing programs in qualifying prospective teacher leaders. Given this framework and research gaps, this study seeks to address the following research questions: What are the perceptions of teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and in-service teachers in relation to (a) the importance of teacher leadership functions and (b) their preparedness through initial teacher education programs to perform teacher leadership domains outlined in the Teacher Leader Model Standards? Insights from this exploration promises to enhance the ITE programmes and make the education system more dynamic and responsive, which will eventually benefit students and communities alike.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualization of teacher leadership

The concept of teacher leadership has garnered a lot of attention recently, yet its universally accepted definition is still missing (Nguyen et al., 2019; Wenner and Campbell, 2017). The complex essence of teacher leadership manifests in both formal and informal dimensions, creating a dynamic environment for growth and collaboration. Formal positions that teachers may take on include head of department, master teacher, and subject coordinator (Danielson, 2007; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009). These roles often come with defined responsibilities and expectations for leading initiatives under school or district-level policies. Some research has limited the concept of teacher leadership to administrative positions typically held by several educators (Cooper, 2020).

In contrast, teacher leadership also thrives in informal roles such as advocating for students, facilitating colleagues, and nurturing a school culture of success (Crowther et al., 2009). Here, teacher leadership is understood as a type of collective leadership that develops through motivating peers, sharing insights, tackling educational issues together, and pursuing continued professional development

(Fairman and Mackenzie, 2015; Meyer et al., 2022). This form of leadership is impactful in fostering a learning community without being confined to titles or positions.

The benefits of teacher leadership are well-documented in the educational literature. Engaging in leadership roles boosts teachers' self-efficacy and self-esteem (Angelle and Teague, 2014), enhances instructional practices (Supovitz et al., 2010), and improves student learning (Yost et al., 2009). Furthermore, effective teacher leadership is instrumental in cultivating vibrant school culture, fostering professional learning communities, and strengthening the overall soundness of the education system (Beachum and Dentith, 2004; Lai and Cheung, 2015). Yukl (2013) likens teacher leadership to "influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (p.23). Thus, teacher leadership is synonymous with a social process in which individual teachers use their agency to influence others towards a shared goal. In this vein, teacher leadership is touted as an essential instrument for enhancing school improvement, as it empowers teachers and their colleagues to practice leadership and influence their professional growth and student learning.

2.2. Teacher leadership learning for preservice teachers

As conceptualized as a social process that enables teachers to influence their peers toward shared goals and professional development, it is clear that teacher leadership should be cultivated for all teachers, regardless of any context or school level. However, while extensive research centres on the crucial role of teacher leadership in K-12 education, there is a shortage of studies on this concept in higher education (Ghamrawi et al., 2024). This gap veils the understandings of the intricacies and contributions of teacher leadership at the tertiary level, especially for those in training to become K-12 teachers or for those navigating the early stages of their career journey. As the beneficial effects of teacher leadership are recognized in the literature, researchers suggest that leadership training should be regarded as a crucial part of teacher preparation programs (King et al., 2019; Turnbull, 2005) to help prospective teachers acquire the knowledge and abilities they need to effectively exercise leadership down the road. Nevertheless, most research focuses on developing leadership skills in in-service teachers (Higgins and Bonne, 2011; Muijs and Harris, 2007; Silva et al., 2000) while neglecting how leadership is addressed in pre-service teacher training programs (Ado, 2016; Bond, 2011; Rogers and Scales, 2013). This lack is partly due to the traditional viewpoint of teacher preparation programs that place less emphasis on leadership training (Xu and Patmor, 2012) and instead concentrate on giving pre-service teachers pedagogical knowledge and capabilities (Bond, 2011). This gives rise to the mismatches between the shortage of systematic teacher leadership preparation and preservice teachers' learning needs to thrive as leaders in ever-changing educational settings.

Among the small number of empirical studies that address this topic, the majority introduce different strategies and approaches to conducting leadership learning at teacher education institutions, which can be grouped into two major categories:

1) Embedding leadership courses: This strategy is to include or introduce leadership and management courses in teacher training programs. For example, Pucella (2014) presents an illustration of a program that incorporates leadership courses, arguing that the depth of coursework helps pre-service teachers develop "a majority of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are essential to the burgeoning teacher leader" (p. 18).

2) Integration of teacher leadership components: The second approach is to incorporate leadership training elements into other courses within the program (Bond, 2011; Xu and Patmor, 2012). Turnbull (2005) proposes incorporating school-based management themes in the research component of two teacher education programs as venues to equip pre-service teachers with not only an understanding of school management but also the significance of being involved in school leadership. Another proportion of the study investigates the extent to which these leadership training components help equip pre-service teachers with leadership knowledge, abilities, and dispositions, reporting mixed results. While favorable impacts of the leadership training components on pre-service teachers are amply demonstrated (Ado, 2016; Lowery-Moore et al., 2016; Reid-Griffin and Slaten, 2016), the study by Rogers and Scales (2013) indicates that the way the given leadership training component was conducted (i.e., performance-oriented) did not necessarily result in the pre-service teachers' change in their perceptions of teacher leadership. Instead, pre-service teachers completed the component to comply with the requirements for their training to be a teacher rather than to understand and embrace the real challenges of being teacher leaders. Regardless of their different focuses and research aims, there remains a major problem in the studies mentioned above, which is their lack of leadership learning. This ambiguity hinders the growth of a coherent framework for interpreting how leadership can be effectively integrated into teacher training education. This highlights the need for a more unified approach that defines and incorporates teacher leadership training in the very context of teacher education so that teachers can navigate and thrive in leadership roles within their schools. In other words, the values and practical experiences of teacher leadership should be embedded and practiced within ITE programs to ensure teacher candidates understand and embrace these competencies to become qualified teachers with effective leadership and influence school effectiveness.

3. The study

A mixed methods research design incorporates both qualitative and quantitative features into the design, data collection and analysis in a single study (Creswell, 2003; Hanson et al., 2005) and was deemed an appropriate approach for investigating how teacher leadership competences are perceived by different stakeholders (i.e., teacher educators, pre-service and in-service teachers) in Vietnam. This study utilised a chronological mixed methods strategy that encompasses both descriptive survey research and interviews in order to explore how Vietnamese teachers (inservice and preservice) and teacher educators in Vietnam perceive the imperative of teacher leadership and the preparedness for leadership skills through teacher training programs.

3.1. Survey description

The survey questionnaire was developed based on Mosley's (2012) Teacher Leader Model Standards instrument, framed under the Teacher Leader Model Standards (TLMS) (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011). To ensure cultural relevance and clarity, all items were translated into Vietnamese and reviewed by experts in Vietnam's teacher professional development.

More specifically, the survey is structured to assess participants' perceptions regarding the importance of various leadership functions and their preparedness to perform these functions, as outlined in the seven domains suggested by the TLMS. These domains encompass a wide range of leadership competencies, including:

1) Fostering a collaborative culture
2) Accessing and using research
3) Promoting professional learning
4) Facilitating instructional improvement
5) Promoting the use of assessments and data
6) Improving outreach to families and community
7) Advocating for students and the profession

In the survey, participants are asked to rate each leadership function on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 'Not Important' or 'Not Prepared' to 'Very Important' or 'Highly Prepared'. This rating system allows for a nuanced understanding of both the perceived significance of these leadership functions in their professional roles and their self-assessed readiness to execute them.

Accordingly, the survey consists of 84 questions, providing comprehensive insights into participants' perceptions and experiences. The survey was administered to three groups of participants: teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and in-service teachers. For teacher educators and pre-service teachers, data was collected from 16 teacher education institutions across Vietnam. Meanwhile, data for in-service teachers was gathered from various elementary, secondary, and high schools across 24 provinces, spanning from the North to the South of the country.

Participants were first asked to indicate the importance of the specific leadership functions in the seven domains suggested by the Teacher Leadership Model Standards. Then, teacher educators were asked to evaluate their students' preparedness to enact such functions in practice, whereas pre-service and in-service teachers were asked to self-evaluate their preparedness in these functions.

As a result, our research sample consists of qualified responses from 224 teacher educators, 806 pre-service teachers, and 694 in-service teachers. **Table 1** provides a detailed look at the demographic features of these groups. In this section, we provide an overview of the demographic characteristics of the three sample cohorts.

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Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample cohort.

Variable		Teacher Educators		Pre-service Teachers		In-service Teachers	
		N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Total responses		224	100	806	100	694	100
Gender	Female	143	63.8	705	87.5	537	77.4
	Male	80	35.7	100	12.4	157	22.6
	Others	1	0.5	1	0.1	0	0
Year in University	First year			219	27.1		
	Second year			180	22.3		
	Third year			103	12.8		
	Final year			304	37.8		
Years of teaching experience	Under 5 years	19	8.5			77	11
	5–10 years	40	17.8			139	20
	Over 10 years	165	73.7			478	69

Among the teacher educators, majority were female (63.8%), while males constituted 35.7%, being the cohort with highest male participants in comparison with 22.6% in the in-service teacher and 12.4% in pre-service teacher groups. In terms of teaching experience, both teacher educators and in-service teachers share similar characteristics, with a substantial portion had over 10 years of experience (73.7% for teacher educator and 69% for in-service teachers), highlighting a workforce with substantial teaching experience. Pre-service teachers had diverse academic standing, with the largest group being in their final year (37.8%). This distribution suggests a good representation as pre-service teachers in their final year are likely more focused on future career and thus more interested in teacher leadership.

Overall, the demographic characteristics of the survey participants reveal a gender imbalance favouring females across all groups and a significant level of teaching experience among teacher educators and in-service teachers. This detailed breakdown helps us understand the participants' backgrounds, which is crucial for interpreting the survey results on teacher leadership perceptions.

3.2. Interviews

The participants who finished the initial quantitative data and indicate their willingness to participate in the second stage of the study were invited for interviews. The qualitative data in this study was predicated on individual semi-structured interviews with 32 inservice teachers and 26 preservice teachers who volunteered to join. This data collection method was employed to capture the personal perspectives of specific interviewees or participants regarding a particular theme (Nascimento and Steinbruch, 2019). Each interview, spanning between 45 min and an hour, was audio-recorded for subsequent analysis to gain a deeper understanding of teacher leadership in the existing educational context. Thematic analysis (Creswell, 2003) was utilized to code the interview transcripts. In this paper, we present rich data on the significance of teacher leadership and the preparedness for these leadership skills as supported or

hindered through the ITE programs. This qualitative data critically complements the quantitative findings and responds to the research questions mentioned earlier.

4. Findings: Perceptions of the importance of the teacher leadership functions

4.1. Findings from quantitative data

The findings showed the importance of leadership competencies across seven domains identified by the Teacher Leadership Model Standards. In specific, the **Figure 1** show the average percentage of participants thinking the described leadership domains are important. The data presented in the **Table 2** illustrate the differences in perceptions among the three participant groups regarding the importance of leadership competencies across seven domains identified by the Teacher Leadership Model Standards.
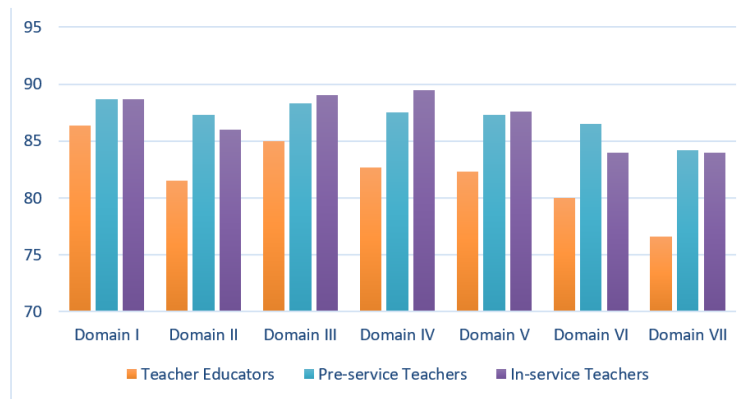

Figure 1. The importance of teacher leadership in each domains

Table 2. Perceived importance of teacher leadership across domains by participants (average percentage).

	Teacher Educators (%)	Pre-service Teachers (%)	In-service Teachers (%)
Domain I	86.36	88.7	88.7
Domain II	81.5	87.3	86
Domain III	85	88.3	89
Domain IV	82.7	87.5	89.5
Domain V	82.3	87.3	87.6
Domain VI	80	86.5	84
Domain VII	76.6	84.2	84

The data presented in the table illustrate the differences in perceptions among the three participant groups regarding the importance of leadership competencies across seven domains identified by the Teacher Leadership Model Standards. The figures show the average percentage of participants thinking the described leadership domains are important.

According to this data, pre-service and in-service teachers share similar perceptions regarding the importance of these leadership competencies, whereas teacher educators have notably different viewpoints. This analysis specifically focuses on Domains VI and VII.

Domain VI pertains to improving outreach and collaboration with families and communities. Participants were asked whether they believe it is important for teachers to understand different backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, and languages within the school community; to model effective communication skills with families and the community to ensure educational equity; to develop shared understandings among colleagues about the diverse educational needs of the community; and to collaborate with families and communities to address these needs. While on average, 80% of teacher educators perceived that this domain is important, the figure for pre-service teachers and in-service teachers are relatively higher, at 86.5% and 84% respectively.

Meanwhile, domain VII covers advocating for student learning and the teaching profession. This domain includes understanding how educational policies are formulated at different levels, how various stakeholders are involved in the policy-making process, and how to use this knowledge to advocate for student needs and the implementation of effective teaching practices. Teacher leaders in this domain are seen as individuals of influence and respect within the school, community, and profession. In general, 76.6% teacher educators rate this domain as important, much lower than the figures of 84.2% and 84% by pre-service teachers and in-service teachers, respectively

Interestingly, all three participant groups rank the importance of these two domains relatively low compared to other domains, particularly teacher educators. This is notable because these domains focus on broadening the scope of leadership beyond the school boundary. The perception that these two domains are less important than others suggests that the primary concern of teacher leadership is seen by the participants as being within the school. This is understandable in the context of Vietnam, where a top-down approach to management prevails, and teachers are perceived as having little influence on matters outside their classroom or school.

However, there is a significant gap in perceptions between the teacher educator group and the other two groups regarding these two domains. The perceptions of in-service and pre-service teachers are quite aligned, indicating a shared viewpoint on the importance of these functions. In contrast, teacher educators do not regard the importance of these two domains as highly as the other two groups. This indicates significant disconnections in teacher educators' perceptions regarding the importance of external outreach and what is actually needed in practice.

4.2. Findings from qualitative data

Through the process of qualitative data analysis, several key insights emerged from pre-service and in-service teachers about the importance of teacher leadership competencies, particularly in the realms of accessing and using research (Domain II), collaboration with parents and the community (Domain VI), and advocating for student learning and the teaching profession through policies (Domain VII).

Domain II: Accessing and using research to improve practice and student learningThe belief in the power of applying research to improve practice and student learning is echoed by many teachers. Two participants, Hanh and Chi, highlighted the necessity of research in driving innovation and evaluating the effectiveness of teaching methods, programs, and educational reforms. Yen further explained, "Research provides tailored strategies and new methodologies that resonate with different learning stages." Specifically, the potential of research helps "identify challenges and obstacles in teaching, discover new methods and solutions to improve weaknesses" (Truc) and "develop their unique abilities and talents" (Lien). Each topic introduces new insights and offers strategies to enhance the quality of education (Xuyen). Thus, producing research ensures that the latest knowledge is applied, and suitable instructional practices are more effectively adopted to enrich student learning (Yen, Truc).

However, conducting research in schools is often tied to pursuing titles, certificates, and achievements in their careers. Phat, an in-service teacher, shared that research was undertaken yearly in his school as a way to strive for attainments. This practice delineates the priority of formal achievements over authentic engagement in leadership development in the high-stakes education context of Vietnam, where teachers "must carry out research and develop initiatives to apply for titles and honors" (Tho). This superficial process of doing research seems to undermine the genuine exploration and perceived significance of using research that accompanies teacher leadership and the targeted enhancement of educational practices in Vietnam.

Domain VI: Improving outreach and collaboration with families and communities

Working in tandem with parents and the larger community is perceived by many pre-service and in-service teachers as a critical component that significantly impacts the quality of education. Lan and Chi highlighted that effective communication with students' parents enabled teachers to address classroom issues promptly and efficiently. The pivotal role of parents in supporting their children's academic journeys (Hanh, Xuyen, Xuan, Lien) is considered the main rationale behind this idea. Xuyen stated that informal learning, particularly from parents and grandparents, was equally significant for students' holistic development. This reinforces their perspective that the educational process goes beyond the classroom walls and that the connection between school and home should be strengthened.

Specifically, informing parents about their children not completing assignments can help them provide the necessary support or encouragement for their academic performance. Parental reminders at home could enhance students' ability to complete assignments and even their learning outcomes (Hanh, Xuan). Another pre-service teacher, Lien, illustrated the practical implications of strong home-school partnerships through her observations during her internship: … when learning a new poem, the time in class is limited, so teachers often send the poem home for parents to help their children memorize it. Children who receive parental support are much more likely to learn the poem successfully. In contrast, those whose parents are less involved often struggle to memorize it… (Lien)

This collaborative approach reinforces the critical role of teacher leadership in constructing strong home-school connections. However, the participating in-service

teachers acknowledged that the effectiveness of teacher leadership through teacher-parent collaboration was somewhat challenged by the broader sociocultural context of mountainous Northern regions in Vietnam:

Due to economic conditions, parents sometimes have to work far from home and entrust their children entirely to teachers and schools. Therefore, communication with students' parents can be more challenging and mainly occurs through the homeroom teacher… (Phuoc)

In contrast to the current system of morning attendance checks and instant messaging, parents in the past found it difficult to stay informed about their children's absences without messaging apps… (Gia Han)

In light of the perceived importance and challenges, the participant teachers must acquire leadership competencies to facilitate timely collaboration with parents and the community and to provide more targeted or individualized assistance and care for their students' improvement and school development.

Domain VII: Advocating for student learning and the teaching profession

In terms of Domain VII, staying informed about educational policies was perceived as pivotal among both pre-service and in-service teachers. According to Lan, the role of teachers is "not just about traditional lecturing but also underpinned in the development of education both historically and during reform efforts." Specifically, Long, an in-service teacher, stressed their "key roles in providing feedback on textbooks and curriculum for potential innovation." Teachers must also "actively evolve their pedagogical approaches to align with contemporary educational practices and foster students to explore knowledge independently under their guidance" (Lan).

Meanwhile, other interviewed teachers position themselves as implementers of existing policies to drive meaningful change in education, rather than as participants in the policy-making process. As per Vy, an in-service teacher, "being aware of these district or provincial policies acts as a catalyst for effective implementation." Every teacher needs to keep updated on trends and policies on innovative teaching methods, and continuous professional development is essential for them to adapt such approaches effectively in certain educational conditions (Tuyet Mai, Long). Phat noted that only after the seniors or experienced teachers attended training sessions from the higher levels did teachers get updated on new educational methods, apply these methods in their classes, and evaluate their effectiveness. In this sense, Nghi further commented, "When teachers are informed about these policies on improving the quality of education from the district or local education authorities, it not only deepens parents' understanding but also supports school leadership in their work with students."

The prominent finding here is the perceived importance of strengthening collaboration skills with families and communities, as well as staying abreast of developments in educational policies, despite their role as implementers. These insights underscore the necessity of equipping teachers with leadership abilities in the complex educational context of mountainous Vietnam.

5. Perceptions of the preparedness to perform teacher leadership functions through the ITE programmes

5.1. Findings from quantitative data

The data in the **Figure 2** highlight significant differences in perceived under-preparedness of teacher for teacher leadership across seven domains according to the Teacher Leadership Model Standards. The figures represent the average percentage of participants who believe teachers are not adequately prepared for the described leadership domains. Once more, it appears that pre-service and in-service teachers have aligned views on their readiness for these leadership competencies, while teacher educators hold distinctly different perspectives, especially in domains II (accessing and conducting research to improve practice and student learning) and VII (advocating for student learning and the teaching profession).
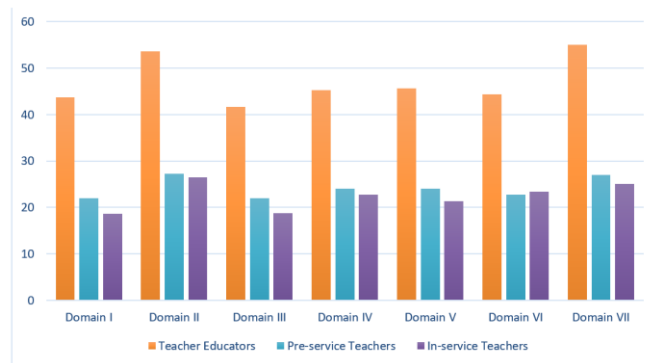

Figure 2. Significant differences in perceived under-preparedness of teacher for teacher leadership across seven domains

Domain II emphasises the importance of accessing and using research to improve practice and student learning. In this domain, 53.57% of teacher educators believe that teachers are under-prepared, compared to only 27.3% of pre-service and 26.44% in-service teachers. This substantial gap suggests that teacher educators perceive a notable deficiency in this area compared to the other two groups.

Table 3. Perceived under-preparedness of teacher leadership across domains by participants (average percentage).

	Teacher Educators (%)	Pre-service Teachers (%)	In-service Teachers (%)
Domain I	43.75	22	18.7
Domain II	53.57	27.3	26.44
Domain III	41.63	22	18.8
Domain IV	45.3	24	22.72
Domain V	45.6	24	21.36
Domain VI	44.4	22.7	23.46
Domain VII	55	27	25.1

Similarly, in Domain VII, which focuses on advocating for student learning and the teaching profession, more than half of teacher educators (55%) believe teachers are under-prepared. In contrast, only 27% of pre-service teachers and 25.1% of in-service teachers share this view. This domain involves understanding how educational policies are formulated, the role of different stakeholders in the policy-making process and using this knowledge to advocate for student needs and effective teaching

practices. The significant disparity in this domain indicates that teacher educators believe teachers are considerably more under-prepared to take on advocacy roles compared to the perceptions of pre-service and in-service teachers. This pattern of differences in perception between teacher educators and those of the other two groups are indeed consistent across other domains (see **Table 3**).

Overall, the data suggest that teacher educators consistently perceive teacher's under-preparedness for teacher leadership at much higher level across all domains compared to pre-service and in-service Teachers. The most significant gaps are observed in domains II (accessing and adopting research to improve practice and student learning) and VII (advocating for student learning and the teaching profession), highlighting a potential disconnect in perceptions of preparedness between teacher educators and the other two groups. This indicates that teacher educators may see more areas for improvement in teachers' abilities to address diverse educational needs and advocate for student learning and the teaching profession.

We believe that this finding aligns closely with the results presented in the previous part. Since teacher educators do not place a high value on leadership competencies in domains VI (improving outreach and collaboration with families and communities) and VII (advocating for student learning and the teaching profession), it is likely that they do not emphasize these areas in their training programs. Domain VI focuses on improving outreach and collaboration with families and communities, while domain VII involves advocating for student learning and the teaching profession. Given the lower importance assigned to these domains by teacher educators, it is plausible that they invest less effort in preparing their students for these specific leadership functions. Consequently, teacher educators perceived their students as being under-prepared in these areas. This perception is reflected in the significant gaps in under-preparedness ratings between teacher educators and the other two groups, indicating a potential disconnect in the prioritization and training of these competencies.

5.2. Findings from qualitative data

Qualitative interviews with pre-service and in-service teachers regarding these domains support the findings from the quantitative results. Pre-service teachers' preparedness for teacher leadership through accessing and using research for educational enhancement (Domain II), collaboration with parents and the community (Domain VI), and their advocacy for educational change (Domain VII) is underpinned by their educational experiences and perceived gaps in the initial teacher education program.

Domain II: Accessing and using research to improve practice and student learning

Pre-service teachers revealed some perceived entanglements about their preparedness for teacher leadership in accessing and using research to facilitate educational practices through the ITE programs. Many referred to the module on research methods as a key component of their training programs (e.g., Minh Quan, Thu, Lieu, Manh Hung), which centers on constructing theory and conducting surveys (Hanh). While Lam and Nguyet felt adequately prepared through their coursework, Ngoc emphasized the significance of practical research experience gained from

participation in school-level research competitions. This experience equipped her with essential research skills such as observation, information filtering, analysis, and synthesis (Thu).

Nonetheless, "engaging in research is voluntary" (Lieu) and "only a few student teachers in the cohort register to do research projects such as theses or competitions" (Hanh). According to some pre-service teachers, implementing research "often requires assistance from supervisors" (Lieu), who shared valuable research skills such as taking the initiative to study previous research, filtering relevant information, synthesizing data, and applying appropriate methods and strategies (Thu). Conversely, Manh Hung admitted his lack of engagement in both formal and informal research activities due to personal motivation and uncertainty about research topics. This gap is intertwined with the superficial nature of research modules in the ITE programs: "My university courses on research are not very in-depth with only an overview of educational research, which leaves us with a vague understanding" (Chi). Dung further emphasized: although some subjects provide supportive knowledge, there are no specific courses to develop research skills. Instead, student teachers working on research projects receive direct guidance from teachers, who assist us step by step or through hands-on learning rather than fostering creativity. (Dung).

These insights highlight gaps in practical research opportunities and support in the ITE programs that may impact the effectiveness of teacher leadership equipped to leverage research to enhance student learning and practices.

Domain VI: Improving outreach and collaboration with families and communities

In terms of collaboration with parents, some pre-service teachers reported that communication skills with stakeholders beyond school settings were incorporated as part of modules in the curriculum and hands-on experiences during their internships (Lan, Lien, Chi, Hanh). However, there were only a few scenarios included in subjects or sections on handling situations, rather than a specific module centered on teaching skills for communicating with parents (Yen, Bich Ngoc, Xuan). Examples of practical experiences included making phone calls or direct interactions with parents to address specific issues (Yen) and responding warmly to parents who were overly strict or upset about their child's low grades (Xuan). Some pre-service teachers valued the scenario-based learning that prepared them for real-life situations and expressed increased confidence in interacting with parents (Lien, Lan).

While Chi found this preparation sufficient for effective communication, many pre-service teachers encountered challenges in developing their parent collaboration skills. These challenges included parents' limited educational levels and perspectives (Minh Quan), skepticism about teachers' capabilities (Bich Ngoc), tight schedules that hindered engagement (Tram, Nhi), and pre-service teachers' slow responsiveness in handling interactions (Xuan). These issues were further exacerbated by a lack of quality teacher education training throughout the mountainous areas of Northern Vietnam. This means that not all ITE programs in universities provide the necessary skills through their activities or lessons. Thus, most respondents indicated that their formal ITE programs failed to equip pre-service teachers with the leadership skills necessary for engaging with parents (Thai Son, Tram, Vinh, Chi Kien, Xuyen, Khoi, Tuyet Mai, Nhung, Manh Hung, Nhi). In other words, the inconsistent structure of the

programs limits their leadership competencies in constructing meaningful collaboration with parents.

Another prevailing theme is that while internships are the only time pre-service teachers can engage directly with parents, there is a notable lack of formal opportunities for such interactions. Nhung shared, "I only communicated with teachers and students but haven't interacted with parents yet during my recent internship." Xuyen and Hanh also underscored that their minor autonomy in parent communication was restricted to assisting homeroom teachers, which hindered their ability to develop leadership competencies. As Xuyen stated, "Reaching out to parents is solely the homeroom teacher's responsibility." This idea is echoed by Chi, who pointed out that collaboration with parents was not a requirement in the educational program. Vinh added, "Our collaboration skills with colleagues, teachers from other schools, and local educational authorities are not strong because we primarily focus on academics, and we lack finesse in such soft skills like communication." Therefore, it is understandable that pre-service teachers' preparedness for teacher leadership is marginalized by the higher hierarchical positions of homeroom teachers and mitigated by scarce leadership opportunities within the ITE programs.

Domain VII: Advocating for student learning and the teaching profession.

The preparedness of pre-service teachers for teacher leadership is influenced by their understanding of—and access to—educational policies. According to Tuyet Mai, the university curriculum endowed them with essential soft skills and information-seeking strategies through workshops and faculty guidance to navigate the complexities of educational reforms and apply them in their teaching. Similarly, some modules on public administration, laws, and resolutions provided valuable insights into local and national trends and policies to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, as well as their rights and responsibilities as future teachers (Vinh, Xuan). Such foundational modules allowed them to understand broader concepts and motivated them to engage with scholarship opportunities and advocate for policies that alleviate financial burdens on families and facilitate students' improved academic outcomes.

As per in-service teachers, party organizations, youth groups, and school administrators understand policies and reforms before informing teachers about them, so this top-down support is beneficial at the grassroots level (Vu, Vy). Meanwhile, Vu, an in-service teacher, stressed, "Pre-service teachers must develop a solid understanding of legal principles early on. Without policy access, they may struggle with civil service exams and remain uncertain about their preparation and even the next steps even if they pass."

While the necessity of improved training and access to educational policies is emphasized among both research participant groups, many pre-service teachers felt unprepared to engage with local and regional educational policies through the ITE programs that are not consistently structured in every region of Vietnam. Thu, a pre-service teacher, and Truc, an in-service teacher, reflected on the absence of direct instruction on accessing policy information from the government, the Ministry of Education and Training, or local authorities, which restricted their ability to advocate effectively within their communities. Most pre-service teachers further asserted that they had not been taught how to effectively access crucial resources pertaining to

training opportunities, educational policies, or reforms, which hampered their advocacy skills and constrained their leadership potential (Xuyen, Lien, Nhung, Truc).

While official documents were provided to teachers in remote regions by the department through training courses and then discussed with pre-service teachers in class, much of the critical information was learned independently rather than through structured university training (Bich Ngoc, Chi). Some also shared that they sought information via social media on their own or consulted experienced teachers, as this approach tended to be quicker and more accessible (Xuan, Thu). Xuan further explained, "We can research online or learn about local policies when we teach in different regions because trying to cover every locality in detail within one subject would be challenging." This self-directed learning experience, albeit valuable, indicates a significant oversight in the ITE programs. Without a formal introduction to educational policies, pre-service teachers may feel uncertain and ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of their future roles and distinguish credible information from unverified claims. As Hanh emphasized, "Self-researching can lead to unreliable or unverified sources, which may cause confusion and misunderstandings."

The failure to incorporate policy education into the teacher preparation programs not only hinders pre-service teacher professional development but also limits their awareness and capacity in leading and advocating for systemic changes that benefit their students and the broader educational settings. As Xuyen reflected, "The information related to government regulations, decisions, and policies is on a macro level, and I haven't paid much attention to it yet." This disconnect directly or indirectly affects how they perceive and develop their leadership competencies, as Bich Ngoc described this struggle: "I'm not thinking about my leadership role… As a head of class in college, I felt confident, but now in a larger environment, I lack the confidence and don't feel ready to take on leadership." It is implied that without adequate support and educational preparation for policy engagement, pre-service teachers may find it difficult to transition from their current roles to validated teachers with leadership competencies ready to advocate for their students and the teaching profession.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Drawing on the TLM standards, our study does not assess the ITE programs but illustrates the contrasting perceptions among the three participant groups—pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and teacher educators—in relation to the importance of teacher leadership functions and the preparedness for these competencies provided by the established programs. The findings indicate that among all, Domain VI (outreach and collaboration with families and communities) and Domain VII (advocacy for student learning and the teaching profession) were notably ranked lower in importance by all groups, prominently by teacher educators. This low ranking may stem from their observations and experiences in the broader educational context of Vietnam, where centralized hierarchical management approaches are prevalent (Mai and Brundrett, 2024). Specifically, educational policies are typically adopted and implemented through a top-down approach, where decisions made by the Ministry of Education and Training are translated into directives for district-level and local administrative tiers and into actionable plans for the teaching staff. This reality is associated with the

practices of the participating teachers in this study who receive guidance and updates on new teaching methods during meetings after seniors or school leaders have undergone professional training or directives from higher authorities. As Nguyen and colleagues (2023) commented, "Regular teacher professional development was a compulsory task for all teacher. and clearly stated in the official documents of the Department of Education and Training" (p.6). In this vein, pre-service and in-service teachers are perceived as passive implementers of educational policies and practices rather than advocates for student learning and their professional development. Therefore, the teachers' roles and practices are situated in the shackles of policies and mandates of those in higher hierarchies, which is in stark contrast with their beliefs about the values of teacher leadership in promoting school effectiveness.

Besides, while collaboration with families is acknowledged as important, it is challenging due to some parents' neglect or limited involvement with children in disadvantaged areas. This perception aligns well with Hedges and other researchers (2016), who argued that building solid bonds between parents and teachers could be challenging given Vietnam's complex socio-political, cultural and economic factors. Especially, insufficient support from other stakeholders such as the government and community and ethnic minorities' scarce language proficiency are some of the barriers faced teacher in a mountainous region of Vietnam (Ngo et al., 2017). Therefore, it is understandable that most interviewed teachers do not place significant emphasis on connecting with the broader community. This perspective reflects the exclusion of communities and society from the education system of Vietnam (Nguyen and Trent, 2020). These identified gaps spotlight how teacher leadership perceptions are deeply embedded in—and even challenged by—the wider hierarchical context and how responsive the ITE programs need to be to address these leadership issues and empower teacher candidates to validate their leadership skills on the journey to becoming qualified teachers within the teacher education program and beyond.

However, another prominent finding is that preparedness for teacher leadership—particularly in accessing research, fostering collaboration with parents and communities, and staying informed about policies to advocate for educational growth—is deterred by the ITE programs. There are no explicit courses on teacher leadership training within the official curricula. This mirrors the educational context of Vietnam, where teacher leadership has not achieved enough recognition to be a priority in teaching profession policies (Ngo et al., 2022).

While some research method modules and specific scenario-based exercises have been considered vital and integrated into the ITE programs to help pre-service teachers develop essential leadership competencies, there remains a noticeable absence of—and inconsistent distribution of—modules on research, outreach, collaboration with stakeholders, and advocacy for student development across the studied schools. According to Mai and Brundrett (2024), due to insufficient preparation during the ITE training, there is a dearth of interest among Vietnamese teachers in conducting research, which undermines their confidence in relevant competencies, along with beliefs about limited support and leadership within schools pertaining to incentives for research engagement.

Similarly, although internships are the sole opportunity for pre-service teachers to engage directly with parents, many pre-service teachers only support homeroom

teachers and partake in internships as a compulsory part of the ITE programs without any direct collaboration with parents and communities. This superficial and performance-oriented essence of the leadership training does not shift pre-service teachers' beliefs about teacher leadership (Rogers and Scales, 2013). Instead, they engage with the component as a 'checkbox' to meet the training requirements to be a teacher. This insight once again delineates the marginalized nature of teacher leadership in the programs and restricts teacher autonomy and ability to influence decision-making.

This mismatches with many researchers who stress that leadership training should serve as a fundamental part of the ITE programs (King et al., 2019; Turnbull, 2005; Bond, 2011) to better arm teachers with capabilities to enact their teacher leadership. For example, Nair (2007) noted that teacher candidates should be equipped with research skills in teacher education universities. Nguyen and Trent (2022) also stated that collaborative relationships among ITE programs, schools, and communities should be strengthened by involving in-service and pre-service teachers and community members as co-collaborators in educational reforms. This gap highlights the disconnect between theory and practice that sidelines their professional opportunities to be involved in leadership roles within and beyond schools or even advocate for their students and their lifetime career.

Furthermore, pre-service teachers frequently forget what they learned in university and tend to replicate the teaching methods they experienced (Darling-Hammond, 1999). As per Ho and Dimmock (2023), Vietnamese teachers "are not ready to grasp these opportunities for greater changes and professionalism without detailed and appropriate guidance and support". As a result, the existing ITE programs seem to not only leave teachers unprepared in leadership competencies, communication, and advocacy skills and meaningful real-life engagement beyond the school walls but also contribute to potential intergenerational marginalization in beliefs and practices of teacher leadership.

In light of the identified gaps, our study suggests specific recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of the ITE programs in optimizing teacher leadership abilities.

1) To ignite a culture of teacher leadership within and beyond schools, we propose redesigning the teacher education curriculum to place teacher leadership at its core and respond to teacher professional needs in practice. This suggestion aligns with Ngo and colleagues (2022), who argued, "Teacher leadership should become a criterion for designing, developing, updating, and accrediting teacher education and teacher professional development programs" (p. 89) in the Vietnamese context.

2) At the school level, efforts to cultivate teacher leadership can encompass organizing extracurricular and interdisciplinary activities, conducting research projects, and encouraging involvement in meetings with colleagues (Meirink et al., 2020). However, their professional needs are underpinned by different sociocultural factors, including educational expectations, historical context, and learning opportunities (Avalos, 2011). Therefore, the program implementation should consider a layer of complexity beyond school walls; for example, improving outreach and collaboration with families and communities (Domain

VI) and advocating for student learning and the teaching profession (Domain VII). In this vein, the seven domains of the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011) should be used to provide a foundation and direction for pre-service and graduate programs.

3) To transform the ITE programs effectively and strategically, it is essential to underpin teacher leadership training and learning—both implicitly and explicitly—into the current pre-service teacher education programs. This restructuring should prioritize the autonomy of prospective teachers as leaders and equip them with the capacities and motivation to inspire others within their cohorts, schools, and communities. By developing sustainable partnerships with schools and communities, we can create a supportive framework that empowers early career teachers and enhances their sense of agency in partaking in decision-making and community initiatives. It is believed that this transformation can advocate for systemic change in education that benefits future and current teachers, students, and the broader educational systems.

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