

อิทธิพลของภาวะผู้นำที่มุ่งเน้นการเรียนรู้ของคณบดีต่อการเรียนรู้ทางวิชาชีพของอาจารย์ใน
วิทยาลัยต่างประเทศของจีน

The Influence of Deans' Learning-Centred Leadership on Teacher
Professional Learning in Chinese Colleges of Foreign Languages

ซุน ดงจุน^{1*} ชนิตา รัชพลเมือง² ปองสิน วิเศษศิริ³

Sun Dongjun Chanita Rukspollmuang Pongsin Viseshsiri

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้วิเคราะห์อิทธิพลของภาวะผู้นำแบบมุ่งเน้นการเรียนรู้ (LCL) ของคณบดีต่อการเรียนรู้ทางวิชาชีพของอาจารย์ (TPL) ในวิทยาลัยภาษาต่างประเทศของจีน ใช้การวิจัยแบบผสมผสานเชิงลำดับ (Sequential Mixed-Methods Design) โดยการสัมภาษณ์ทางโทรศัพท์และแบบสำรวจเป็นเครื่องมือหลักในการเก็บข้อมูล วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพจากคณบดี 5 ราย ด้วยการวิเคราะห์เชิงธีม (Thematic Analysis) เพื่อระบุรูปแบบแนวคิดสำคัญ วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณจากอาจารย์ 360 คน ใน 36 วิทยาลัย ด้วยสถิติพรรณนาและแบบจำลองสมการโครงสร้าง (SEM) เพื่อทดสอบกรอบทฤษฎี การวิจัยใช้ SEM วิเคราะห์ผลกระทบทางตรงและทางอ้อมของ LCL ต่อ TPL โดยมีความไว้วางใจของอาจารย์ (TT) การมีอำนาจควบคุมตนเอง (TA) และชุมชนการเรียนรู้ทางวิชาชีพ (PLCs) เป็นตัวแปรคั่นกลาง การวิเคราะห์ทางสถิติรวมถึงการทดสอบความเชื่อมั่น การวิเคราะห์องค์ประกอบเชิงยืนยัน และการวิเคราะห์เส้นทาง ผลการศึกษาพบว่า LCL ไม่ส่งผลโดยตรงต่อ TPL แต่ดำเนินการผ่านกลไกตัวแปรคั่นกลางทั้งหมด PLCs เป็นตัวแปรคั่นกลางใหม่ที่สำคัญในบริบทอุดมศึกษา แสดงเส้นทางอิทธิพลทางอ้อมที่แข็งแกร่ง (LCL → PLCs → TPL) การวิเคราะห์การคั่นกลางเชิงลำดับยืนยันเส้นทางที่มีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติ (LCL → TT → TA → TPL) การศึกษาขยายงานวิจัยระดับการศึกษาขั้นพื้นฐานโดยตรวจสอบแบบจำลองทฤษฎีในบริบทอุดมศึกษา เน้นความสำคัญของการปลูกฝังวัฒนธรรมความร่วมมือ สร้างความสัมพันธ์ซึ่งความไว้วางใจ และเสริมอำนาจคณาจารย์

คำสำคัญ: ภาวะผู้นำที่มุ่งเน้นการเรียนรู้ ภาวะผู้นำของคณบดี การเรียนรู้ทางวิชาชีพของอาจารย์
ชุมชนการเรียนรู้ทางวิชาชีพ ประเทศจีน

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^{1,2} Graduate School of Education, Siam University, Bangkok 10160 Thailand.

³ Independent Scholar in Educational Management, Bangkok 10220 Thailand.

*Corresponding Author, E-mail: 1318288204@qq.com

Abstract

This study investigates the influence of deans' learning-centred leadership (LCL) on teacher professional learning (TPL) in Chinese colleges of foreign languages. A sequential mixed-methods design was employed, utilizing telephone interviews and survey questionnaires as primary data collection tools. Qualitative data from five deans were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key conceptual patterns. Quantitative data from 360 faculty members across 36 colleges were examined through descriptive statistics and structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the theoretical framework. The research employed SEM to investigate direct and indirect effects of LCL on TPL, with teacher trust (TT), teacher agency (TA), and professional learning communities (PLCs) serving as mediating variables. Statistical analyses included reliability testing, confirmatory factor analysis, and path analysis to validate the measurement and structural models. Findings reveal that LCL does not directly influence TPL but operates entirely through mediating mechanisms. PLCs emerged as a significant novel mediator in higher education contexts, demonstrating a robust indirect pathway (LCL → PLCs → TPL). Sequential mediation analysis confirmed a statistically significant pathway (LCL → TT → TA → TPL), illustrating the interconnected roles of relational trust and individual agency in fostering professional learning. The study extends existing primary education research by validating the theoretical model within higher education contexts. Results emphasize the importance of cultivating collaborative cultures, establishing trust-based relationships, and empowering faculty agency. Policy implications include developing comprehensive leadership programs beyond traditional managerial competencies, investing in PLC infrastructure, and providing targeted support for resource-constrained institutions.

Keywords: Learning-Centred Leadership, Deans' Leadership, Teacher Professional Learning, Professional Learning Communities, China

Background and Significance of the Study

Global higher education is undergoing a major transformation, driven by rapid growth, internationalization, and technological integration. Institutions are increasingly interconnected, fostering collaboration and research. Advancements in information and communication technologies have reshaped educational models toward greater flexibility and learner-

centered approaches. In this shifting landscape, improving teaching effectiveness has become a central priority.

Teaching effectiveness involves the ability to engage students, reflected in improving understanding and learning outcomes, making teacher quality central to educational success. UNESCO's Education 2030 Incheon Declaration emphasizes expanding the number of qualified teachers to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), which promotes inclusive, equitable, and lifelong education. UNESCO (2015) emphasizes that empowering teachers through equitable recruitment practices, competitive salaries, ongoing professional development, and robust institutional support is essential for enhancing learning outcomes.

China has incorporated these international priorities into its national educational strategies. The 14th Five-Year Plan and Vision 2035, approved by the 13th National People's Congress in 2021, outlines a strategic approach to creating a modern, high-performing teaching workforce. This plan is designed to bolster teacher training and elevate the quality of teaching to address the challenges of higher education in the coming years. As Cai and Yan (2017) suggest, China's higher education system must innovate and set new priorities to keep pace with the changing landscape of the 21st century.

Attributes of Learning-Centred Leadership

Learning-centred leadership (LCL), grounded in transformational and instructional leadership, focuses on improving teaching quality and student outcomes through faculty development (Kılınç et al., 2017; Aslan & Gören, 2023). Porter et al. (2008) outline six core components of LCL: setting high learning standards, preparing the curriculum, applying effective teaching, fostering a professional culture, engaging stakeholders, and ensuring accountability. These are supported by six key processes: planning (goal-setting), implementation (executing strategies), support (providing resources), protection (maintaining a stable learning environment), communication (information flow), and monitoring (evaluating progress).

LCL also involves intentional efforts to build professional knowledge and improve institutional effectiveness, demonstrated through leadership practices such as inspiration, guidance, support, and direct engagement in teacher learning (Hallinger et al., 2017). Liu et al. (2016) identify four key dimensions of LCL: (1) **Building a learning vision** to unify the school community around shared goals; (2) **Modeling** core values and behaviors to foster trust and collaboration; (3) **Providing learning support** through resources, mentoring, and training to

promote continuous improvement; and (4) **Managing the learning program** by aligning curriculum, coordinating instruction, and allocating resources to support student success.

Liu et al. (2016) framework integrates vision, modeling, support, and organization to promote teamwork and equity. Through this structure, LCL fosters a collaborative culture focused on academic excellence and ongoing faculty development, aligning with transformational and instructional leadership principles to empower faculty success.

Research Problem

Education systems worldwide have struggled to keep pace with rapid change, and top-down professional development approaches have often failed to meet evolving needs (Hallinger et al., 2017). In China's foreign language colleges, this challenge is intensified by a lack of structured professional learning, heavy workloads, and limited institutional support, all of which hinder teaching innovation and effectiveness. A qualitative study involving interviews with five deans revealed a shared recognition of the importance of teacher professional learning but also highlighted consistent concerns over inadequate resources and funding. Insufficient quality and quantity of teacher professional learning is also a barrier to improving teacher quality and teaching effectiveness in colleges of foreign languages.

Research Objectives

The three objectives:

1. To explore deans' understanding of learning-centred leadership and its connection to teacher professional learning in colleges of foreign languages in China;
2. To examine the direct influence of dean learning-centred leadership on teacher professional learning within these institutions; and
3. To examine how teacher trust, teacher agency, and professional learning communities mediate the relationship between dean learning-centred leadership and teacher professional learning, and to explore the sequential mediating effect of teacher trust and teacher agency.

Research Hypotheses

H1: Deans' learning-centred leadership (LCL) has no significant direct effect on teacher professional learning (TPL) in colleges of foreign languages.

H2: Deans' LCL has a significant positive indirect effect on TPL through teacher agency (TA).

H3: Deans' LCL has a significant positive indirect effect on TPL through teacher trust (TT).

H4: Deans' LCL has a significant positive indirect effect on TPL through professional learning communities (PLCs).

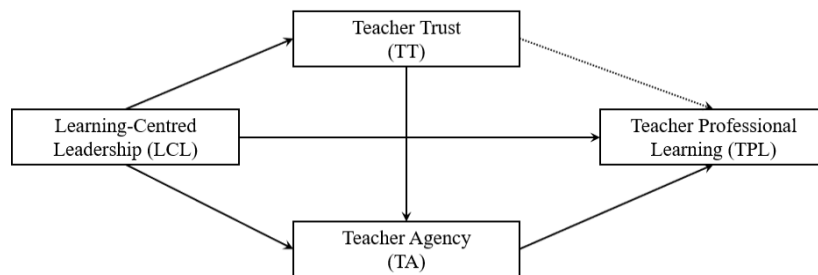
H5: Deans' LCL influences TPL through a sequential mediation path involving teacher trust and teacher agency (LCL → TT → TA → TPL).

Theoretical Frameworks

1. The model of LCL and TPL by Hallinger et al. (2017)

Figure 1

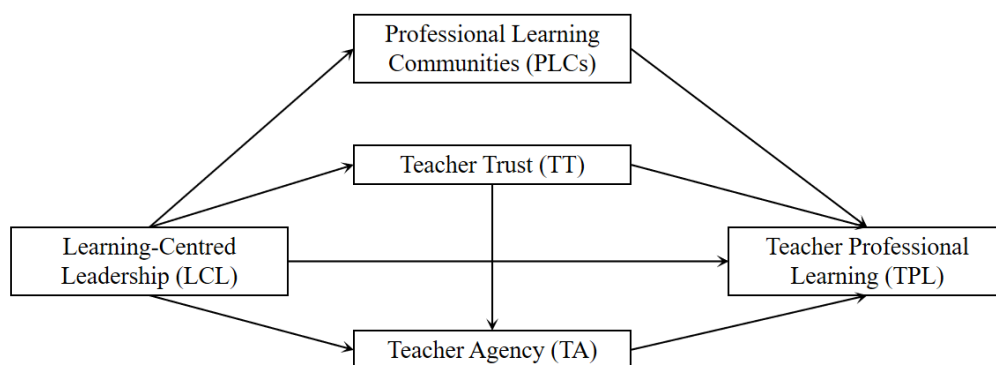
The Model of LCL and TPL Based on the SEM



2. VAL-ED (Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education) model by Porter et al. (2008)
3. PLCA-R (the Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised) model by Olivier et al. (2010)

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework



Literature Review

This study draws on the frameworks of Hallinger et al. (2017), Porter et al. (2008), and Olivier et al. (2010) to examine how deans' learning-centred leadership (LCL) influences teacher professional learning (TPL) through mediating variables. The Hallinger model emphasizes the importance of leadership that promotes shared vision, structured support,

and professional growth. The VAL-ED model by Porter et al. (2008) identifies leadership practices that support learning effectiveness and teacher development. The PLCA-R model (Olivier et al., 2010) focuses on the role of collaborative professional environments in enhancing instructional quality. Research shows that leadership affects teacher learning not only directly but also through the development of teacher trust (TT), teacher agency (TA), and professional learning communities (PLCs). TT creates conditions for open communication and collegial support, which are necessary for meaningful collaboration. TA enables educators to take ownership of their learning and adapt to institutional goals. PLCs provide structured opportunities for shared inquiry and continuous improvement. Together, these factors form a pathway through which leadership contributes to teacher development, with TT and TA acting in sequence to support engagement in TPL. The researchers also studied and reviewed the following relevant works to explore the existing problem in practice and develop the conceptual framework:

1. Deans' Learning-Centred Leadership

Leadership plays a vital role in shaping institutional culture, driving innovation, and improving quality in higher education. Transformational and distributed leadership models are especially effective in fostering collaboration and sustained faculty development, with responsive leadership key to engaging academic staff (Bryman, 2007). Deans serve a critical bridging role between faculty and administration, balancing strategic and managerial responsibilities. Those exhibiting transformational traits, such as vision and support for innovation, tend to build stronger academic communities.

Learning-Centred Leadership (LCL) merges instructional and transformational principles to promote faculty development and improve teaching. Porter et al. (2008) and Liu et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of shared vision, support, and structured program management in creating inclusive academic cultures. In China, LCL aligns with national education reforms, yet implementation is often hindered by hierarchical systems and resource constraints, especially in smaller institutions. Nonetheless, leadership training is fostering a shift toward more collaborative and developmental practices (Chen, 2016).

2. Teacher Professional Learning

Research indicates that Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) enhances student outcomes, teaching quality, and faculty career growth (Bektaş et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Effective TPL is collaborative, reflective, and continuous, involving practices such as peer observation, engagement in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs),

and academic participation (Liu et al., 2016; Hallinger et al., 2017). In higher education, these collaborative models are increasingly used to align faculty development with institutional goals (Borko, 2004). PLCs serve as effective platforms for idea-sharing and instructional improvement (Vescio et al., 2008) and require trust-based leadership for sustainability. Contextual, discipline-specific TPL further reinforces faculty identity and collegiality.

3. Teacher Agency

Teacher Agency (TA) refers to faculty's willingness and capacity to take ownership of their professional goals, shaping both their own development and the institution's direction (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Key dimensions include learning and teaching effectiveness, optimism, and engagement. Faculty with strong agency adapt to changing demands, drive innovation, and contribute to institutional progress (Priestley et al., 2012). Institutional factors such as leadership, policies, and resources influence agency; supportive environments foster greater autonomy, collaboration, and innovation. Active faculty engagement enhances teaching quality, strengthens professional identity, and supports continuous improvement. The following table summarizes the main literature on TA.

4. Teacher Trust

Trust plays a key mediating role in how leadership influences faculty learning, fostering collaboration, growth, and institutional success (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Teacher Trust (TT) reflects a willingness to be vulnerable based on positive expectations, enabling open communication, shared decisions, and collaborative learning (Vescio et al., 2008). TT comprises calculative (cost-benefit), relational (emotional), and faith (shared values) trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). In higher education, trust enhances collective efficacy, innovation, and resource sharing. Leaders who demonstrate integrity and transparency help build trust, supporting ongoing improvement, while its absence can cause disengagement and resistance to change.

5. Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) offer a collaborative framework for ongoing faculty development, grounded in the belief that shared expertise enhances teaching and learning. Rooted in social interaction theory, PLCs in higher education, often called Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs), provide structured spaces for idea exchange and joint practice development (Vescio et al., 2008). Their effectiveness depends on trust and institutional support (Stoll et al., 2006). PLCs significantly mediate the impact of Learning-Centred Leadership (LCL) on Teacher Professional Learning (TPL), as LCL fosters collaboration and reflective practice (Hallinger, 2011). Research shows that PLCs promote engagement through

shared values, open dialogue, and supportive environments (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), and that transformational and distributed leadership amplify their impact. When supported by trust and resources, faculty are more likely to engage in collaborative, innovative practices that improve teaching and drive institutional progress (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Methodology

This study contained two phases, following a mixed-method approach. The research process consisted of five systematic steps:

Step 1: Qualitative Phase (Interviews)

This study began with interviews to identify and clarify the research problem. Five deans from colleges of foreign languages at public provincial universities in China were interviewed. The open-ended questions focused on:

- A. The status quo of teacher professional learning (TPL)*
- B. Deans' awareness of learning-centred leadership (LCL)*
- C. Understanding of teacher agency (TA) and teacher trust (TT)*
- D. The status quo of professional learning communities (PLCs)*

Thematic content analysis was applied to the interview transcripts. This method is flexible and well-suited for identifying, describing, and interpreting detailed patterns or themes within qualitative data. Analysis revealed that while all deans recognized the critical importance of TPL and described various initiatives to enhance faculty development, they also reported persistent concerns about inadequate resources and funding. These findings helped to state the research problem with the relevant literature review of leadership and professional development.

Step 2: Research Design (Quantitative Survey)

The quantitative approach with the use of the questionnaire was consequently employed. Stratified sampling ensured proportional representation from 36 colleges of foreign languages within 42 provincial universities in Shandong (Creswell, 2014). Sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula, resulting in 346 participants from a population of 3,506, which meets recommended SEM standards (Kline, 2015).

Step 3: Instrument Development and Validation

The research employed a structured questionnaire designed to measure five key constructs: deans' learning-centred leadership (LCL), teacher professional learning (TPL), teacher agency (TA), teacher trust (TT), and professional learning communities (PLCs). The

instrument was adapted from well-established and validated sources to ensure theoretical and empirical relevance to the study context.

- Deans' Learning-Centred Leadership (LCL): Items were adapted from Liu et al. (2016), reflecting four core dimensions: building a learning vision, role modeling, providing learning support, and managing learning programs.

- Professional Learning Communities (PLCs): Items were derived from the Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R) by Olivier et al. (2010), covering reflective dialogue, collaboration, and shared practice.

- Teacher Professional Learning (TPL), Teacher Agency (TA), and Teacher Trust (TT): Items for these constructs were compiled based on theoretical frameworks and validated instruments cited in Liu et al. (2016), Hallinger et al. (2017), and Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000).

The questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of three experts in educational leadership and measurement for content validity. Their feedback was used to revise item wording for clarity and contextual relevance to Chinese colleges of foreign languages. The results of the specialists' examination of the questionnaire were computed using Rovinelli's and Hamblenton's formula of the Index of Consistency (IOC), whose value of each question should be higher than 0.50. In this questionnaire, each selected question has the IOC value between 0.60-1.00, ensuring the content validity.

Step 4: Reliability and Construct Validity Testing

All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree), ensuring consistency in response format across constructs. To evaluate internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each construct using the full sample (N = 360). The results were as follows: LCL ($\alpha = 0.91$), PLCs ($\alpha = 0.88$), TA ($\alpha = 0.90$), TT ($\alpha = 0.87$), and TPL ($\alpha = 0.92$), indicating high reliability across all scales.

Construct validity was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), with all factor loadings exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.60 and demonstrating good model fit indices ($\chi^2/df < 3$, CFI > 0.95, RMSEA < 0.06). These results confirm that the measurement model was appropriate for use in subsequent structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses.

Step 5: Data Analysis

Following validation, SEM was used to examine the relationships among variables, including the direct and mediating effects of LCL on TPL through TA, TT, and PLCs. Model fit and path coefficients were interpreted to test the hypotheses derived from the conceptual framework.

Findings

The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) results provide evidence supporting the complex mechanisms through which Dean Learning-Centred Leadership (LCL) influences Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) in colleges of foreign languages. The results are reported with reference to each research objective to ensure clarity in addressing the study's aims.

Objective 1: To explore deans' understanding of learning-centred leadership and its connection to teacher professional learning in colleges of foreign languages in China.

The qualitative findings showed that all five deans acknowledged the importance of learning-centred leadership (LCL) in promoting teacher professional learning (TPL). While they reported efforts to foster collaboration and support faculty development, they also highlighted barriers such as limited funding, time constraints, and institutional challenges. Their views reflected partial alignment with transformational and distributed leadership, though traditional top-down practices remained common.

Objective 2: To examine the direct influence of deans' learning-centred leadership on teacher professional learning within these institutions.

Consistent with previous findings in basic education settings, the direct effect of deans' LCL on TPL was found to be statistically non-significant ($\beta = 0.098, p = .164$). This result supports Hypothesis 1 (H1) and suggests that dean LCL alone does not directly foster TPL within the higher education context. Instead, the relationship is fully mediated through a set of relational and organizational factors.

Objective 3: To examine how teacher trust, teacher agency, and professional learning communities mediate the relationship between deans' learning-centred leadership and teacher professional learning, and to explore the sequential mediating effect of teacher trust and teacher agency.

Three distinct indirect pathways were found to significantly mediate the relationship between deans' LCL and TPL, supporting Hypotheses 2 to 5 (H2–H5). These mediation effects involve Teacher Agency (TA), Teacher Trust (TT), and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), both independently and sequentially.

Mediation Effects

Deans' LCL \rightarrow PLCs \rightarrow TPL: Deans' LCL had a strong, statistically significant effect on the development of PLCs ($\beta = 0.720, p < .001$), and PLCs were found to positively influence TPL ($\beta = 0.235, p < .001$). This mediation pathway was significant, supporting Hypothesis 4

(H4). This result highlights the critical role of PLCs in the higher education context, offering new insights beyond those found in primary and secondary school models.

Deans' LCL \rightarrow TA \rightarrow TPL: Deans' LCL significantly predicted TA ($\beta = 0.587, p < .001$), which in turn significantly contributed to TPL ($\beta = 0.228, p < .001$). This pathway supports Hypothesis 2 (H2), affirming the mediating role of teacher agency, as previously documented in other educational levels.

Deans' LCL \rightarrow TT \rightarrow TPL: The indirect effect of Deans' LCL on TPL through TT was also statistically significant. Deans' LCL positively influenced TT ($\beta = 0.371, p < .001$), and TT subsequently predicted TPL ($\beta = 0.235, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 3 (H3).

Sequential Mediation: Deans' LCL \rightarrow TT \rightarrow TA \rightarrow TPL

Finally, the sequential mediation pathway was significant. Deans' LCL influenced TT ($\beta = 0.371, p < .001$), which then positively affected TA ($\beta = 0.487, p < .001$), leading to increased levels of TPL ($\beta = 0.228, p < .001$). This result supports Hypothesis 5 (H5) and affirms the layered and interrelated nature of trust and agency in mediating deans' LCL.

Taken together, these findings suggest that deans' LCL plays a foundational, though indirect, role in enhancing TPL, mediated primarily through the activation of TT, empowerment of TA, and cultivation of PLCs.

Table 1

Summary Table of Standardized Path Coefficients

| Path | β (Standardised) | p-value | Significant? |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|---------|--------------|
| Deans' LCL \rightarrow TPL (Direct) | 0.098 | .164 | No |
| Deans' LCL \rightarrow PLCs | 0.720 | < .001 | Yes |
| PLCs \rightarrow TPL | 0.235 | < .001 | Yes |
| Deans' LCL \rightarrow TA | 0.587 | < .001 | Yes |
| TA \rightarrow TPL | 0.228 | < .001 | Yes |
| Deans' LCL \rightarrow TT | 0.371 | < .001 | Yes |
| TT \rightarrow TPL | 0.235 | < .001 | Yes |
| TT \rightarrow TA | 0.487 | < .001 | Yes |

2. Model Extension and Novelty

Notably, this study extended the traditional LCL-TPL mediation models, originally tested in primary school settings, by incorporating PLCs as an additional mediator relevant to higher education. The PLC construct was measured using the Professional Learning

Communities Assessment–Revised (Olivier et al., 2010), providing empirical support for the unique role of collaborative professional culture among university faculty. This newly identified mediation pathway (LCL → PLCs → TPL) was found to be significant, underscoring the importance of PLCs in promoting teacher professional learning in universities.

3. Summary

Overall, the results indicate that the influence of deans' LCL on TPL in higher education operates primarily through the mediating mechanisms of PLCs, TT, and TA, rather than through a direct effect. These findings highlight the importance of fostering a collaborative professional culture, trust, and agency to enhance teacher learning in university contexts.

Discussion

This study explored the influence of deans' Learning-Centred Leadership (LCL) on Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) in colleges of foreign languages at provincial universities in China, using both qualitative interviews and quantitative structural equation modeling. The findings offer important insights into how leadership practices at the dean level shape faculty development, engagement, and institutional culture in the higher education context.

1. Qualitative Insights: Challenges and Realities (aligned with research objective 1)

The interviews provided valuable context for the qualitative findings. Deans consistently emphasized the importance of TPL for improving teaching quality and institutional competitiveness. They described efforts to foster faculty engagement in learning communities, encourage reflective practice, and cultivate trust. However, limited resources and funding remain persistent barriers to effective professional learning – challenges consistent with prior studies on structural constraints in Chinese higher education (Chen, 2016). Despite these limitations, deans expressed a strong commitment to supporting faculty development, highlighting the need for adaptive leadership that balances vision with local institutional realities.

2. The Indirect Pathways of Leadership Influence (aligned with research objectives 2 and 3)

Quantitative analysis showed that deans' LCL had no significant direct effect on TPL. Instead, its influence occurred indirectly through PLCs, TA, and TT – all of which had significant positive effects. The inclusion of PLCs as a mediator, based on Olivier et al. (2010), proved especially relevant in the university context, where faculty collaboration is both essential and challenging. These findings align with global research emphasizing that strong academic leadership fosters environments conducive to professional learning and innovation (Bryman, 2007; Hallinger, 2011). They also underscore that effective leadership is multi-dimensional:

deans who build trust, promote collaboration, and empower faculty agency are more likely to drive lasting improvements. The mediation roles of PLCs, TA, and TT affirm that faculty development is a shared, relational process rooted in trust, vision, and collective engagement.

3. Summary

This study deepened understanding of how deans in Chinese foreign language colleges approach LCL. Interviews showed strong support for faculty development but also revealed barriers such as limited resources and structural constraints. Quantitative results confirmed that leadership shapes teacher learning through its influence on institutional culture and professional relationships, highlighting the need for practical, context-aware leadership strategies.

Key Knowledge and Contributions from the Study

This study contributes valuable insights into how deans' learning-centred leadership (LCL) influences teacher professional learning (TPL) in Chinese colleges of foreign languages. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research confirms that LCL does not directly impact TPL. Instead, the effect is mediated through teacher trust (TT), teacher agency (TA), and professional learning communities (PLCs), with PLCs emerging as a particularly influential mediator in the higher education context.

By extending leadership models traditionally applied in primary education to the university setting, the study underscores that faculty development is shaped less by direct authority and more by relational and structural supports. Notably, it introduces a sequential mediation pathway (LCL → TT → TA → TPL), emphasizing the layered influence of leadership through trust-building and faculty empowerment.

The findings affirm that deans who foster collaboration, trust, and agency are better positioned to enhance professional learning. Practically, the study calls for institutional investment in PLCs, leadership development focusing on relational and instructional capacity, and strategic support for under-resourced colleges. Overall, this research offers a comprehensive framework for improving teaching quality through indirect but powerful leadership pathways in higher education.

Recommendations

To strengthen faculty development in colleges of foreign languages, institutions should adopt the following strategies based on the study's findings:

1. **Strengthen Professional Learning Communities (PLCs):** Invest in the formal establishment and sustained support of PLCs by providing time, resources, and administrative

backing to encourage faculty collaboration and continuous learning;

2. **Prioritize Leadership Development:** Design leadership training for deans that focuses on building trust, promoting teacher agency, and fostering inclusive, supportive environments – going beyond traditional managerial approaches;

3. **Empower Faculty Agency:** Create platforms for faculty to take initiative in professional development, propose innovations, and contribute to academic decision-making, thereby promoting ownership and engagement;

4. **Address Resource Constraints:** Recognize financial and structural barriers that hinder leadership implementation, especially in under-resourced institutions, and allocate targeted funding to support faculty growth;

5. **Embed LCL in Institutional Policy:** Integrate learning-centred leadership principles, such as vision-setting, modeling, and monitoring, into institutional strategies to ensure leadership practices align with faculty development goals; and

6. **Future Research:** Future studies should examine how learning-centred leadership develops across different institutional settings, especially under varying resource conditions. Longitudinal research could track how leadership impacts faculty over time. Further exploration is also needed into the development of teacher trust, agency, and the effectiveness of PLCs in diverse academic contexts.

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