

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.1634>

An Exploration of Teacher Leadership: Are Future Teachers Ready to Lead?

JETË ALIU¹ AND FJOLLA KAÇANIKU*²

∞ The teaching profession has become increasingly complex in the last decades. The changing role of teachers has called for a new paradigm of the teaching profession that recognises the potential of teachers to lead for supporting school development and change. The influence teachers have on the school community and their commitment to school change are at the core of teacher leadership definitions. Preparing future teachers to act as leaders in their schools can support the overall efforts for school improvement. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore pre-service teacher leadership development. The study utilised a qualitative methodology to address: (i) pre-service teachers' understanding of teacher leadership, (ii) the role of initial teacher education in shaping the understanding of teacher leadership, and (iii) the contribution of initial teacher education to pre-service teachers' readiness for exercising leadership roles for school improvement. The study was conducted with pre-service teachers in the leading initial teacher education institution in Kosovo. A total of 42 pre-service teachers from all years of the Primary Teacher Education programme participated in four group interviews with the aim of discussing in depth the core elements of teacher leadership in order to better grasp the pre-service teachers' understanding of this concept as well as their readiness to exercise leadership roles. A model devised by Snoek et al. (2019) was used as an analytical framework to determine the development of teacher leadership in initial teacher education. The study reveals that there is no consensus on the definition of teacher leadership. The findings show that the understanding of teacher leadership is based on a contextually drawn vision of what it means to be a teacher, resulting in a narrow view of leadership with regard to individual and classroom levels. The study concludes that initial teacher education has a critical role in contributing to shifting the conceptualisation of teacher leadership beyond the isolated views of individual and formal leadership. The findings have

1 Faculty of Education, University of Prishtina, Prishtina, Kosovo.

2 *Corresponding Author. Faculty of Education, University of Prishtina, Prishtina, Kosovo; fjolla.kacaniku@uni-pr.edu.

imperative implications for providing good models of initial teacher education that support the preparation and readiness of future teacher leaders to tackle the ever-increasing complexities of the teaching profession.

Keywords: teacher leadership, initial teacher education, pre-service teachers, school improvement

Raziskovanje vodenja pri učiteljih: ali so bodoči učitelji pripravljeni voditi?

JETË ALIU IN FJOLLA KAÇANIKU

Učiteljski poklic v zadnjih desetletjih postaja vse kompleksnejši. Spreminjajoča se vloga učiteljev je zahtevala novo paradigmo učiteljskega poklica, ki priznava potencial učiteljev za vodenje pri podpiranju razvoja in sprememb v šolah. Vpliv, ki ga imajo učitelji na šolsko skupnost, in njihova zavzetost za šolske spremembe sta v središču opredelitev vodenja pri učiteljih. Priprava bodočih učiteljev, da bodo na svojih šolah delovali kot vodje, lahko podpre splošna prizadevanja za izboljšanje šole. Zato je namen te študije raziskati razvoj vodenja pri učiteljih pred začetkom dela. V študiji je bila uporabljena kvalitativna metodologija za obravnavo: i) razumevanje vodenja pri učiteljih na strani učiteljev pred začetkom dela; ii) vloga začetnega izobraževanja učiteljev pri oblikovanju razumevanja vodenja pri učiteljih; iii) prispevek začetnega izobraževanja učiteljev k pripravljenosti bodočih učiteljev za izvajanje vodstvene vloge za izboljšanje šole. Študija je bila izvedena z bodočimi učitelji na vodilni ustanovi za začetno izobraževanje učiteljev na Kosovu. V štirih skupinskih intervjujih je sodelovalo 42 bodočih učiteljev iz vseh letnikov programa izobraževanja učiteljev osnovnih šol, da bi se poglobljeno pogovorili o ključnih elementih vodenja pri učiteljih in tako bolje razumeli, kako bodoči učitelji razumejo ta koncept in kako so pripravljeni opravljati vodstvene vloge. Kot analitični okvir za ugotavljanje razvoja vodenja pri učiteljih v začetnem izobraževanju učiteljev je bil uporabljen model, ki so ga zasnovali Snoek et al. (2019). Študija razkriva, da ni soglasja glede opredelitve vodenja pri učiteljih. Ugotovitve kažejo, da razumevanje vodenja pri učiteljih temelji na kontekstualno oblikovani viziji, kaj pomeni biti učitelj, kar ima za posledico ozek pogled na vodenje glede na raven posameznika in razreda. Študija ugotavlja, da ima začetno izobraževanje učiteljev ključno vlogo pri prispevanju k premiku konceptualizacije vodenja pri učiteljih, ki presega izolirane poglede na individualno in formalno vodenje. Ugotovitve imajo nujne posledice za zagotavljanje dobrih modelov začetnega izobraževanja učiteljev, ki podpirajo pripravo in pripravljenost bodočih učiteljev kot vodij za spopadanje z vse večjo kompleksnostjo učiteljskega poklica.

Ključne besede: vodenje pri učiteljih, začetno izobraževanje učiteljev, bodoči učitelji, izboljšanje šole

Introduction

Teacher leadership has gained immense interest in recent decades as a core component of pioneering educational leadership and school reform. This is generally because research has demonstrated the importance of the quality of educational leadership on the school and student achievement (Bush, 2010). Effective leadership is when authority is distributed among the personnel of the school, instead of centralising leadership in the persons formally holding the position of leaders. The idea of distributed leadership involving teachers as leaders within and beyond their classrooms is growing rapidly (Muijs & Harris, 2007; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009).

Teachers' great potential for change has been recognised in the literature, as they are considered to have "the capacity to lead the school via increasing teacher collaboration, spreading best practices, encouraging teacher professional learning, offering assistance with differentiation, and focusing on content-specific issues" (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, pp. 1–2). Teachers are persistently considered to be the crucial variable of change given the considerable impact they have on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Fullan (1991) explains that "[e]ducational change depends on what teachers do and think – it is as simple and as complex as that" (p. 117).

Teacher leadership plays a significant role in improving educational practices (Muijs & Harris, 2005; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). However, there is a lack of literature that investigates teacher leadership as a strategy for teacher professional development (Poekert, 2012). Initial teacher education programmes play a crucial role in preparing future teachers to take on leadership roles. Students' experiences during teacher education can help future teachers develop the knowledge, skills and attributes needed to be effective leaders. A strong link exists between teacher leadership and professional development, as professional development is both a source and a result of teacher leadership (Poekert, 2012). Effective professional development supports the professionalisation of teachers by enhancing their leadership abilities and enabling them to positively influence their colleagues' practice (Murphy, 2005).

The Kosovo teacher education context

Efforts to advance the quality of initial teacher education have been at the forefront of higher education and teacher education reforms in Kosovo for the past two decades (Kačaniku, 2020a; Kačaniku, 2022). In the pursuit of the necessary educational changes, Kosovo has aligned itself with European trends towards high-quality education (Saqipi, 2019). Numerous policy interventions

have also been employed at the national level to improve the standards required for the teaching profession to comply with the ever-increasing complexities of the teaching profession (Kačaniku, 2020b; Kačaniku, 2022; Saqipi, 2019).

According to the advanced standards, future teachers are expected to act as change agents and contribute beyond just teaching in the classroom, e.g., by engaging in continuous professional development and engaging professionally with colleagues, parents and community.

Mandated to prepare future teachers, the University of Prishtina's Faculty of Education has embarked on ongoing reforms to address the demands for new teacher professionalism (Saqipi, 2019). The Faculty of Education has committed to designing programmes at the bachelor and master's levels that include coursework and experiential learning opportunities to support future teachers in developing the required skills, knowledge and attributes in line with the standards of the teaching profession (Kačaniku et al., 2019). Such interventions have arisen as a request from the Kosovo Accreditation Agency in efforts to improve the quality of study programmes. However, the Faculty of Education has taken a proactive role in improving the quality of programmes by serving as a beneficiary in several TEMPUS and ERASMUS+ projects for capacity building in higher education, which have enabled substantial programme reform (Kačaniku, 2022). A significant aspect of the revised programmes is the cultivation of student-teacher generic competencies, which are recognised as crucial for developing adaptable future teachers. Nevertheless, teacher leadership is still considered a novel concept and has not directly been addressed as part of study programme reform.

Spurred by the idea that teacher leadership is an essential aspect of teacher education, the present study explores the views that pre-service teachers of the primary education programme hold regarding teacher leadership, as well as their readiness to enact teacher leadership as part of their future professional work.

Theoretical background

What is teacher leadership?

There is an equivocal understanding in the literature regarding the definition of teacher leadership. Some authors view teacher leadership from the perspective of influence and interaction, while others see it from the perspective of power and authority (Poekert, 2012). The common understanding among the descriptions of teacher leadership is that teacher leaders engage in leadership roles inside and outside the classroom in order to support the

enhancement of educational practices and school development. Harris and Muijs (2005) claim that teacher leadership relates to teachers' behaviours regarding school advancement, professional development and collaboration with colleagues, as well as their knowledge, skills and behaviours for improving teaching and learning. This suggests that teachers' leadership attitudes are important in elevating the quality of instruction taking place in schools and as such the quality of education delivery to students. York-Barr and Duke defined teacher leadership as: "the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (2004, p. 287). Making a difference in school beyond teaching in the classroom involves an effort to enhance teaching practices and deepen subject matter expertise, providing support to colleagues, building professional relationships, being involved in school decision-making processes and challenging existing norms (Danielson 2006; Jacobs et al., 2014). According to Katyal and Evers (2004), teachers have a direct or indirect impact on other colleagues, students and the school community through their beliefs, values, expertise and actions. Teacher leadership is effective when teachers are accepting and respectful towards the opinions of others, and when they are positive, energetic and self-assured (Danielson, 2007; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Such qualities are critical, as effective leadership relies on the creation and preservation of cooperative and professional connections (Poekert, 2012).

Teacher leadership roles can be played in a formal or informal way. Formal teacher leaders are often assigned a particular role within the school by the principal, such as department chair, assigned mentor, curriculum specialist or leader of a study group (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). However, a pitfall of the formal role can be a lack of self-initiative among teachers, as they expect to receive tasks from the school management. Teachers who act as leaders informally, on the other hand, are characterised by an intrinsic motivation to undertake self-initiative for improving teaching and learning. For instance, informal leaders engage in the wider school community to improve teacher collaboration, support colleagues' professional development, share curriculum and instructional materials, conduct action research and provide informal mentoring (Danielson, 2007; Muijs & Harris, 2006). Teachers who engage in formal or informal leadership roles differ in the qualities they possess. Formal teacher leaders are characterised as committed, confident, well organised, communicative, empathetic, flexible and reflective. In addition to these qualities, informal leaders are described as deeply empathetic towards others, resulting in the creation of strong personal ties. Moreover, they are passionate about improving teaching

and learning practices by not only collaborating with other teachers, but also listening to student needs and modelling attentiveness to individual students needs in their classrooms (Gordon et al., 2020).

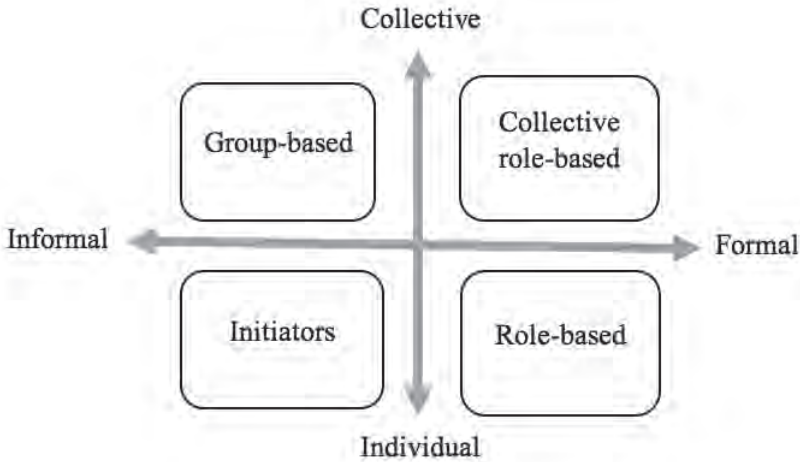
In addition to formal and informal roles of teacher leadership, the literature views teacher leadership from the perspective of individual role-based initiatives as opposed to a collective task-oriented approach. For instance, Snoek et al. (2019) delineate four types of teacher leadership in the lenses of formal/informal and individual/collective.

- Formal and individual teacher leadership is *a role-based approach*, where teachers are given positions by authorities within the school's organisational structure, such as coordinator, team leader or workgroup leader, which come with responsibilities for leading others.
- Formal and collective teacher leadership is *a collective role-based approach*, where teachers work together as part of a group with a specific role in order to exert influence over other individuals outside of the group. They usually work towards a specific goal, e.g., facilitating the professional growth of colleagues.
- Informal and individual teacher leadership is *an initiators approach*, where teacher leadership does not derive from an assigned formal leadership position, but rather arises from teachers taking the initiative to lead in order to contribute to the school's development, e.g., creating informal study circles.
- Informal and collective teacher leadership is *a group-based approach*, where teachers – either all of the teachers or several from the school – work together in initiatives that support school development. This type of teacher leadership empowers every teacher to exert an influence, while those with the most relevant expertise are allowed to lead the process, e.g., working together on innovative teaching strategies.

The present study is based on the framework presented by Snoek et al. (2019) in order to better understand where the conceptualisation of teacher leadership falls within these four types of leadership among pre-service teachers and how initial teacher education contributes to their understanding of and readiness for teacher leadership. Such findings provide significant information on the ways to move forward in preparing future teachers to embrace a broader understanding of leadership and to acquire a greater readiness to act as leaders.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework of Teacher Leadership (adapted from Snoek et al., 2019).



Teacher leadership and initial teacher education

The teaching profession has become increasingly more complex in the last decades. The changing role of teachers has called for a new paradigm of the teaching profession that recognises the potential of teachers to lead for supporting school development. Yet, teachers are seldom seen as the driving force of change (Fullan, 2005). Hence, many teachers do not view themselves as leaders or recognise their role as the backbone of school reforms. Teachers' professional identity as teacher leaders can be nurtured during teacher preparation programmes, as this is when future teachers develop their professional identity. During initial teacher education programmes, through various experiences and interactions, students construct their views of who they want to be as professionals and their understandings of the role and position of teachers in society (Sachs, 2005). Students' values and beliefs about themselves as teachers are critical issues in teacher initial education programmes, because these views serve as the foundation of how they interpret and decide on issues regarding teaching and learning as future teachers (Bullough, 1997). This implies that teacher initial education programmes can contribute to the development of future teacher identity by devoting specific attention to the personal and professional growth of students. Embedding teacher leadership in teacher preparation programmes in which students develop their teacher identity supports their vision of the profession and their understanding of the impact of the profession on the development of school and student success. As Katzenmeyer

and Moller (2009) claim, teachers are confident to enact leadership roles when their personal philosophy to education is clear and well-shaped.

In addition to identity formation, teacher education programmes should equip future teachers with the required competencies to address the needs and challenges of the profession. Leadership is a vital part of the new paradigm of the teaching profession. Forster (1997) stated that “All teachers must be educational leaders in order to optimize the teaching and learning experiences for themselves and their students” (pp. 82–83). This means that future teachers should be supported and encouraged to become leaders in order for them to fulfil their roles and responsibilities as professionals. In order for teachers to act as leaders, they need to have a sense of motivation and confidence to undertake positive changes within school (Muijs & Harris, 2006). Teacher preparation programmes can play a crucial role in nurturing confidence and willingness in future teachers to act as change agents, thus breaking the cultural norms of the teaching profession that view the teacher’s role predominantly situated within the classroom borders. In a study conducted by Oppi et al. (2020), participants mentioned intrinsic motivation as one of the main characteristics of teacher leaders, as teacher leaders should have a force that stems from within and pushes them to do things better. Students’ opportunities for professional development during teacher preparation programmes can support pre-service teachers to broaden their approach towards leadership and expand their understanding of the opportunities they have to lead. Other qualities of teacher leaders include self-regulation skills, such as planning, collaboration and communication, as well as empathy and consideration for others (Oppi et al., 2020). By designing curricular experiences that engage students in leadership roles and responsibilities, future teachers develop a professional identity that incorporates leadership, as well as the skills, attributes and qualities required to take on leadership roles within the classroom, the school and the broader education community. As argued by Forster (1997), “Teacher education institutions carry a particular responsibility by preparing teachers not only to understand and accept a leadership role, but to be able to effectively function in that capacity” (pp. 88–93).

The literature reveals a gap in defining teacher leadership, with varying perspectives on its nature. While definitions differ, teacher leaders are generally seen as influencing educational practices inside and outside the classroom. Teacher leadership can take formal or informal forms, each associated with distinct qualities. Additionally, the literature distinguishes between individual and collective approaches to teacher leadership (Gordon et al., 2020; Oppi et al., 2020; Snoek et al., 2019). In order to address this gap, it is essential to investigate the concept of teacher leadership in initial teacher education programmes

by exploring the process of shaping future teachers' professional identity and equipping them with the necessary competencies to act as leaders within education. Motivated by a belief that teacher leadership plays a crucial role in initial teacher education, the present research investigates the perspectives of student-teachers regarding teacher leadership and their preparedness to embrace teacher leadership in their future careers.

The purpose of the study is to explore pre-service teacher leadership development by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: How do pre-service teachers conceptualise teacher leadership?

RQ2: How does initial teacher education shape the understanding of teacher leadership for school improvement?

RQ3: How does initial teacher education contribute to pre-service teachers' readiness for exercising leadership roles for school improvement?

Methods

The study is situated within a qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative research allows participants' opinions to be flexibly represented and prompts issues that emerge beyond participants' actions and behaviours that exist beneath their consciousness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Sampling, instruments and procedure

The study was conducted with pre-service teachers in the largest initial teacher education institution in Kosovo during the spring semester of the 2022/2023 academic year. Purposive sampling was adopted as a sampling strategy (Cohen et al., 2018). The goal was to ensure inclusive participation of student-teachers from all study years of the Primary Teacher Education programme (1st to 4th-year student-teachers) in group interviews. A total of 42 pre-service teachers from all years of the Primary Teacher Education programme participated in group interviews. In order to ensure an equal opportunity for student-teacher participation in the group interviews, an email was sent out to student-teachers from all study years of the Primary Teacher Education programme with a detailed explanation of the study's purpose. Student-teachers were invited to fill out a participation form that enabled their selection to participate in group interview discussions on a first-come-first-served basis. This selection method was based on the premise that students who filled out the participation form showed an interest in engaging further with the topic of teacher leadership. See the table below for more information on the sample.

Table 1
Sample distribution

Primary Teacher Education students	Number of participants
Year I	10
Year II	10
Year III	10
Year IV	12
TOTAL	42

Since the topic of teacher leadership is fairly new in the Kosovar context of teacher education, group interviews were conducted to enable the researcher to acquire valuable insight into the interpretation of the discussion, as the group members stimulate each other to engage in the discussion (see: Frey & Fontana, 1991). A typical group interview involves 10–15 participants (Cohen et al., 2018), and we invited at least 10 student-teachers per group as participants.

In order to capture a range of teacher leadership conceptualisations, the group interview protocol was developed based on Snoek et al.'s (2019) theoretical framework of teacher leadership. The protocol reflected the goal of initiating discussion on how pre-service teachers conceptualise teacher leadership by linking this to the role of initial teacher education in fostering this concept in teaching profession dimensions. Furthermore, the group interview protocol triggered a discussion on understanding the contribution of initial teacher education to pre-service teachers' readiness for exercising leadership roles for school improvement.

Quality criteria for qualitative research

The study adopted criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative inquiries in order to address validity, generalisability, reliability and objectivity. Researchers who subscribe to the constructivist worldview (including the qualitative, interpretive approach) have developed the following concepts in response to addressing the quality criteria relevant for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative inquiries in qualitative research: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In our research, we addressed the issue of *credibility* in the following ways: (i) by operationalising concepts related to teacher leadership clearly in the data collection, intended to allow respondents to confirm the results; (ii) by random sampling, since the respondents filled out the participation form on a voluntary basis and 'secured' their spots in the group interviews on a first-come-first-served

basis; and (iii) by offering a detailed description of the phenomena being studied in the email invitation to the participants, as well as during the group interviews. Although there is no intention to address external validity/generalisability in qualitative research, our research focused on ensuring *transferability* of results by: (i) allowing other researchers the opportunity to compare context similarities and differences; and (ii) developing a modest basis for achieving theoretical generalisations as the key advantage of conducting qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasise that there is a close association between *dependability* and *confirmability*. In our study, we tackled these two essential benchmarks for conducting qualitative research by offering a comprehensive description of our research methodology and the specific actions taken, in order to facilitate the reader's comprehension of the execution of each step.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using a hybrid thematic approach (see: Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) by combining a deductive template for data analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) and a data-driven inductive approach (Boyatzis, 1998). Deductive thematic analysis was done using the theoretical framework of teacher leadership from Snoek et al. (2019) (see *Figure 1*), while inductive thematic analysis relied on the student-teachers' perspectives and was purely data driven. This combined approach of data analysis was used to ensure an inclusive view of the data and offered rich insights into the students' understanding of teacher leadership and their readiness to exercise a leadership stance towards school improvement.

Results

The study yields evidence about pre-services teachers' understanding of teacher leadership. The findings are organised in accordance with the research questions regarding the conceptualisation of teacher leadership, the contribution of the initial teacher education programme in shaping the understanding of the concept, and the pre-services teachers' readiness to act as leaders based on their perceptions. The results are categorised following a theoretical framework that considers various forms and approaches of teacher leadership depending on teachers' engagement activities. The analysis of the data generated central themes that dominated the pre-service teachers' conceptualisation of teacher leadership and the key insights delineating the understanding of the role of teacher leaders in school development. An overview of the findings is presented in *Table 2* and discussed throughout this section.

Table 2*Overview of the findings*

Forms of Teacher Leadership	Approaches to Teacher Leadership	Central Themes	Key Insights
Formal and individual leadership	Role-based approach	Top-down outlook of leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School principal considered as the key person responsible for school leadership - Formal authority exercised by the school principal enables them to initiate change - Guidance and orders to initiate activities come from a top-down leadership approach
		Teacher leader as an authority figure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher leadership as a formal position in the school hierarchy - Teacher exercises authority and has influence over others - A formal position to initiate activities and foster change
		Teacher as a "successful classroom leader"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A teacher who is in charge of the classroom - Capable of providing effective teaching to students - Focused on student achievement - Capable of fulfilling curriculum requirements - Student-centred teaching approach - Contemporary teaching methodologies - Incisive teacher - Supportive classroom environment for successful learning - Effective classroom management - Cooperation with parents
Formal and collective leadership	Collective role-based approach	Missing link between teachers as individuals and school leadership structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher leadership as confined to classroom roles - Lack of understanding regarding school leadership scope - Lack of guidance to participate in school management activities - Lack of exposure to broad views of teacher and school leadership
Informal and individual	Initiators approach	Teacher leader as a change agent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brings new ideas and practices - Identifies gaps and strives for continuous professional development - Reflects constantly and aims for improvement - Initiating school and community-level activities - Reflects creativity
		Teacher leader as a supporter of collegiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers share good experiences and practices with their peers - Teachers help colleagues to develop professionally - Support colleagues to find appropriate solutions for pressing problems - Invest in developing relationships with colleagues inside and outside school

Forms of Teacher Leadership	Approaches to Teacher Leadership	Central Themes	Key Insights
Informal and collective	Group-based approach	Teachers as contributors to school development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers participate in different school development projects voluntary - Teachers understand the school vision and engage in group efforts to support school improvement - Teachers understand school culture and school needs in order to contribute to different areas of improvement

Conceptualisation of teacher leadership and the contribution of initial teacher education to the understanding of teacher leadership

The study attempted to ascertain how pre-service teachers understand teacher leadership. The predominant understanding among the interviewees situates teacher leader in a formal and individual leadership stance depicting a top-down view on leadership and portraying the teacher leader as an authority figure who is successful mainly within the classroom borders. The prevalent view that teacher leadership relates to formal authority, whereby teachers are expected to fulfil requirements that derive from formal roles, positions the pre-services' understanding of teacher leadership within the *role-based approach*.

The pre-service teachers' understanding of the concept of teacher leadership illustrates their view of leadership in education, which is associated with the *top-down outlook of leadership* in school management. When discussing leadership, the primary figure responsible for school leadership that came into the participants' minds was the school principal. The pre-service teachers mainly regard the school principal as the critical figure in facilitating school improvement and driving change, as guidance and directives to initiate activities are provided by those in higher levels of authority:

The teacher leader is someone who helps other individuals within and outside school to develop professional knowledge. From my previous experience, this person in my school was the school principal, who always dealt with and managed the school's affairs. (Participant 4, Year 1)

The first thing that comes to my mind when we discuss leadership is the position of school principal. (Participant 4, Year 2)

The pre-service teachers portrayed the teacher leader as an *authority figure* having a formal position that allows them to exercise authority and influence others. The formal position of the teacher leader within the school hierarchy grants teacher leaders the ability to initiate activities that drive progress and school improvement:

I think that teacher leadership is more of a formal role [...] if I can say it refers to a teacher who has formal authority in the school, which comes from the higher position a teacher has in the leadership hierarchy. (Participant 4, Year 3)

I think that in a formal role, the teacher leader will have more influence over others, i.e., others will listen and follow him/her in whatever actions the teacher leader initiates. In an informal role, others might not necessarily listen to the teacher leader [...] if for example the teacher provides some ideas for activities to be implemented in the school, if others like or agree with the idea they will follow [...] if not, then they won't. (Participant 2, Year 1)

The pre-service teachers stipulate that the teacher leader is a *successful classroom leader* capable of effectively fulfilling the curriculum requirements and adept at providing effective teaching that conforms with contemporary teaching strategies for addressing students' individual needs, as well as being an inclusive teacher who fosters a supportive classroom environment to facilitate successful learning:

The teacher leader is an inclusive teacher who acts as such both inside and outside the classroom context. The teacher leader is a contemporary teacher who analyses the requirements specified in the curriculum framework and is able to translate them into teaching practice. (Participant 3, Year 2)

The teacher leader is someone who is capable of fulfilling the curriculum requirements effectively, e.g., using student-centred teaching approaches that put the individual needs of students at the forefront, so students can benefit from the teaching that takes place in the classroom. (Participant 3, Year 1)

The findings indicate that the pre-service teachers' understanding of teacher leadership as a *collective role-based approach*, in which teachers work as a group with a specific role to exert influence over other individuals outside the group, is only sporadically mentioned. For example, one participant mentioned that:

[...] the teacher leader can get involved in professional *activas* (departments) of schools and contribute to the teaching and school system. (Participant 5, Year 4)

In the Kosovo education system, professional *activas* are professional communities of two or more teachers of the same/similar subject areas who

share knowledge and practices among themselves in order to contribute to the enhanced quality of teaching and learning.

The *missing link between teachers as individuals and the school leadership structure* is identified by the pre-service teachers' prevalent view of the teacher leader's influence being limited to the classroom role. This suggests that the respondents may not be fully aware of the scope of school leadership, that they lack a comprehensive understanding of the roles and responsibilities of school leadership, and that they might not be fully aware of the broader leadership opportunities available to them within the school system and how they can be more involved in school management.

The participants in the study made a distinction between the teacher's involvement as a leader who relates to their activities that are part of the expected teachers' workload and teachers' involvement in informal activities with students. Such a distinction indicates that the pre-service teachers have a moderate understanding of teacher leadership as an *initiators approach* in which teachers have an informal and individual role as leaders. For instance, teachers' informal involvement on a voluntary basis in organising school-level activities such as awareness raising activities regarding important societal issues:

[...] An example is when a teacher takes the initiative to organise activities related to students' awareness of environment protection. (Participant 4, Year 2)

The pre-service teachers view the teacher leader *as a change agent* in the sense that teacher leaders are innovators who bring new ideas and practices to their work, introduce innovative solutions to problems, initiate school-level activities that engage students and motivate them to learn, and reflect continuously on identifying their needs for professional development. However, this theme was mainly discussed within the framework of individual and classroom-level interventions, and the participants failed to more thoroughly recognise teacher leadership beyond classroom boundaries.

The teacher leader accepts his/her challenges and knowledge gaps and always strives to improve him/herself through continuous professional development activities [...]. They are more prone to taking risks and are fully committed to their responsibilities as teachers. (Participant 1, Year 4)

In addition, within the *initiators approach* to teacher leadership, the pre-service teachers portray the teacher leader as a *supporter of collegiality*, as teacher leaders are viewed as teachers who play a critical role in creating a positive and collaborative school culture in which teachers are willing to share

experiences, practices and knowledge with one another. As mentioned by the participants, the teacher leader helps colleagues to develop professionally by offering support, guidance and feedback, and by investing in developing collegial relationships inside and outside the school:

Teacher leaders can contribute to school development by sharing good practices and experiences with their colleagues – if they have implemented a teaching practice/activity during their lesson that has turned out to be successful and well received (perceived as attractive) by students – in order for their colleagues to also implement good practices for their students to learn more effectively. (Participant 3, Year 1)

I will initiate collaborations not only within the classroom and school context, but with colleagues beyond the school ‘boundaries’. (Participant 9, Year 4)

Teacher leaders should collaborate with all of their colleagues (teacher colleagues and other school staff, as well as with students and parents) and be willing to listen to others’ ideas, concerns. Such teachers are willing to invest in collegial collaboration even outside school [...] by inviting colleagues to social activities outside working hours. This helps colleagues to connect at a deeper level and find commonalities that enhance their professional connection. (Participant 6, Year 1)

Finally, the interviewees depict the role of the teacher leader within the *group-based approach* by stipulating that teacher leaders are *contributors to school development*. In this role, teacher leaders should understand the school vision and work collaboratively with others to support school development:

[...] One concrete example is when the teacher and the school principal collaborate in preparing an application for a grant for school improvement purposes. (Participant 4, Year 2)

I think school development is a continuous process. In order to contribute to school development, we need to have a vision [...] we need to know where we want the school to be. But in order to do this I cannot do it alone, I can contribute as part of a team, but I consider that the involvement of other colleagues and the school principal is necessary to have a common understanding of where we are as a school and where we want to be, and afterwards decide on the activities that we need to implement in order to achieve that goal. (Participant 5, Year 3)

The pre-service teachers have varying opinions on the contribution of the initial teacher education programme to the formation of their

conceptualisation of teacher leadership. The participants from the first and second year of study tend to have a more positive view on the effectiveness of the programme to equip them with knowledge regarding the roles and responsibilities of the teaching profession through various courses and assignments, as well as to develop skills such as research skills and time management, which are viewed as crucial for their work as professionals.

The study programme exposed us to the content of the curriculum, its purpose and the role of teachers in implementing the curriculum. This has helped us to broaden our view and perspective on the role of teachers in the education system. (Participant 2, Year 1)

Last year, we had a task to analyse the national curriculum framework and I remember that when we analysed the competencies we needed to develop in students that was the first understanding I gained of what kind of teacher I would like to be. The development of such competencies has helped me understand how to become a teacher leader in the future. (Participant 3, Year 2)

The participants from the third year of study reveal mixed views on the study programme's focus on teacher leadership. Some of the participants claimed that, during their three years of study, they lacked opportunities to discuss the concept of the teacher leader specifically, but that the programme had offered them opportunities to expose themselves to leadership practices mainly during in-school placement and practical assignments. Others claimed to have heard about the concept but lacked an opportunity during their studies to gain a more comprehensive understanding of it. The participants from the fourth year of study had more dilemmas regarding the study programme's focus on teacher leadership, which limited their views on the role of teacher leadership in school improvement.

We did not specifically discuss the concept, but during our assignments I think we were exposed to leadership and practised it without maybe realising. For example, during in-school placement, we were asked or supposed to lead the class or an activity and then we were asked to reflect on how we implemented it to understand what to do better next time. (Participant 3, Year 3)

Many courses focus on general aspects of the teaching profession and have failed to enable us to dig deeper into different problems and explore potential interventions and solutions. I only know what a teacher leader is in theory! (Participant 9, Year 4)

Readiness for exercising leadership roles

Regarding the pre-service teachers' readiness to exercise leadership for school improvement, the findings revealed the main competencies that the participants consider to be essential for the teacher leader. Personal characteristics – such as positive attitudes towards the profession, work ethics, being inspiring, reflective, empathetic, professional, motivating, responsible, enthusiastic and creative, and being a role model for students – were deemed as characteristics of the teacher leader. The participants considered that the initial teacher education programme had enabled them to shape their professional identity and their personal philosophy to education in line with the identified characteristics of the teacher leader:

I think that, in this changing world, there is a general understanding that being a teacher does not only mean that we go to class and teach. [...] Teachers are expected to engage in continuous professional development in order to gain new knowledge and skills that prepare them to deal with a range of demands and to address students' needs. This is the basis that enables teachers to develop as leaders. (Participant 2, Year 2)

The participants also emphasised the generic skills that characterise the teacher leader, such as communication skills, organisational skills and research skills, to name a few. Generally, the participants considered that the programme had helped them to develop such skills, thus making them feel more confident to act as leaders in the future:

I think that the programme has helped me develop some of the generic skills. For example, I learned to be organised and manage my time more effectively, and to be more responsible during group assignments. Assignments also helped me be more reflective in terms of analysing things and listening to others' views on a certain topic. (Participant 3, Year 1)

Lastly, the pre-service teachers mentioned that the teacher leader should embrace democratic values, such as diversity and inclusion, and respect for all students. They consider that they are ready to demonstrate and promote such values in their schools:

I would try to create an inclusive school and support students with special needs. In this regard, I would organise awareness-raising activities, involving the community as well, to emphasise the importance of the inclusive school. (Participant 2, Year 3)

The findings also show a reluctance in some participants to exercise leadership, as they consider they lacked opportunities for hands-on experience and

practical work during their studies. This view prevailed mainly among third- and fourth-year students, who considered that they need more time and experience to be able to fully understand the multifaceted demands of the teaching profession. The pre-service teachers positioned teacher leadership within the role-based approach, the initiators approach and the group-based approach, while the collective-role based approach is missing in their understanding of the concept.

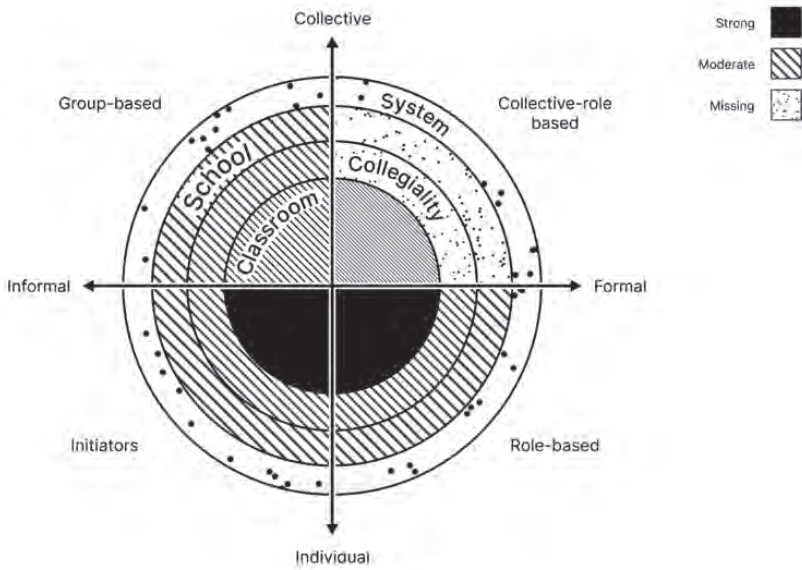
Discussion

The present study provides evidence about pre-service teachers' conceptualisation of teacher leadership, the contribution of initial teacher education in developing an understanding of teacher leadership, and the readiness of future teachers to act as leaders. The findings regarding the conceptualisation of teacher leadership within the Snoek et al. (2019) model of different forms of teacher leadership reveal that there is no consensus on the definition of teacher leadership, which is consistent with previous findings in the literature.

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1979), our findings indicate that shaping teacher leadership in initial teacher education is highly context-based. This means that initial teacher education influences the understanding of teacher leadership based on a contextually drawn vision of what it means to be a teacher. Although teacher leadership has been discussed as a cross-cutting theme in initial teacher education, pre-service teachers embrace a narrow view of teacher leadership towards individual and classroom-level leadership roles. However, other dimensions of teacher leadership at the collegial, school and system levels are marginally represented or missing. Hence, our findings support the development of a framework (see *Figure 2*) for understanding teacher leadership within such contextual dynamics whereby the role of teacher leader is confined within classroom borders, while teachers' contribution to educational leadership is practically lacking at the school and system levels. The framework connects the models of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Snoek et al. (2019) to offer a deeper understanding of context-based teacher leadership development towards shaping future teacher professionalism.

Figure 2

Framework for understanding context-based teacher leadership development



At the classroom level, the predominant exemplification of the teacher leader relates to the formal and individual role of teachers bounded mainly within the classroom borders. Similar to other research (see: Brooks, 2004), the pre-service teachers interviewed in the present study generally believed that their leadership responsibilities were limited to the classroom context, as they considered that the role of the teacher leader is primarily to accomplish the official requirements, responsibilities and duties of the profession. The limited view of teacher leadership centred on fulfilling curriculum requirements indicates an absence of understanding of the broader leadership opportunities available to teachers in the school and education system. This prevalent view among the future teachers interviewed could be due to their general understanding of the hierarchical interviewed of leadership, which positions teachers' work primarily in the classroom. The formal structure of school leadership is widespread among schools in Kosovo (see: Buleshkaj & Koren, 2022). Therefore, pre-service teachers lack exposure to different leadership models during their in-school placement, which could have contributed to their limited view of teacher leadership.

At the collegial level, the participants in the study demonstrated an understanding of the distinctive role of the teacher leader in formal and informal positions by mentioning activities that could be done individually or collectively

in formal and informal roles (York-Barr & Duke, 2004) at the school as well as the community level. They mentioned the role of the teacher leader in establishing a positive climate within the school and in collaborating with other colleagues to advance teaching practices for successful student learning. Although aware of the importance of collegial collaboration, the nature of collaboration is essentially to serve the purposes of classroom change. This means that exercising leadership through collegiality entails sharing good practices and experiences that enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

At the school level, collaboration for school improvements is partly discussed. Teacher leadership is viewed as limited to collaboration for student achievement, which in turn could support overall school development. Nevertheless, collaboration to support the vision of the school and development beyond the classroom is missing in the pre-service teachers' delineation of the role of the teacher leader for school development, which is similar to other findings in the literature (see: Oppi et al., 2020). Participating in school change and improvement initiatives is one of the dimensions of teacher leadership practice identified by York-Barr and Duke (2004), encompassing teachers taking part in decision-making within school, working with colleagues and conducting action research for school change. However, teachers' engagement of this nature was absent in the discussion of teacher leaders' roles with the participants of the present study, which further supports their isolated view of the scope of teacher leadership.

At the system level, teacher leadership for supporting education system changes is missing. How students construct their view of their future selves as teacher leaders does not support them in acting as change agents at the system level, but rather in exerting influence through their classroom practices. This means that the initial teacher education programme has shaped a pre-service teacher philosophy to education (see: Sachs, 2005; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009) by introducing students to the core professional tasks and responsibilities of the teaching profession confined within the classroom setting. These findings indicate that initial teacher education programmes should incorporate a more explicit and multifaceted approach to teacher leadership in order to broaden pre-service teachers' conceptualisation of the role of teachers in contributing to system change.

In addition to developing an understanding of teacher leadership, the initial teacher education programme should support students with developing the required competencies to act as leaders. As many programmes may not be suitable for pre-service teachers, Bond (2011) suggests that the experience of in-school practice provides opportunities for students to develop leadership skills.

In the present study, the participants mentioned the opportunities they had during their study years to develop generic skills, particularly competencies like communication and research skills during practical assignments, or opportunities to exercise leadership by leading a class during in-school practice. This demonstrates the importance of exposing students to various experiential opportunities to help them develop their skills and have a better understanding of their leadership role in a school setting.

Conclusion

The present study concludes that initial teacher education has a critical role in contributing to shifting the conceptualisation of teacher leadership beyond the narrow sense of individual and formal leadership. Teacher leadership should be placed within a wider context of teacher professionalism so that teacher leadership for school improvement is understood as part of the teaching profession. Pre-service teachers should be practically exposed to leadership situations in order to broadly understand the scope of teacher leadership, develop teacher leadership competencies and enhance their readiness to exercise leadership roles. Therefore, embedding teacher leadership as part of initial teacher education study programmes is imperative for cultivating future teacher leaders for school and education system improvement.

Limitations and future research

The study has some limitations, both methodological and in terms of content. Regarding content limitations, the study deals with pre-service teacher leadership conceptualisations shaped through the leading initial teacher education institution in Kosovo. Teacher leadership is operationalised using Snoek et al.'s (2019) theoretical framework of teacher leadership in order to capture a range of teacher leadership conceptualisations. In order to ensure the teacher-orientation in the concept investigation, however, school leadership and school improvement are not included. Regarding methodological limitations, the study is context-situated and offers a focused view of developing pre-service teacher leadership. Future studies could focus on in-service teacher leadership to understand how teacher experience and continuous professional development shape the leadership stance. Such studies could contribute to understanding the required interventions in initial teacher education programmes in order to fully incorporate the teacher leadership dimension.

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Biographical note

JETË ALIU, MA, is a Teaching Assistant in the field of Educational Sciences at the Faculty of Education, University of Prishtina in Kosovo. She is currently a PhD candidate in Educational Sciences at the University of Ljubljana with a research interest in educational leadership, specifically focusing on teacher leadership, school culture, teacher professional development, and school development.

FJOLLA KAÇANIKU, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Prishtina in Kosovo. She currently teaches courses on education research and education policy. Her research focuses on quality-driven teacher education in the context of European policy reforms. She is currently a board member of the Teacher Education Policy in Europe (TEPE) network.