



Empowering Curriculum Leaders and Mastering Educational Trends: A Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

The landscape of education is continuously shaped by rapid technological changes, evolving societal demands, and increasingly intricate curriculum frameworks. Within this context, curriculum leadership emerges as a key factor influencing school effectiveness and the quality of education. This conceptual review investigates the relationship between the empowerment of curriculum leadership and the mastery of current educational developments, drawing on theoretical insights from distributed leadership, transformational leadership, and socio-cultural theory. By examining policy documents, empirical research, and theoretical sources, the review highlights how curriculum leaders balance the need to preserve curricular coherence with pressures to address new priorities such as digital innovation, artificial intelligence integration, values-based education, and inclusive approaches. The findings suggest that effective curriculum leadership involves not only expertise in curriculum design and execution but also the ability to adaptively navigate between broad policy demands and the practical conditions of classroom teaching. Moreover, the review points to notable gaps in existing research, especially concerning the contextual influences that facilitate or hinder curriculum leadership across different educational environments, the ongoing professional development requirements of curriculum leaders, and the pathways through which leadership impacts student learning. The paper proposes a conceptual framework that frames curriculum leadership as a fluid practice sensitive to its context, and it outlines potential avenues for future inquiry aimed at addressing the challenges of empowering curriculum leaders amid ongoing educational transformation.

1. Introduction

Over the past thirty years, the notion of curriculum leadership (Morrissey, 2025) has shifted considerably, moving from a limited administrative role to a multifaceted practice central to educational improvement efforts worldwide. In today's educational systems, individuals in curriculum leadership positions (whether labeled as curriculum coordinators, subject heads, or school leaders responsible for curriculum) face the complex task of ensuring curricular coherence while adapting to rapidly changing educational trends and societal demands. This conceptual review addresses the question: How can curriculum leaders be supported to effectively understand and respond to emerging educational trends in ways that enhance teaching, learning, and equity?

This question gains importance against the backdrop of a growingly complex educational environment. Recent policy documents (Education Bureau, 2026) highlight a heightened focus on strengthening curriculum leadership capacity as a key strategy for implementing curriculum reforms. In this context, school curriculum leaders are seen as pivotal in maintaining the quality of support services and fostering ongoing curriculum development (Cooney & Cohen, 2024). This view aligns with an international consensus that curriculum leadership is not a mere auxiliary role but a primary driver of educational change.

Several intersecting developments characterize the current educational landscape, imposing new expectations on curriculum leaders. The digital transformation of education (Zizikova, Nikolaev & Levchenko, 2023), propelled by the global pandemic and sustained by continual technological advances, challenges curriculum lead-

ers to go beyond incorporating technology into instruction: they must also promote digital literacy, artificial intelligence comprehension, and computational thinking (Angeli & Giannakos, 2020) among both students and educators. Simultaneously, a renewed policy focus on values education, national identity, and cultural heritage demands curriculum leaders engage with politically sensitive matters without compromising pedagogical rigor. Moreover, addressing the ongoing challenge of learner diversity (including students with special needs, language learners, and those facing socioeconomic disadvantages) calls for curriculum leaders to advocate for inclusive teaching strategies, often within contexts of limited resources.

This review is organized as follows. The second section discusses the theoretical underpinnings of curriculum leadership, drawing on frameworks such as distributed leadership, transformational leadership, and socio-cultural theories. The third section examines current educational trends and their implications for curriculum leadership practices. The fourth section considers the notion of empowerment as it relates to curriculum leaders, outlining structural, professional, and individual factors involved in capacity development. Section five integrates these insights into a conceptual framework for understanding empowered curriculum leadership within its contextual realities. Section six concludes by highlighting gaps in existing research and proposing avenues for future inquiry.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Curriculum Leadership

2.1 Defining Curriculum Leadership

Curriculum leadership is a concept subject to debate, with definitions varying from a technocratic perspective that centers on managing curriculum materials and scheduling, to a transformative view that highlights leaders' roles in shaping educational vision, supporting teacher professional development, and ensuring the curriculum addresses the needs of all students. In this review, curriculum leadership is understood as the practice of guiding, supporting, and influencing the processes of curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation in ways that aim to improve teaching quality and student learning outcomes, while remaining attentive to the diverse contexts within which schooling takes place.

This understanding incorporates several important aspects. Firstly, curriculum leadership is essentially relational, involving interactions among leaders, teachers, students, parents, and external stakeholders. Secondly, it is shaped by the specific institutional, cultural, and policy environments of schools, making it context-sensitive. Thirdly, curriculum leadership maintains a pedagogical focus, with the primary goal of enhancing learning experiences and outcomes.

2.2 Distributed Leadership and Curriculum Leadership

The distributed leadership framework (Chitpin, 2020) provides a valuable perspective for examining curriculum leadership. Rather than viewing leadership as a set of individual traits or formal positions, this framework regards it as an emergent outcome of social interactions within an organization. Consequently, curriculum leadership is seen not as the sole responsibility of appointed leaders but as a function shared among various participants, including subject coordinators, lead teachers, and classroom teachers, all of whom contribute to decision-making and the implementation process.

The concept of "leadership practice" which emphasizes the dynamic interaction among leaders, followers, and contextual factors (Case & Sliwa, 2020), is particularly pertinent here. From this standpoint, curriculum leadership hinges less on the identities of leaders and more on their collaborative actions with others. This understanding influences how empowerment is approached: it involves establishing conditions (such as supportive structures, adequate resources, and conducive cultural norms) that facilitate the distribution of leadership activities throughout the educational community.

The applicability of distributed leadership to curriculum implementation becomes evident given the inherent complexity of curriculum change. Top-down mandates rarely achieve lasting reform: instead, successful change depends on active teacher involvement and the cultivation of shared capacity (Schneider, 2024). Within a distributed leadership model, curriculum leaders are seen primarily as facilitators who promote collective participation rather than as exclusive decision-makers.

2.3 Transformational Leadership and Curriculum Vision

The transformational leadership framework adapted to educational settings by Leithwood, Tomlinson and Genge (1996), offers an additional perspective. This approach highlights the leader's role in articulating a compelling vision, encouraging followers to move beyond their self-interest, and promoting both intellectual engagement and individualized support (Eduzor, 2024). Within curriculum leadership, transformational methods emphasize the leader's ability to cultivate a shared vision for the curriculum that aligns with teachers' professional values and goals, while accommodating the requirements imposed by curriculum policies. Leaders who employ this style often act as intermediaries between policy expectations and teacher autonomy, fostering a sense of ownership that helps maintain long-term implementation efforts.

Nonetheless, the transformational leadership model has faced criticism for potentially overstating the influence of the individual leader and underappreciating the significance of distributed leadership and contextual variables (Kavgacı, 2024). We might get a better grasp of curriculum leadership by combining two approaches. One is the relational side of distributed leadership, which focuses on sharing practices and working together among educators. The other is the vision-driven part of transformational leadership, which highlights setting clear goals, encouraging new ideas, and building commitment to keep curriculum changes going in different education settings (Weiss, Barth & von Wehrden, 2021).

2.4 Socio-Cultural Perspectives on Curriculum Leadership

Socio-cultural theories, based on Vygotsky's work and later scholars like Tzuril (2021), offer a different way to understand curriculum leadership. This view sees curriculum leadership as something that depends on the context, shaped by cultural tools, social interactions, and the history of specific schools or institutions. Learning, whether by students or teachers, happens through cultural items like curriculum documents, technology, and teaching methods.

This perspective highlights the importance of recognizing the "cultural scripts" that influence how curriculum is practiced in different places (Kitiashvili, 2025). For those leading curriculum efforts, it means paying attention not just to the official curriculum but also to the underlying assumptions, routines, and norms that affect teaching in their schools. Supporting curriculum leaders therefore involves helping them develop the skills to spot and think critically about these cultural elements, and encouraging group discussions aimed at improving how things are done.

In addition, the socio-cultural approach points out the importance of "communities of practice" (Fonseca, Zegers & Firoozi, 2024) as key spaces for professional learning and curriculum changes. In this setting, curriculum leaders act less like people who just carry out orders and more like facilitators who help teachers work together, deepening their understanding of both the curriculum and teaching methods.

3. Mastering Contemporary Educational Trends

3.1 The Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence

The shift toward digital transformation in teaching and learning has become a key trend in today's education. It is not just about using new technology tools but involves major changes in how curricula are designed, how teachers deliver lessons, and how students' learning is assessed. Curriculum leaders are encouraged to support national goals that focus on boosting the country's progress through science, education, and innovation. Education Bureau is pushing for a deeper use of digital methods to make teaching more effective and help students build skills in areas like artificial intelligence and creative problem-solving.

For those who develop curricula, this digital shift brings both chances and challenges (Catalano, 2019). On the positive side, digital tools can offer more personalized learning, open lots of resources, and engage students in real-world, inquiry-driven activities. But technology is evolving quickly, which creates some uncertainty. Teachers need to balance technical know-how with a good understanding of teaching methods, curriculum design, and how to assess students properly to make the most of these tools.

Adding AI into education has made things even more complicated. New AI systems, like those that generate content, are starting to affect how materials are created, how students get help, and how evaluations are done. Curriculum leaders now have tough questions to deal with: how to include AI literacy in existing programs, how AI might impact academic honesty, and how to use AI to support teachers' expertise rather than replace it. It is necessary to create an AI professional learning community involving pre-service teachers, experienced teachers, and experts, and conduct a professional development study connected to teaching practice.

3.2 Values Education and National Identity Formation

Another important trend in education today, especially clear in policy documents from Hong Kong and elsewhere, is a renewed focus on values education and building national identity. For example, the Education Bureau (2026) highlights national education, values education, STEAM, independent learning, and addressing learner diversity as key areas for support. Many programs mentioned there concentrate on fostering national identity, Chinese culture, and patriotism.

This trend ties into wider global changes where education is expected not just to boost economic growth, but also to promote social unity and national progress. For those leading curriculum design, this means finding ways to genuinely integrate values education into different subjects without it feeling like an extra task. It must be part of the core teaching and learning experience across grades.

Because values education (Curriculum Development Council, 2021) involves social and political issues, curriculum leaders face a complex challenge. They need to interpret policy in ways that fit their schools while considering the varied values and backgrounds of students, parents, and communities. This calls for skills beyond teaching methods, including cultural awareness and political sensitivity.

3.3 STEAM Education and Interdisciplinary Learning

STEAM education, encompassing science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics, has gained considerable attention as a curriculum approach worldwide. This focus arises from the understanding that complex real-world issues seldom align neatly with conventional subject divisions, and that innovation often occurs at the convergence of different fields (Niu & Cheng, 2022). The Education Bureau (2026) provides support through various STEAM-oriented programs, which include efforts to advance STEAM education via innovative technologies and to integrate it with artificial intelligence applications (Huang & Qiao, 2024).

For curriculum leaders, implementing STEAM education challenges traditional curriculum frameworks. It necessitates moving away from compartmentalized subject teaching toward interdisciplinary learning opportunities, which require new modes of teacher collaboration, adaptable scheduling, and revised assessment strategies. Leaders must support the development of teachers' abilities to design and deliver interdisciplinary units that cross subject boundaries, enabling meaningful connections between disciplines. At the same time, they must ensure that each discipline retains its unique conceptual frameworks, methodologies, and inquiry approaches that form its intellectual core.

3.4 Catering for Learner Diversity and Inclusion

Addressing learner diversity (including students with special educational needs, those who are non-native language speakers, and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds) has become increasingly integral to curriculum policy and practice. The Education Bureau (2026) outlines specific support services aimed at assisting non-native Chinese students and learners with special educational needs, indicating a clear commitment to inclusive education.

For curriculum leaders, this shift entails moving beyond uniform curriculum models to adopt differentiated and adaptive teaching methods. It involves a nuanced understanding of how curriculum content, instructional approaches, and assessment methods can be structured to accommodate diverse learners. Consequently, curriculum leaders must cultivate expertise in inclusive pedagogy (Jacquart et al., 2019) and provide guidance to teachers in building similar competencies.

3.5 Indigenous and Culturally Responsive Curriculum

In various contexts, particularly those shaped by postcolonial histories, there is increasing attention to making curricula culturally responsive and integrating indigenous knowledge systems. This shift aligns with broader efforts to decolonize education (Absolon, 2019) and to acknowledge diverse cultural traditions as valid knowledge sources. Within the Hong Kong context, such efforts manifest in a focus on "Chinese culture" and "Chinese history" throughout the curriculum, whereas elsewhere these initiatives may take different shapes.

For curriculum leaders, embedding indigenous and culturally responsive perspectives entails a critical analysis of the cultural assumptions underlying current curriculum materials and practices. It also involves designing curricula that acknowledge and build upon the cultural assets students bring to their learning. Achieving this balance is a complex endeavor, demanding not only expertise in curriculum design but also a thorough grasp of culture, history, and the dynamics of power.

4. Empowering Curriculum Leaders: Dimensions and Mechanisms

4.1 Structural Empowerment

Structural empowerment pertains to the formal structures (such as defined roles, allocation of resources, and decision-making authority) that facilitate curriculum leaders in fulfilling their duties effectively. Support services provided by the Education Bureau focus on strengthening the professional capabilities of school curriculum leaders. This includes assisting with the planning and implementation of curricula across early childhood, primary, and secondary education, as well as guiding school teams in developing curricula that are distinctive, sustainable, and responsive to evolving curriculum initiatives and educational trends.

Crucial structural factors that enable curriculum leadership involve the following aspects:

(a) Clearly assigned leadership roles: Schools that establish specific positions with defined responsibilities and allocate protected time for curriculum-related activities generally achieve more effective curriculum implementation.

(b) Provision of resources: Sufficient financial support and material resources are necessary to support curriculum development. These resources encompass access to professional development opportunities, relevant curriculum materials, and educational technology.

(c) Authority in decision-making: Curriculum leaders need appropriate authority to make decisions concerning curriculum content, instructional approaches, and assessment methods within their designated scope, accompanied by corresponding accountability measures.

Nonetheless, structural empowerment alone does not suffice. The Education Bureau acknowledges the importance of continually refining support services to better integrate with ongoing curriculum initiatives and

broader educational developments. This acknowledgment highlights the necessity for structural mechanisms to remain adaptable and evolve over time rather than being fixed or rigid.

4.2 Professional Empowerment

Professional empowerment encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that curriculum leaders require to function effectively. This involves a foundation in curriculum theory and design, as well as specialized understanding of emerging areas such as digital education and values education.

The professional development needs of curriculum leaders are varied. These include expertise in curriculum design, which entails crafting coherent and aligned frameworks articulating clear learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment methods. Additionally, deep pedagogical content knowledge is necessary to teach specific subject matter in ways that engage and accommodate diverse learners. Leadership in change management is also critical, requiring the ability to guide curriculum reform, address resistance, foster stakeholder support, and maintain ongoing implementation. Furthermore, data literacy plays a role in enabling leaders to use student learning data to guide curriculum decisions and assess effectiveness. Lastly, proficiency with technology is essential for effectively utilizing and evaluating digital tools in curriculum delivery and assessment.

The Education Bureau's support services address these varied needs through programs that build professional learning communities focused on curriculum leadership. These initiatives cover subjects such as values education, STEAM education, and digital education. They emphasize that professional empowerment arises not from isolated training sessions but through continuous, collaborative learning processes.

4.3 Personal and Relational Empowerment

In addition to structural and professional aspects, curriculum leaders must possess personal and relational capacities, such as confidence, agency, and skills in relationship building, to fulfill their roles effectively. Personal empowerment entails cultivating a professional identity as a curriculum leader, which includes the confidence to initiate actions, advocate for necessary resources, and navigate complex political environments. Relational empowerment, on the other hand, involves the capacity to establish trust, encourage collaboration, and galvanize collective efforts. According to the distributed leadership framework, curriculum leadership is inherently relational; thus, leaders need to engage productively with teachers, administrators, parents, and external stakeholders.

The Education Bureau (2026) highlights this by emphasizing the importance of building learning communities and promoting professional exchange between schools, acknowledging the significance of relational empowerment. Such learning communities serve as platforms where curriculum leaders can enhance their relational competencies and strengthen the professional confidence essential for effective leadership.

5. Toward a Conceptual Framework for Empowered Curriculum Leadership

Building on the theoretical perspectives and analyses discussed earlier, this section introduces a conceptual framework aimed at understanding how curriculum leadership can be empowered within the current landscape of educational developments.

5.1 Core Components of Empowered Curriculum Leadership

The framework delineates three fundamental elements characterizing empowered curriculum leadership.

(a) Vision and Direction involve curriculum leaders articulating a well-defined, collectively endorsed vision that integrates policy requirements with the school's priorities and teachers' perspectives. This vision serves to unify the wide range of initiatives and trends schools navigate.

(b) Capacity Building refers to their systematic efforts to enhance both teacher and leader proficiency in curriculum implementation through professional development, resource creation, and the establishment of collaborative inquiry processes.

(c) System Alignment denotes the leaders' role in coordinating multiple aspects of the curriculum system (such as objectives, content, teaching methods, assessment, and resources) to facilitate coherent execution, while also ensuring that practices at the school level correspond with district and national policy guidelines.

5.2 Contextual Factors

The framework also highlights several contextual factors that influence the potential for empowered curriculum leadership. First, the policy environment plays a role, where the level of clarity, flexibility, and support within policies affects leaders' ability to adapt to educational developments. When mandates lack funding or policies send mixed messages, empowerment tends to be limited. Second, school culture matters, as prevailing norms about collaboration, innovation, and ongoing improvement create the conditions under which curriculum leadership occurs. Environments characterized by trust and collegiality tend to foster empowerment, whereas hierarchical and compliance-driven cultures may restrict it. Third, the availability of resources is significant; having access to financial, human, and material support, including adequate time allocated for curriculum-related tasks, serves as a key factor enabling leadership. Finally, the community context, including the diversity of student

backgrounds and the specific expectations held by the community, shapes the challenges curriculum leaders face and must navigate.

5.3 Dynamic Interactions

The framework highlights the ongoing interactions between core components and the surrounding context. Empowerment should be understood as a continuous process involving adaptation and learning rather than a fixed condition. Curriculum leaders are required to repeatedly revise their vision, develop new capabilities, and adjust systemic elements to respond effectively to evolving trends and circumstances.

This fluid nature is evident in the Education Bureau document, which stresses the importance of “continuous optimization” and offers various support mechanisms (such as school-based assistance, cross-school learning communities, and collaboration between mainland and Hong Kong teachers) that can be tailored to address the specific needs of different schools.

6. Gaps in Literature and Future Research Directions

This conceptual review has revealed several notable gaps in the literature concerning curriculum leadership and educational trends that merit further exploration.

(a) Contextual Variation — Much of the scholarship on curriculum leadership has emerged from Western settings, particularly in North America and Europe. However, there is a scarcity of research examining how curriculum leadership is understood and practiced across diverse cultural and institutional environments, such as postcolonial societies, authoritarian regimes, and contexts with limited resources. The situation in Hong Kong, characterized by its blend of East Asian cultural heritage, British colonial history, and integration with mainland China, presents a valuable case for conducting comparative and context-sensitive studies.

(b) The Role of Technology in Curriculum Leadership — Although technology integration within teaching is well-studied, relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which curriculum leaders can effectively steer digital transformation processes. Key questions remain regarding the skills curriculum leaders require to support the incorporation of artificial intelligence, digital assessment tools, and blended learning models. Further investigation is warranted into how these leaders might cultivate their own digital competencies and assist teachers in developing theirs.

(c) Empowerment Mechanisms — While empowerment is frequently highlighted as central to curriculum leadership, empirical evidence identifying which mechanisms (whether structural, professional, or relational) function most effectively across different contexts remains limited. There is a need for research that elucidates specific practices and situational factors that help curriculum leaders build confidence, competence, and a sense of agency.

(d) Linking Leadership to Outcomes — A longstanding challenge within leadership studies is establishing clear causal connections between leadership behaviours and student learning outcomes, an issue that also affects curriculum leadership research. Future studies should adopt robust methodologies, such as longitudinal designs and mixed methods approaches; to investigate how empowered curriculum leadership (Murphy & Curran, 2020) might lead to enhanced teaching practices and improved learning results.

(e) The Experience of Curriculum Leaders — Research focusing on the lived experiences of curriculum leaders themselves is notably lacking. Despite policy frameworks, such as those outlined by the Education Bureau (2026), which articulate ambitious goals for curriculum leadership, there remains limited understanding of how leaders perceive their roles, the challenges they encounter, the forms of support they find beneficial, and the strategies they employ to manage complexity. Qualitative and participatory research methods may offer valuable insights into the practical realities of curriculum leadership.

7. Conclusion

This conceptual review has explored the relationship between empowering curriculum leaders and navigating contemporary educational trends. The analysis highlights that effective curriculum leadership involves a complex interplay of theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and interpersonal abilities. Curriculum leaders face the challenge of managing diverse, sometimes conflicting, trends such as digital transformation, values education, STEAM initiatives, and inclusion, all while ensuring curricular coherence and fostering teacher development.

A conceptual framework is proposed, identifying three central elements of empowered curriculum leadership: vision and direction, capacity building, and system alignment. The framework underscores the ongoing interaction between these elements and the broader contextual conditions. According to this perspective, empowerment should be understood not as a status granted by policy alone but as a process cultivated through continuous investment in organizational structures, professional learning opportunities, and collaborative networks.

The findings carry notable implications for policy and practice. For educational authorities aiming to strengthen curriculum leadership, it is necessary to shift from sporadic professional development toward establishing sustained, context-sensitive support mechanisms. The Education Bureau (2026) initiative exemplifies such an approach by integrating school-based coaching, inter-school learning communities, and cooperation between mainland China and Hong Kong to meet varied school needs. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of these efforts

hinges on their ability to enhance curriculum leaders' adaptive capacity, enabling them to respond effectively to emerging educational trends while addressing the unique challenges of their schools.

As global education systems face unprecedented challenges and opportunities, the significance of curriculum leaders will continue to increase. Empowering these leaders to engage with evolving educational trends extends beyond professional development; it represents a critical investment in the overall quality and equity of education. The conceptual framework introduced in this review provides an initial lens for understanding the requirements of such empowerment and suggests pathways for its realization.

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