Research Article:

Teacher and Middle Leadership: Resolving Conceptual Confusion to Advance the Knowledge Base of Teacher Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores issues with defining teacher leadership and this causes confusion with research on middle leadership. After providing a definition of middle leadership, four major reviews of teacher leadership and an international research project on teacher leadership are described in terms of how teacher leadership is defined. It is shown that in most definitions of teacher leadership there is considerable overlap with middle leadership research and because of this there is a lack of clarity about what is being researched. A leadership influence model is described which provides a way to distinguish between school leadership based on positional power and personal connectiveness. Importantly, this can provide a distinction between teacher and middle leadership that has greater clarity and distinctiveness than current definitions, and potentially it could unify the study of teacher, middle, principal and distributed leadership.

Keywords: Teacher leadership, middle leadership, teacher leaders, middle leaders, distributed leadership

INTRODUCTION

Whilst principals, have been the focus of much research, with changes to school structures and expectations over the last 60 years and changes in societal expectations, such as the widespread adoption of school-based management, the rise of managerialism and more egalitarian workplaces (Bush, 2018), there has been a concern over the last 30 years to explore the leadership work of others in schools. Much of this research effort has been through exploring distributed views of leadership, with these views typically focused on the interaction between people in workplaces rather than on positional leadership. However, there have also been parallel research streams exploring the leadership work of others in schools in formal and informal leadership roles through the considerable literature on middle leaders and teacher leaders. Whilst, transformational, instructional and distributed, remain the dominant views in educational leadership research (Arar & Oplatka, 2022; Day et al., 2020; Harris & Jones, 2017; Gumus et al., 2018), teacher leadership continues to gain momentum (Harris & Jones, 2017), to the point that it now seems to be fourth dominant leadership view (Gumus et al., 2018).

With the research on teacher leadership now considerable (e.g., Angelle & DeHart, 2016; Murphy, 2005; Nguyen et al., 2020; Schott et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), a problem is that much of this work overlaps with research on middle leaders (De Nobile, 2021, Grootenboer, 2018; Gurr, 2023; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Harris et al., 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2023) because of conceptual opaqueness in defining teacher leadership and middle leadership. Indeed, in a review on middle leaders, De Nobile (2021) suggested that the terms middle leadership and teacher leadership were becoming interchangeable.

This paper is a conceptual paper which argues that advancement in knowledge of the work of teacher leaders is hampered by a lack of agreement about who teacher leaders are and that it would be better to separate the work of teacher leaders from those of middle leaders. The literature on teacher leadership is and will continue to be important. This paper does not seek to diminish the research that has happened, but rather suggests that it could be more impactful if it is more clearly understood what was being researched. The paper begins with a brief exploration of middle leader definitions, before exploring in detail teacher leader definitions. The paper ends with description of a distributed leadership model that may provide a way forward in distinguishing between teacher and middle leaders in terms of the level of influence being dependent on positional power and personal connectiveness.

The paper is written principally by Gurr, and all first-person writing refers to Gurr, but the paper ends with a model that Nicholas (2019) developed in his doctoral research and Nicholas has provided this important model.

MIDDLE LEADER DEFINITION

Whilst the paper is focussed on teacher leadership, given it is part of the special journal issue devoted to teacher leadership, I will begin this discussion of teacher leadership by

providing a definition of middle leaders. This provides a point of comparison and contrast for the discussion on teacher leadership definitions.

For De Nobile (2021), middle leaders are those people who are positioned organisationally below the principal and other senior leaders (if present), but above teachers. They differ from teachers in that they will have a defined organisational responsibility, which will typically be part of a formal role, and they differ from senior leaders in that they will retain a substantial teaching responsibility that is likely to be their main work focus.

> Middle leaders are the group of people between senior leadership (such as principals and deputy principals) and teachers/non-teachers without formal positions as well as, in some contexts, junior or emergent leadership.

> (De Nobile, 2021, p. 5)

Defined this way, middle leaders are likely to have position titles such as director of teaching and learning, curriculum coordinator, subject coordinator, domain leader, professional learning team leader, head of department, student well-being coordinator, year level coordinator and so forth, depending on context (e.g., location, school type and school level). Obviously, principals are excluded, but so too are deputy principals, or those with similar overseeing roles such as a head of a campus or school section. These people are better placed in a senior leadership category, although some researchers include them as middle leaders (e.g., Cranston, 2009) and others note that an administrative-focused deputy principal can be less like a leader than a middle leader with significant strategic responsibilities (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014). Teachers are also excluded as they usually do not have a position of responsibility, and this means, teacher leaders will often be excluded if they too are defined as not having a position of responsibility. Grootenboer et al. (2015, p. 509) captured some of this complexity well in their definition of middle leaders:

> By 'middle leaders' we mean those who have an acknowledged position of leadership in their educational institution but also have a significant teaching role. Colloquially, they can be seen as those who sit between the principal or the head and the teaching staff – in the middle! We have adopted the term middle leaders to try and capture this positioning, but also to highlight that these leaders practise their leading from 'among' their teaching colleagues. It is not the same construct as 'teacher leader', which is more generic and ubiquitous, or 'middle manager', which highlights more the managerial rather than the leading dimension. Furthermore, it is not necessarily easy to identify and label these people because their titles and roles vary across educational levels, sites and countries, and there are also issues related to scale and the size of institutions.

Their definition of middle leaders concurs with Gurr and Drysdale's (2013) focus on middle leaders as people who, whilst substantially focussed on teaching, also have significant responsibility for specific areas within a school.

From this brief discussion, and for this paper, I will use the definition from my 2023 review: "Middle leaders are teachers who have an additional formal organisational responsibility" (Gurr, 2023, p. 115), with this typically having a curriculum (e.g., in charge of a learning area) or pastoral (e.g., in charge of a year level) focus.

Teacher Leadership Definitions

From my perspective, having researched middle leaders in schools for more than two decades, I want to separate the work of those teachers with formal leadership roles – the middle leaders – from those that do not have these but who are still considered leaders – the teacher leaders. Not everyone agrees with this view and clearly some middle leader researchers are not concerned by the distinction (e.g., De Nobile, 2021). A reviewer of this paper challenged me to provide a clearer justification of my position in trying to separate them. The simple argument is that there is a relatively coherent body of research on middle leadership that provides trustworthy claims about the work of middle leaders as I have defined them (see my recent review for greater clarification on this; Gurr, 2023), yet the teacher leadership literature explores a variety of phenomenon, and by not distinguishing the very different leadership work that teachers can do, it cannot make the same trustworthy claims. The more complex argument now follows.

At a basic level, any form of leadership is about direction and influence; establishing agreed upon directions for improvement and influencing people to achieve them: "…it is all about establishing widely agreed upon and worthwhile directions for the organisation and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions" (Leithwood, 2007, p. 44).

This definition permits many people in schools to be considered leaders. There are researchers that want to focus on those teachers, who have no other formal organisational roles beyond teaching, but who are "recognised for their success with students, their effectiveness in helping to lead new initiatives, and their strength as mentors to other teachers" (McBee, 2015, p. 19). These teachers are viewed as leaders and "go-to anchors for school principals and other teachers" (McBee, 2015, p. 19). These views move beyond the classroom work of teachers, but usually do not extend to the "control of the machinery of the professions writ large" (Murphy, 2005, p. 9); they are located at the school level. In chapter one of his book on teacher leadership, Murphy (2005) demonstrated the complexity in trying to define teacher leadership, and, in the end, did not provide a concise definition by saying the concept would be unpacked over the course of the book. Unfortunately, by the time the book concluded it seemed that the only distinction offered was that teacher leadership was not principal leadership and that caution is needed to not overload teacher leadership with administrative rather than instructional matters. By this stage of the book the work of people like department heads was clearly viewed by Murphy (2005) as part of teacher leadership.

Murphy (2005) noted that the concept needed far more research, and nearly 20 years later, I think we remain in a similar position, although there are interesting developments in this regard, and one of those, the *International Study of Teacher Leadership,* is described below.

One way to understand the definition of teacher leadership is to consider how key review papers have defined teacher leadership both in terms of the review criteria and, if addressed, as an outcome of the review. As Webber and Okoko (2021) describe, there have been four comprehensive reviews of teacher leadership over the past two decades: York-Barr and Duke (2004); Wenner and Campbell (2017); Nguyen et al. (2020); and Schott et al. (2020). As these have been, or are likely to become, important reviews, it is worth considering how they defined teacher leadership. To this list, I will also add early findings from the *International Study of Teacher Leadership*, because, for the first part of the project, the researchers reviewed conceptions of teacher leadership across 10 countries. My focus will be on the definitions used and uncovered, rather than the full complexity of the findings of the reviews.

York-Barr and Duke (2004): Review period 1980 to 2003

This "comprehensive" review was based on searches for key terms teacher leadership, shared decision making and teacher professionalism "when such sources addressed roles and responsibilities of teachers beyond classroom instruction, in …the ERIC database, Education Abstracts, reference lists from scholarly works, and recent books from leading education publishers" (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 257). From 140 potential sources, 100 were cited in the paper and these included a variety of peer and non-peer reviewed publications including journals, books, book chapters, reports and conference presentations. The "review draws largely from the empirical sources, but supporting discussion from nonempirical sources is selectively included" (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 257). Exclusion criteria, beyond the search descriptions delimiting the field, were not described.

For their review, York-Barr and Duke (2004, pp. 287–288) described teacher leadership as:

> **The process by which teachers, individually and collectively, influence their colleagues, principals and other members of the school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement.**
>
> [Please note I will put in bold case for the teacher leader definitions from each review]

This definition does not mention formal leadership roles, but it does not exclude these roles either. The following description, which arises from their review, highlights the ambiguity of how teacher leadership is defined and the overlap with research on middle and other school leaders.

> Teacher leadership is practiced through a variety of formal and informal positions, roles, and channels of communication in the daily work of schools. Sometimes teachers serve in formal leadership positions, such as union representatives, department heads, curriculum specialists, mentors, or members of a site-based management team. At other times, leadership is demonstrated in informal ways, such as coaching peers to resolve instructional

> problems, encouraging parent participation, working with colleagues in small groups and teams, modelling reflective practice, or articulating a vision for improvement. As mentioned in the introduction, teacher leaders sometimes assume full-time positions of leadership and other times continue with full-time positions as classroom teachers while also taking on various individual and collective leadership responsibilities.
>
> (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 263)

From their review findings, York-Barr and Duke (2004) created a conceptual framework which provided a complex view of teacher leadership in terms the qualities of teacher leaders, attributions about their work, conditions that support their work, how they went about influencing others and who and what they influenced to improve teaching and learning practice and, ultimately, student learning. Teacher leader qualities included being respected as teachers, being learning oriented and having leadership capacities. The work of teacher leaders was regarded as valued and visible, and it was collaborative in that it was negotiated and shared. The work of teacher leaders was enhanced through a supportive culture that included support from the principal and colleagues and provision of development opportunities, and teacher leaders were given time and resources to support their leadership work. Teacher leaders influenced individuals, teams and the school through formal and informal means by maintaining a focus on teaching and learning, and establishing trusting and constructive relationships.

This description permits a variety of people to be termed teacher leaders. It can include teachers with or without formal positions in addition to their teaching. So, whilst there is complexity to their view, unfortunately it does not distinguish between teachers with no other major responsibilities outside of teaching, and those that have an additional formal role, such as head of a learning area (the middle leaders as defined previously). By the time of Wenner and Campbell's (2017) review, there was only one publication identified that had used this conceptual framework to define teacher leadership.

Wenner and Campbell (2017): Review period January 2004 to December 2013

For their review, Wenner and Campbell (2017) searched for teacher leadership in the Education Research Complete database and included peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters and doctoral dissertations. This resulted in 704 articles which were reduced with exclusion criteria (excluding: non-empirical studies; less than five teacher leaders studied; untriangulated data; pre-service participants; participants with no classroom responsibilities; leaders with a program/curriculum focus; not focussed on teacher leadership; and, not peer reviewed) and reviewing, to a final collection of 54 publications comprised of journal articles, book chapters and dissertations. The intention of the review was "to examine how teacher leadership is defined, how teacher leaders are prepared, their impact, and those factors that facilitate or inhibit teacher leaders' work" (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p.1).

For the review, which was designed to update and extend the review of York-Barr and Duke (2004), Wenner and Campbell (2017, p. 140) defined teacher leaders as:

> **Teachers who maintain K–12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom.**

They noted that teacher leaders should be leading the whole school and not promoting a particular program/curriculum (and recall that this last point was one of the exclusion criteria). This definition differs from York-Barr and Duke (2004), because Wenner and Campbell (2017) believed their view distinguished teacher leaders from other forms of leadership in schools, such as, to use their terms, administrators, and disciplinary specialists. It seems that many middle leaders are excluded in this definition as a common role for middle leaders is to have programme/curriculum responsibilities, and these roles tend to be more focussed on an area rather than whole school. However, it does not exclude some middle leaders, such as a student welfare or student leadership coordinators, who will typically have a whole school focus. They go on to say, "this notion of teacher leadership highlights the reality that all teachers have the capacity to be leaders but does not assume that all teachers do lead outside of their classroom or that they should" (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 140). This is an important distinction as it seems to me that often the literature seems to imply that all teachers should be leaders, which I find an unrealistic expectation. Like views of distributed and system leadership, they regarded schools as complex systems of connected actors. In these complex systems they considered teacher leaders to have potentially wide influence, and "not just influencing individual teachers, but also having the capability to influence the entire school, community, and profession" (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 140). The expanded scope of influence to include beyond the school is a point of difference from the review of York-Barr and Duke (2004).

As part of the review, they explored teacher leadership definitions in the reviewed papers. Troublingly, 65% of the papers (*n* = 35) "never definitively stated how they defined teacher leadership for the purposes of their study" (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 145). Of the remaining 19 papers that did provide a definition, there were some features about teacher leadership that Wenner and Campbell (2017, pp. 145–146) discerned:

1. Teacher leadership goes beyond the classroom walls.
2. Teacher leaders should support professional learning in their schools.
3. Teacher leaders should be involved in policy and/or decision making at some level.
4. The ultimate goal of teacher leadership is improving student learning and success.
5. Teacher leaders work toward improvement and change for the whole school organisation.

There is not specific exclusion of middle leaders in these features, and some of the research reviewed was ambivalent about the inclusion or exclusion of middle leaders. For example, Anderson (2011) was included in the review. This study included a case-study of a multi-campus school in Victoria, Australia. For this case, 17 leading teachers were interviewed. In Victoria at the time of the research, most, if not all, of these people would have had a position of responsibility (most likely with a curriculum or pastoral focus) and a teaching

load. They were most likely middle leaders and not teacher leaders as envisaged by Wenner and Campbell (2017). So, whilst Wenner and Campbell's (2017) teacher leadership definition seems to exclude some, but not all, middle leaders (excluding those who have a program/curriculum focus), there remains ambiguity in the papers that they reviewed.

Nguyen et al. (2020): Review period January 2003 to December 2017

This review is somewhat different to the previous two in that it was limited to SCOPUS/SSCI-indexed journal papers. The period of review also overlaps substantially with that of Wenner and Campbell (2017) and in a minor way with that of York-Barr and Duke (2004). Like Wenner and Campbell's (2017) review, Nguyen et al. (2020) sought to extend York-Barr and Duke's (2004) review. It differed from Wenner and Campbell's (2017) review in that it extended beyond schools to include pre-K and post-secondary schools (2% of articles were pre-K and 16% post-secondary), had no lower limit on the number of teacher leaders researched, included studies which used a single data source, and was less discerning as to whether the research had to be focussed on teacher leadership. The review was "focused on identifying the contextual methodological patterns of teacher leadership research, the evidence emerging from this empirical base, the main themes that emanate from the selected studies and the implications for future work in the field" (Nguyen et al, 2020, p. 62).

Beginning with a search for teacher leadership and teacher leader(s) in all the EBSCOhost databases, the 1,512 articles identified were then reduced through review to check for empirical research directly relevant to teacher leaders to 293 articles. Somewhat surprisingly at this point, the authors then culled these by only including SSCI/Scopus-indexed journal articles. The argument for this was that it matched recent educational leadership reviews – unfortunately, this decision meant their review was similarly stymied to these limited number of academic journals, rather than copying the broader scope of the previous two teacher leader reviews. A final list of 150 SSCI/Scopus-indexed journal articles were used for the review; this is a much higher number of manuscripts than the other reviews and reflected a major increase in articles in 2013–2017.

Nguyen et al. (2020) used Katzenmayer and Moller's (2009, p. 6) definition, in which teacher leaders:

> **Lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of that leadership.**

This is a broad definition, conflates good teaching with leadership, and implies collaboration, direction setting and influence as leadership features. In considering definitions of teacher leadership, only six articles stated a chosen definition of teacher leadership and only 11 further articles stated their own definition; this meant that 133 articles were not clear about what they were studying. Nguyen et al. (2020, p. 67) noted that whilst there were 17 different definitions, there were some commonalities:

Four common hallmarks of teacher leadership were identified in the review: teacher leadership is a process of influence; teacher leadership is exercised on the basis of reciprocal collaboration and trust; teacher leadership operates within and beyond the classroom; and teacher leadership aims to improve instructional quality, school effectiveness and student learning.

As with the previous reviews, the definitions don't distinguish between teachers who have formal leadership roles and those that don't, but who are still influential. Again, the research used can be ambivalent about what teacher leaders do. For example, the work in Australia on the IDEAS project which was cited in the review (Chew & Andrews, 2010) included teacher leaders, but these can include teachers with or without formal leadership roles in addition to their work on the IDEAS project, which seemed to be a formal leadership role (Andrews et al., 2004).

Schott et al. (2020): Review period January 2014 to July 2018

Schott et al. (2020) reviewed 93 articles and books, with both theoretical and empirical studies represented. Whilst their review began from when Wenner and Campbell's (2017) review ended, it does overlap significantly with Nguyen et al.'s (2020) review. They used a standard systematic review process, claiming this was an improvement on the reviews of York-Barr and Duke (2004) and Wenner and Campbell (2017) because of greater transparency, although I could see nothing wrong with what the previous reviews had done – indeed the level of detail provided about the previous reviews' processes was excellent, and the listing of the review papers in the appendix in York-Barr and Duke (2004) and in the reference list of Wenner and Campbell (2017), enhanced transparency.

Similar to Nguyen et al. (2020), they initially limited their review to only a partial survey of the research by relying on SSCI/Scopus-indexed journals; I wonder if this will be the trend from now on to ignore other publication avenues for educational research. Their initial search terms were teacher leadership and, somewhat surprisingly, instructional leadership (I say 'surprisingly', as this term has a significant attachment to middle and senior/principal leadership; Tang et al., 2022). This generated 957 potential articles. To their credit, and departing from a typical systematic review, they introduced three other ways of generating possible articles: a review of four highly regarded education journals, but, in a puzzling move, not including any educational leadership journals; a search of papers citing York-Barr and Duke (2004) and Wenner and Campbell (2017); and, finally, asking six international experts (unspecified) in the field of teacher leadership for their comments on the review list. With inclusion/exclusion criteria that included published papers, written in English and with a focus on teacher leadership in K-12 and vocational settings, and only including teachers who maintained a focus on classroom responsibilities, 93 publications were reviewed.

In the reviewed papers, 42% (n = 39) did not provide a definition of teacher leadership. What is troubling is that whilst there were 22 mentions of teacher leadership in the introduction to the paper, Schott et al. (2020) did not provide a definition of teacher leadership for their paper. Of the 58% of reviewed papers that did provide a description of teacher leadership,

they noted some examples of differing ways to define the term and concluded by saying that whilst they had no definitive view, they were not troubled by this and instead:

> **Strongly encourage[d] scholars to rely on the definition of York-Barr and Duke (2004), which does not only stress that teacher leadership is a process of influencing others, but also includes other important elements of teacher leadership, such as its independence of a formal position and development of students as a goal.**

> (Schott et al., 2020, p. 6)

Of course, by promoting this view, they also supported the ambiguity of York-Barr and Duke's (2004) definition. So, it appears that their view of teacher leadership is similar to that of York-Barr and Duke (2004). Like York-Barr and Duke (2004), Schott et al. (2020) summarised their review findings into a conceptual model, and this perhaps provides a better sense of their view of teacher leadership. Their conceptual model has personal, school (principal and peer) and supra-school (educators, government and networks) antecedents influencing the extent to which teachers were able to influence others to improve teaching and learning, with this influence shown to impact on teacher (e.g., satisfaction), school (e.g., curriculum and pedagogy improvement), supra-school (e.g., parent involvement, PLC development) and student engagement and achievement outcomes.

International Study of Teacher Leadership

Webber has led the creation of the International Study of Teacher Leadership (ISTL). This is a 12 country exploration of teacher leadership which "seeks to contribute to the wider understanding of teacher leadership and of how professional development and university programmes might contribute to teacher leadership knowledge and skill development" (https://sites.google.com/mtroyal.ca/istl/home). Its central research question is, how is teacher leadership conceptualised and enacted and what are the implications for educational stakeholders? The project has a special issue of in *Research in Educational Administration and Leadership* (Webber & Okoko, 2021) and a book (Webber, 2023).

Webber and Okoko (2021) provided the editorial and overview paper for the special journal issue. They too described aspects of the four literature reviews just considered and noted the lack of precision in what is meant by teacher leadership. Importantly, they argued that despite this lack of terminology precision, the language of teacher leadership has become pervasive across countries in terms of a "…growing influence on teacher education, teaching standards, and teacher evaluations" (Webber & Okoko, 2021, p. 6); Wenner and Campbell (2017) also noted how teacher leadership had infiltrated teacher standards and teacher evaluations. These influences were part of the reason for the foundation of the ISTL, along with a desire "…to learn more about how classroom teachers understand the term and how prepared they feel to serve as teacher leaders" (Webber, 2021, p. 21). In reading through the papers, it seems that the project wants to view teacher leaders as teachers without formal positions, but often this is not clear, and much of what is described is more closely related to expectations regarding the professional work of teachers than

anything beyond the teacher role that might be construed as teacher leadership. For example, Webber (2021) provided a list of attributes and indicators of teacher leadership that included accountability, advocacy, cultural responsiveness, collaboration, openness to change, professionalism, reflection, risk-taking, shared vision, stability and teamwork. These are qualities that describe good teachers, and so the question for me is, 'Where is the leadership?' The paper then described four related concepts from the literature: formal and informal influence; school culture, professional development; and teacher leadership as part of school improvement. Again, these concepts mostly describe the work of good teachers, those that are good organisational citizens that want the best for their students, colleagues and the school. The only differentiation regarding leadership comes in the discussion of informal and formal leadership, but there is no consensus about whether ISTL will focus on the informal, or include formal leadership as well. Even the example used, the IDEAS project (Andrews et al., 2004), does not distinguish teacher leaders from middle leaders in its concept of parallel leadership and its distinction between teacher and administrative leadership.

DISCUSSION

The study of teacher leadership has at least a three-decade history, yet the four major reviews of the past two decades indicate that there remains confusion about defining teacher leadership, and a recent international project chose to spend the first three years of the project exploring what teacher leadership means in ten different countries. Despite confidence in those that claim much is known about teacher leadership, the reality is that it is a field characterised by conceptual obfuscation and considerable overlap with middle and distributed leadership research. As a result, it is difficult to make substantial claims about teacher leadership, and so the impact on policy and practice is constrained. I prefer to have a tighter conceptual focus on both teacher and middle leadership so that they are distinct fields of inquiry that better reflect the reality of how many schools are organised. By doing this it celebrates the work of those teacher who have no formal organisational position, but who are nevertheless organisationally influential, and supports the work of those teachers who decide to take formal organisational responsibilities.

In my 2023 review of the middle leadership literature, I made this observation:

> There is, no doubt, considerable overlap between teacher leader, distributed leadership and middle leader research. It is not easy to resolve the overlap and what it means for the knowledge of leadership in schools – the segmentation allows for detail to be explored, but may be artificial compared to the reality of working in schools.
>
> (Gurr, 2023, p. 120)

This overlap across the areas of teacher, middle and distributed leadership has troubled me for several years, and in the writing of this paper, I was drawn back to the research of Darren Nicholas who completed his doctorate under my supervision in 2019. He conducted a

fascinating study that explored distributed leadership in three successful Australian schools (Nicholas, 2019). This is part of our two-decade research programme on successful school leadership which has had a strong principal leadership focus (Drysdale & Gurr, 2017; Gurr & Drysdale, 2020) and is related to our two-decades of research on middle leaders in schools (Gurr, 2019; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). I think the Distributed Model of Influence (DMI) described by Nicholas (2019) is potentially a way to both integrate and distinguish between principal/senior, middle, teacher leadership in a distributed leadership view. The model is explained next and draws directly upon Nicholas' (2019) thesis.

In each of the three schools, Nicholas (2019) conducted a social network analysis through a relationships survey of eight areas, which 138 teachers completed (59% response rate). This provided a picture of the most connected people in each school on matters including administration, curriculum, pastoral care, teaching and personal influence. To gather understanding as to what these connection patterns meant, across the schools, 26 interviews with key people were conducted to explore the forms and impacts of distributed leadership in the schools. A DMI was developed which described how the extent of an individual's influence is dependent on their positional power and personal connective .... the model is shown in Figure 1.
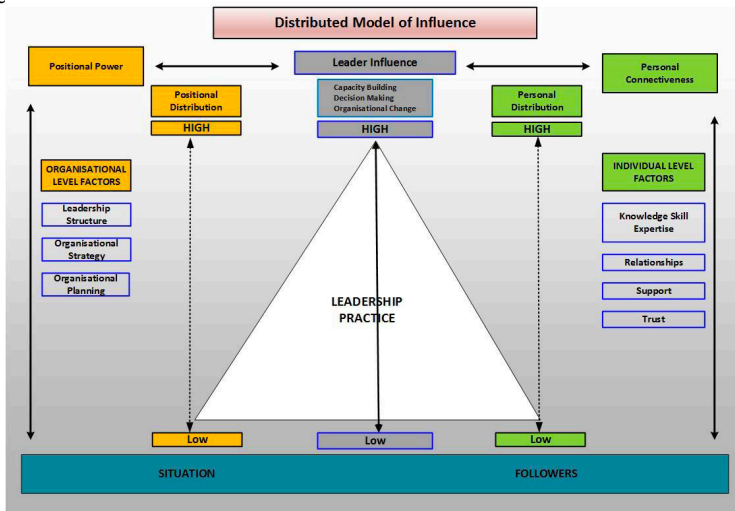

Figure 1. Distributed Model of Influence (DMI) (Nicholas, 2019, p. 213).

Nicholas (2019, p. 213) described the model in this way:

> At the center of the model is a triangle which represents the leader/follower/ situation triad (refer to Figure 2.2). Situation and followers are located at the bottom vertices in the blue bar, and the leader (or leader influences) is located at the top vertex. Running vertically through the middle of the triangle is a line which represents level of influence. Leader influence is indicated in grey

at the top of the line and is concerned with leadership practices associated with capacity building, decision making and organisational change. High levels of influence will utilise all three practice areas more often.

There are two components to the model which impact leader influence and these are the Positional Power (yellow) and Personal Connectiveness (green)…

Positional power was viewed as deriving from organisational factors including leadership structure, organisational strategy and organisational planning. Personal connectiveness was viewed as deriving from individual level factors including knowledge, skills, expertise, relationships, support and trust. Leader influence was exerted through practices that included capacity building, decision making and organisational change.

Nicholas (2019, p. 216) described how the model works:

> The DMI model can be used to indicate the extent of influence of leaders within a distributed leadership context. To identify a leader's level of influence, a line is plotted on the model from left to right. On the left side, their positional power is shown and this is determined by their formal position or strategic role within the school. For example, a principal has high positional power because they have authority to make decisions, can enact organisational change and set direction. On the right side, their level of personal connectiveness is shown and this is determined by their level of expertise, their relationships, level of support for others, and how trusted they are by their colleagues. More of these attributes leads to higher personal connectiveness. A line is drawn between these points, and the midpoint intersects with the leader influence line and gives an indication of the overall level of influence of the leader.

The highest levels of influence came from being high on both positional power and personal connectiveness. Someone with high positional power and low personal connectiveness would still have a middle level of influence, as would someone with low positional power but high personal connectiveness. Figure 2 shows five examples of different participants from the study and how they map on the DMI. Persons A and B were Assistant Principals, person C was a Mathematics Head, and persons D and E were teachers with no formal leadership responsibilities.
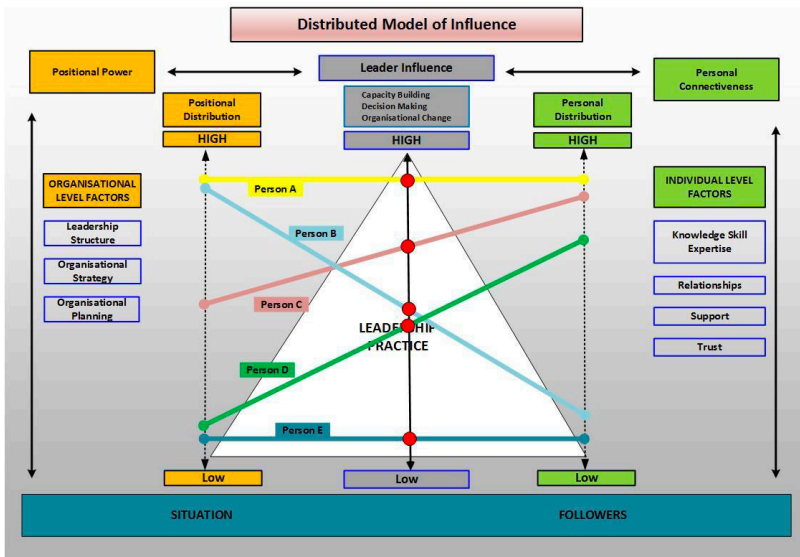
Figure 2: Distributed Model of Influence (DMI) and Leader Examples (Nicholas, 2019, p. 216)

Of interest for this discussion of teacher leadership, across the three schools and the 235 staff, there was only one teacher who was identified as highly connected in the relationship surveys that did not have an additional formal organisational responsibility. This is Person D in Figure 2 and was described by Nicholas (2019, p. 218) as follows:

> This was teacher B1 who had no formal role or position of leadership which meant that they had low positional distribution**.** However, their overall influence is lifted on the DMI due to their level of personal connectedness. They were very well respected in the school and were recognised for being highly skilled in teaching and very knowledgeable. They were identified as someone who could give advice, particularly in teaching and curriculum. They were also very supportive of the school and people and had strong relationships with a number of teachers in the school that they didn't directly work with. This was, perhaps, the only true teacher leader across all three schools.
>
> (Person D)

Nicholas (2019, pp. 217–218) also provided a description of a typical middle leader and this is Person C in Figure 2:

> This was leading teacher A7 who was in charge of Maths. The interviews and social network analysis indicated they were a very influential leader. They had

high positional distribution due to their leading teacher role and because they were head of mathematics they were strategically well positioned because they were one of only two leading teachers of a Key Learning Area (KLA) in the school with English also having a leading teacher. All other subject areas had leaders who had a position of responsibility. In this school many of the leadership group commented on the strong focus on Maths and English. They also had very high personal connectiveness for two reasons. In the social network analysis for the key questions, they were the most connected leader overall and their strength of influence was also significantly higher than any teacher or leader in the school and this was due to their ability to provide advice and meant that a lot of teachers sought them out for this reason. They were also described as being very skilled in their role, and they were seen as trustworthy and had positive relationships with a number of teachers and other leaders. There were references to the level of respect that this person had from other people.

(Person C)

For me, the DMI provides some clarity for making a distinction between teacher and middle leaders. The reality for teachers in schools is that they will be on different parts of the positional power and personal connectiveness continua during their careers, and maybe even over a short period of time, and this will impact on the degree to which they have leader influence. **Teacher leaders** will be those teachers with significant classroom responsibilities and no formal organisational position. They will be low to moderate on positional power because of the lack of a formal organisational position, but high to moderate on personal connectiveness. This definition covers those teachers who might be involved over a short-time period on an initiative that gives them some positional power, but most of their leadership influence will come from their personal connectiveness – there knowledge, skills, expertise, relationships, support and trust. **Middle leaders** will be those teachers with significant classroom responsibilities and a formal organisational position. They will be moderate to high-moderate on positional power because of their formal organisational position, and they will likely be moderate to high on personal connectiveness if they have been developed, selected and supported appropriately.

The DMI also allows for consideration of other typical roles in schools, such as principal, and roles that will be more context dependent. For example, in the USA literature there is often discussion of roles like math or literacy coaches, or specialists in support areas (Wenner & Campbell, 2017), and in Chile there are Technical Pedagogical Heads who lead the curriculum and support the principal (Huerta-Villalobos, 2018). These positions are not found, or not prominent, in other educational jurisdictions. These people typically have none, or limited, teaching responsibilities, yet their moderate to high-moderate positional power means that they are often not considered to be part of the senior leadership or principal class in a school. The DMI, of course, covers principals and other senior leaders whose positions have high positional power, and accounts for variation in their influence based on their degree of personal connectiveness.

The DMI accounts for variation in the distribution of leadership through formal positions across senior and middle leaders in schools, and accounts for others, like teacher leaders, who do not have a formal leadership role, but are nevertheless widely influential in schools. It also provides clarity about teacher and middle leaders based on positional power and personal connectiveness.

The DMI is not the final answer for the problems in defining teacher leadership, but it does provide a conceptual model for thinking about better ways to describe teacher leaders so that the research about them is more distinct from other researched areas like middle leaders. Indeed, the DMI might be a better way to conceptualise the leadership work of anyone in schools; after writing this paper I could now define middle leaders as those teachers with significant classroom responsibilities and a formal organisational position, who have moderate to high positional power and moderate to high personal connectiveness. More research on the model is needed, and this could be research that better captures the complex nature of contemporary schools and the work of school leaders. As I described in Gurr (2023), this might involve holistic research that has a practice focus through research methods like the interaction perspective of distributed leadership researchers (e.g., Spillane & Zuberi, 2009) or the practice architecture approach of middle leader researchers (e.g. Grootenboer, 2018). This will likely require innovative research strategies that can, in unobtrusive ways, collect rich practice data.

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