International Journal of Social and Educational Innovation
Vol. 13, Issue 26, 2026
ISSN (print): 2392 – 6252
eISSN (online): 2393 – 0373
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.24568096

PEDAGOGICAL MICRO-LEADERSHIP: A SELF-STUDY OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN A POST-COVID-19 SOUTH AFRICAN CLASSROOM

Khadija CAJEE
University of Johannesburg
Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Leadership and Management

Nicolan Stefaan GOVENDER*
University of Johannesburg
Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Leadership and Management

Sadi SEYAMA-MOKHANELI
University of Johannesburg
Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Leadership and Management

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic created persistent learning gaps and reduced learner engagement in South African classrooms, yet the leadership demands that this places on teachers remain under-theorised. This article explores how teacher leadership is enacted through everyday instructional practice in a post-COVID-19 classroom. Drawing on a qualitative self-study of my own practice as a Post Level One (PL1) educator in a South African public school, and using distributed leadership as the primary theoretical framework supported by French & Raven's (1959) typology of power and Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of agency, the study identifies three themes: re-teaching as pedagogical leadership in response to conceptual difficulty, relational strategies addressing learner disengagement, and informal professional collaboration. The findings suggest that teacher leadership is enacted through ongoing instructional decision-making rather than confined to formal positions. The study contributes

*Corresponding Author, steffangovender@gmail.com, Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa.

to the concept of pedagogical micro-leadership, leadership exercised through consequential instructional micro-decisions, and proposes a modest extension to distributed leadership theory by drawing attention to intra-actor distribution, leadership exercised across the micro-decisions within a single teacher's practice, a dimension that has received limited attention in the literature.

Keywords: ***Distributed Leadership; Pedagogical Micro-Leadership; Post-Covid-19; Self-Study; South African Education; Teacher Leadership.***

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted education systems globally, with effects continuing to reverberate through classrooms. In South Africa, where structural inequalities and limited digital infrastructure compounded the crisis in many communities, schools returned to full-time teaching only to find that significant numbers of learners presented with foundational knowledge gaps, reduced engagement, and diminished academic confidence (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020).

Within the South African system, curriculum coverage and learner progression remain central expectations enforced through departmental monitoring, with DBE and district officials tracking curriculum coverage and learner performance (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2020). In response to post-COVID-19, the DBE issued revised Annual Teaching Plans to guide pacing and assessment, but these policies largely delegated responsibility to teachers without accommodating professional judgement on pacing, leaving teachers to navigate the tension between coverage expectations and learner readiness alone (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). These expectations often assume that learners possess necessary foundational knowledge, an assumption that fails in many post-COVID-19 classrooms. Teachers face a genuine dilemma: advancing learners who lack prerequisite understanding leaves them increasingly alienated, while halting to address foundational gaps creates pressure from accountability systems that measure coverage rather than conceptual mastery. The absence of policy guidance delegates this tension to individual teachers, placing significant leadership demands on classroom practitioners who lack formal authority to modify curriculum pacing expectations.

Contemporary leadership scholarship challenges traditional views that leadership is confined to formal positions. Leadership is increasingly understood as emergent and context-driven practice enacted by teachers in response to complex post-pandemic curriculum and learning demands. (Nguyen, Harris & Ng, 2021). Distributed leadership theory (Spillane, 2006) frames

leadership as shared practice distributed across individuals, interactions, and contexts. However, the literature has predominantly conceptualised distributed leadership as occurring across organisational roles rather than examining how leadership is enacted within a single teacher's instructional decision-making. This research gap matters because post-COVID-19 conditions amplify everyday leadership demands at the classroom level in ways existing frameworks do not adequately capture (Nguyen, Harris & Ng, 2021).

This study addresses the question: How is teacher leadership enacted through everyday instructional practice in a post-COVID-19 South African public school classroom?

Literature Review

Distributed Leadership as Primary Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Spillane's (2006) distributed leadership theory as its primary analytical lens. Distributed leadership conceptualises leadership as stretched across multiple actors, interactions, and situational artefacts, rather than located in a single individual's actions or formal position. Spillane argues that leadership practice is constituted in the interactions among leaders, followers, and their situation, a framework that has proven valuable for understanding how influence emerges in schools without relying on hierarchical authority.

However, distributed leadership literature has primarily focused on distribution across formal and informal roles within organisations (Gronn, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2020). Studies examine how principals, department heads, and teachers collectively accomplish leadership tasks. Spillane (2006) distinguishes collaborated, collective, and coordinated distribution, all of which involve interaction between actors. What remains under-theorised is whether leadership can be distributed within a single actor's micro-decisions and adaptations. This assumption, that distribution necessarily occurs across people, could limit the framework's usefulness in classrooms, where teachers make quick, important decisions alone.

This is significant because post-COVID-19 conditions amplify the frequency and complexity of these instructional decisions. Teachers must continuously decide when to slow down, when to reteach, how to rebuild confidence, and how to balance curriculum coverage against learner readiness to engage with grade-level content. These are leadership decisions, yet they occur within a single teacher's practice rather than across a team. Distributed leadership theory, as it has predominantly been applied, has directed limited analytical attention to this intra-actor

distribution. This study responds by proposing pedagogical micro-leadership, leadership enacted through instructional micro-decisions by an individual teacher, as an additional analytical lens. Rather than replacing Spillane's (2006) existing configurations, the article suggests that intra-actor distribution, where leadership is distributed within a single actor across the micro-decisions that constitute situated practice, warrants further theoretical attention.

Power and Agency as Supporting Lenses

Distributed leadership theory explains leadership as practice stretched across actors, interactions, and contexts Spillane (2006), but it does not fully explain how teachers without positional authority exercise influence. French & Raven's (1959) typology of power provides analytical tools for examining this informal influence. Expert power (knowledge and competence) and referent power (trust and respect) are especially relevant in schools, where teachers often lead through professional credibility rather than formal authority. Expert power operates when colleagues seek advice from a recognised knowledgeable teacher, as seen in the informal collaboration described in this study. Referent power operates through trust-based relationships, enabling learner participation when psychological safety is established, particularly important in post-COVID-19 classrooms where confidence is fragile. However, both forms are fragile. Expert power can be undermined when systemic directives ignore teacher judgement, while referent power can be eroded by accountability pressures that prioritise coverage over relationships Lukes' (2005). In school contexts, expert and referent power enable pedagogical micro-leadership but require systemic recognition to be sustained.

Teacher agency provides a third supporting lens. Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) emphasise that agency is not an individual attribute but emerges from interaction between personal capacity and contextual conditions, including institutional expectations, resources, and professional relationships. In post-COVID-19 classrooms, agency is evident when teachers adapt lessons, modify pacing, and develop creative strategies despite significant constraints. Hollweck, Upenieks, and Kutsyuruba (2021) note that agency becomes particularly visible in crisis contexts where teachers must exercise professional discretion when formal structures prove inadequate.

The relationship between power and agency in teaching contexts is bidirectional, in that each influences the other, yet it is asymmetrical, with systemic power typically exerting greater influence on teacher agency than the reverse. Teachers exercise agency through pedagogical

decisions, but agency is always power constrained. Lukes' (2005) three-dimensional view shows how pacing schedules shape what teachers see as possible. A teacher who follows pacing despite learner confusion may not lack agency. Rather, this decision may reflect the internalisation of accountability pressures that have reshaped professional priorities. Recognising this dimension prevents romanticising teacher agency as purely liberatory and acknowledges the genuine structural constraints within which pedagogical leadership must operate.

What these frameworks share is recognition that leadership, power, and agency are relationally constituted and context-dependent. However, they have rarely been applied to analyse the micro-processes of instructional decision-making in post-crisis classrooms. This study integrates them to examine how teacher leadership is enacted moment to moment in response to learner difficulty and disengagement.

Distinguishing Pedagogical Micro-Leadership from Adjacent Concepts

The concept of pedagogical micro-leadership proposed in this article overlaps with, but is not reducible to, three related constructs in the educational literature: adaptive teaching, instructional autonomy, and teacher agency. Clarifying these distinctions is necessary to establish the analytical work that the concept is intended to do.

Adaptive teaching refers to the pedagogical practice of adjusting instruction in response to learner needs, prior knowledge, and contextual demands. It is fundamentally a question of instructional effectiveness: whether the teacher selects, sequences, and scaffolds learning experiences in ways that enable understanding (Bondie, Dahnke & Zusho, 2019). Pedagogical micro-leadership, by contrast, is not defined by instructional effectiveness alone. It refers to the exercise of professional judgement and responsibility under conditions of competing accountabilities, when a teacher must decide, for instance, whether to depart from prescribed pacing to address foundational gaps, knowing that this decision carries accountability risks. Adaptive teaching asks "what works for this learner?" Pedagogical micro-leadership asks, "what is the right decision to make when what works for this learner conflicts with what the system demands?" The latter is a leadership question because it involves navigating institutional pressure, not merely selecting a strategy.

Instructional autonomy denotes the degree of discretion teachers possess over curricular and pedagogical decisions. It is a structural condition, an attribute of the teacher's role within an

organisational and policy context, rather than an enacted practice. A teacher may possess high instructional autonomy but exercise it without leadership; conversely, pedagogical micro-leadership may be enacted in conditions of low formal autonomy, precisely because the teacher chooses to exercise judgement where the system does not explicitly permit it. Autonomy is the space; micro-leadership is what is done within, and sometimes against, that space.

Teacher agency, following Priestley, Biesta and Robinson's (2015) ecological model, is the emergent capacity to act that arises from the interplay between individual professional capacity and contextual conditions. Agency is a precondition for pedagogical micro-leadership but not identical to it. A teacher may exercise agency in routine instructional decisions without those decisions constituting leadership. Pedagogical micro-leadership involves a specific quality of agency: an agency directed toward consequential decisions that balance competing accountabilities and carry professional risk. In this sense, micro-leadership is a particular enactment of agency under conditions of tension, rather than agency in general.

These distinctions matter because conflating pedagogical micro-leadership with adaptive teaching risks reducing it to a pedagogical strategy; conflating it with autonomy risks treating it as a structural given rather than a practice; and conflating it with agency risks losing the specifically leadership dimension of the concept, the exercise of influence and responsibility in the face of competing demands.

Teacher Leadership Post-Covid-19: Conceptual Gaps

The pandemic foregrounded the leadership capacities of classroom teachers who, despite lacking formal authority, responded with resilience and initiative essential to sustaining education during crisis (Bush, 2020; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). In South Africa, Post Level One teachers led through devising alternative communication strategies when official platforms proved inaccessible, mentoring colleagues less familiar with digital tools, and bridging policy directives with classroom realities (Koopman & Koopman, 2021; Mpungose, 2020). These grassroots responses were pragmatic, relational, and ethically motivated.

Yet the literature reveals a significant gap. Studies of teacher leadership post-COVID-19 have focused on visible, collaborative, or crisis response leadership, actions recognisable as 'leadership' within existing frameworks. Less attention has been paid to pedagogical leadership: the leadership enacted through routine instructional decisions about pacing, explanation, scaffolding, and assessment adaptation. This gap matters because post-

COVID-19 conditions have made pedagogical leadership more demanding and more consequential. Teachers need to continuously decide when to slow down, when to reteach, how to adapt explanations, and how to rebuild confidence, decisions that are simultaneously pedagogical and leadership acts.

Post-COVID-19 policy reforms in South Africa compounded these demands by introducing centralised planning and accountability systems intended to manage curriculum recovery (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2020; Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). Top-down pacing schedules aimed to ensure essential content coverage despite reduced instructional time, yet these interventions often failed to accommodate diverse learning contexts or teachers' professional judgement. Recent literature confirms that reforms excluding teacher voice diminish morale and restrict instructional innovation (Fullan, 2021; Ingersoll & Collins, 2020). Fourie and Naidoo (2022) report that South African teachers felt frustrated by centralised directives lacking contextual responsiveness. The resulting implementation gap, where teachers quietly deviate from prescribed pacing while submitting compliant documentation, represents not teacher resistance but professional survival (Fullan, 2021). This study examines the pedagogical leadership enacted within that implementation gap.

Furthermore, Nguyen, Harris and Ng (2021) caution that without systemic recognition, informal leaders risk burnout and disillusionment. Krahenbuhl and Fuller (2021) argue that informal teacher leadership is often structurally invisible, creating a disconnection between contribution and recognition. This study responds by examining how pedagogical leadership is enacted, recognised, and constrained within one teacher's practice, and by proposing a conceptual framework that makes this invisible work visible.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative self-study research design (LaBoskey, 2004) to examine how teacher leadership is enacted within everyday classroom practice in a post-COVID-19 context. Self-study is suited to research examining professional practice from the practitioner's perspective, allowing critical reflection to generate insight into teaching and learning processes (LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2011). The approach recognises teachers as active decision makers whose professional judgements influence learning quality, particularly important when policy directives fail to account for classroom complexity. The purpose is not generalisability but

deeper understanding of how leadership is experienced and enacted within one specific teaching context.

The study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social phenomena such as teacher leadership are constituted through meaning-making, context, and professional judgement rather than observable through objective, value-neutral measurement. Self-study methodology aligns with interpretivism because it privileges the practitioner's insider perspective while acknowledging that knowledge is co-constructed through reflection and critical dialogue (Samaras, 2011). In this study, co-construction occurred through reflective journaling and critical friend engagement, where dialogue refined my understanding of emerging themes.

Research Context

The study is situated in a Gauteng public primary school serving a mixed socio-economic catchment, where curriculum coverage and assessment are guided by national policy frameworks. At the time of the study, I taught Grade 7 Mathematics to a class of 40-plus learners. The school has adequate infrastructure, including smartboards and sufficient digital devices for learner use. However, like many South African public schools, it operates within a high-accountability environment characterised by constrained time, large classes (40-plus learners), and prescriptive pacing requirements. Resource constraint in this study therefore refers primarily to constrained professional discretion and time rather than to an absence of basic infrastructure. Post-COVID-19 data indicated that a significant proportion of learners had not yet attained the foundational numeracy competencies expected at Grade 6 level. Teachers must ensure learners progress through prescribed content within specified timeframes while demonstrating measurable achievement in formal assessment tasks, monitored through departmental oversight of curriculum coverage and learner performance (Department of Basic Education, 2020). These post-COVID-19 conditions have complicated these expectations, as many learners demonstrate foundational knowledge gaps affecting engagement with grade-level content. In my classroom, learners often required additional explanation, scaffolding, and repeated practice to develop conceptual understanding. These challenges demanded ongoing adaptation of teaching approaches, including modified pacing, varied instructional methods, and increased guided practice.

Data Generation

Data were generated through systematic reflective practice, documenting classroom experiences, learner responses, and professional interactions with colleagues. Reflections were recorded over four months (March to June 2022), focusing on moments where learners demonstrated difficulty understanding concepts, displayed limited engagement, or required additional support. A total of 18 reflective entries were generated, each approximately 500 - 800 words in length, resulting in a dataset of roughly 12 000 words. Reflections were written retrospectively, typically within 24 hours of the documented lesson, to allow for sufficient distance while maintaining recall accuracy. Guiding questions included: What happened? What did learners do or say that was significant? What decisions did I make in response? What alternative approaches could I have taken? Reflections followed Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988), though I adapted the framework to focus on three key stages: description, analysis, and action planning. This adaptation was appropriate because my primary interest was in observable instructional decisions and their consequences, rather than the full emotional and evaluative dimensions of reflection. By emphasising analysis and action planning, the adapted framework aligned with the study's focus on leadership enacted through pedagogical decision-making

.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As both researcher and participant, I must explicitly address how my position shapes interpretation. I am a Post Level One educator with teaching experience in both South African private and public schools. At the time of this study, I was employed in a public school, and all data reported here derive exclusively from that context. I hold no formal leadership position, which shapes my perspective on informal leadership enactment. My professional commitment to learner-centred pedagogy may predispose me to interpret adaptive teaching as leadership. To mitigate bias, I maintained reflexive journals noting moments where my assumptions influenced interpretation and actively sought disconfirming evidence. This transparency addresses what LaBoskey (2004) terms the "vulnerability of self-study," where the researcher's proximity to the data requires explicit epistemic humility.

Critical Friend Review and Dialogue

Trustworthiness was supported through critical friend engagement with a fellow PL1 educator who was independent of my classroom practice and study design. We met bi-weekly over four months to review reflections, challenge interpretations, and test emerging themes. Disagreements were recorded and resolved by returning to reflective data; for example, distinguishing instructional adaptations from leadership required revisiting definitions and evidence. This process, recommended by Kitchen, Berry & Russell (2022), prevents self-confirmation bias and strengthens interpretive rigour. The critical friend also reviewed draft findings to verify they were recognisable from the data. To manage power dynamics, I positioned the critical friend as a peer collaborator rather than a supervisor.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, adapted to the self-study context. The process was recursive rather than linear, with movement back and forth between phases as understanding developed.

In the first phase, all 18 reflective entries were read and re-read to achieve familiarisation with the dataset as a whole. During the second phase, initial codes were generated inductively from the data, while remaining sensitive to the study's theoretical framing. Coding was conducted at the level of the text segment, a sentence or short passage expressing a coherent idea, and codes were assigned descriptive labels drawn from the language of the reflections where possible. Examples of initial codes included "re-teaching equations," "abandoning lesson plan," "learner confusion about variables," "silence during questioning," "fear of being wrong," "sentence starters," "colleague asks for help," "sharing strategies informally," and "no record of strategies."

In the third phase, codes were collated and grouped into candidate categories on the basis of shared meaning. For example, codes relating to re-teaching, abandoning plans, and responding to learner confusion were grouped under the candidate category "instructional adaptation in response to conceptual difficulty." Codes relating to silence, fear of error, and participation structures were grouped under "relational strategies for engagement." Codes relating to colleagues seeking advice, informal sharing, and the absence of documentation were grouped under "informal professional collaboration."

In the fourth phase, these candidate categories were reviewed against the full dataset to check whether they captured the range of the data or whether some codes fitted better elsewhere. The category "instructional adaptation" was reframed as "re-teaching as pedagogical leadership" to foreground the leadership dimension that the analysis was intended to illuminate. Codes concerning the department head's "behind schedule" comment were grouped with the re-teaching category, because they concerned the negotiation of accountability pressures rather than collegial interaction. In the fifth phase, the three themes were named and defined: (1) re-teaching as pedagogical leadership in response to conceptual difficulty; (2) creating conditions for participation through relational engagement; and (3) leadership through collaborative expertise.

To illustrate the coding process concretely, Table 1 presents an example drawn from the 9 June reflective extract. The raw segment is shown alongside its initial code, the category into which it was grouped, and the final theme to which it contributed.

Table 1: Example of the Coding Process

Raw data segment (9 June reflection)	Initial code	Category	Final theme
"I abandoned the lesson plan entirely and created a colour-coded sorting activity for the next lesson. The department head, walking past, noted I was 'behind schedule.' I explained why. He nodded but said, 'Just make sure term ends well.'"	Abandoning lesson plan; negotiating pacing pressure	Instructional adaptation in response to conceptual difficulty	Theme 1: Re-teaching as pedagogical leadership

This example illustrates how a single segment can carry both a pedagogical dimension (the decision to abandon the plan and redesign the activity) and a leadership dimension (the negotiation of accountability pressure with the department head). The coding process was designed to retain both dimensions rather than reducing the segment to a pedagogical strategy alone.

The critical friend reviewed the coding framework at the category review stage and again at the theme definition stage, and disagreements were resolved by returning to the reflective data. A full audit trail, including coded extracts, category groupings, and theme definitions, was maintained to support dependability.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was established through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement and persistent observation over several months of data generation, with reflective entries documenting classroom experiences, and through critical friend review, where disagreements were recorded and resolved by returning to reflective data. Transferability is supported by thick description of the research context, including the province (Gauteng), school type (public primary), subject (Grade 7 Mathematics), class size (40 plus learners), resources (smartboards, sufficient digital devices), and learner profile (foundational gaps post-COVID-19), enabling readers to assess applicability to their own settings. Dependability was addressed through a transparent audit trail, a documented record of analytical decisions, including reflective extracts, initial codes, grouping of codes into categories, and refinement into final themes, allowing the research process to be tracked and scrutinised. Confirmability was achieved through reflexivity, with a reflexive journal maintained to note how personal assumptions and positionality shaped interpretations, and through the critical friend process, which checked that interpretations arose from the data rather than from researcher bias.

Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (Sem 1-2022-087). Informed consent was obtained from the school principal and from learners' parents or guardians. Because the study involved reflections on my own classroom practice rather than data collection from learners, learners were not research participants in the conventional sense; they were informed, in age-appropriate terms, that their classroom was the focus of my professional inquiry. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identity of the school, learners, and colleagues. All reflective extracts were anonymised, and the critical friend's identity is not disclosed. Data are stored securely on a password-protected device, accessible only to the researcher, and will be retained for five years before being permanently deleted in accordance with the university's data management policy.

Findings

Three themes emerged from analysis. These were developed by grouping initial codes, such as re-teaching, participation, and professional support, into categories, and then refining these into the three themes that appeared most consistently across the data (see Data Analysis, Table 1, for a worked coding example). The themes, re-teaching as pedagogical leadership in response to conceptual difficulty; creating conditions for participation through relational engagement; and leadership through collaborative expertise, are presented through reflective extracts followed by brief interpretive commentary, with extended theoretical analysis reserved for the Discussion.

Theme 1: Re-teaching as Pedagogical Leadership: Responding to Conceptual Difficulty

Across multiple reflective entries, a consistent pattern emerged: learners required repeated explanations and practice opportunities before demonstrating partial understanding, even for concepts previously taught successfully within a single period. Reflective entries documented instances where learners could not solve equations correctly after two periods of instruction, where foundational misconceptions about variables and operations persisted, and where learners expressed confusion about why they were not grasping the material. The data shows that these challenges were not isolated incidents but recurring across different topics and lessons.

Reflective extract, 12 March: Today I taught solving simple linear equations, where Grade 7s learn to solve for x in equations like x + 5 = 12. This would typically take one period. After two periods, less than half could solve correctly without prompting. I tried using a balance scale with counters that worked well last year. Still nothing. One learner asked, "Miss, why are we still doing this?" Not resistance, but genuine confusion about why they were not getting it. I realised I'm not just re-teaching equations; I am teaching basic number fact fluency they should have mastered in Grade 6.

Reflective extract, 9 June: I paused the lesson and asked learners to write on a slip: "What is still confusing?" Answers included: "How do I know which terms can be combined?" "What does the letter mean?" "Why can't I add 3x and 4?" These are foundational misconceptions, not COVID-19-related but COVID-19 exacerbated. I abandoned the lesson plan entirely and created a colour-coded sorting activity for the next lesson. The department head, walking past,

noted I was "behind schedule." I explained why. He nodded but said, "Just make sure term ends well."

These extracts illustrate how teacher leadership was enacted through instructional adaptations in response to learner difficulty. The decision to abandon the lesson plan represented a leadership act because it involved deliberate decision-making under competing pressures: prioritising conceptual foundation over pacing compliance, exercising professional judgement in the absence of policy guidance, and taking responsibility for learner outcomes despite systemic constraints. While responsive teaching might involve similar adaptations, what distinguishes pedagogical micro-leadership here is the negotiation of systemic expectations: I knowingly departed from prescribed pacing while remaining accountable to departmental monitoring, and the department head's response, though not punitive, offered no systemic accommodation, leaving me solely responsible for managing the tension. The learner questions also suggest metacognitive awareness, with learners articulating what they did not understand, which informed my subsequent instructional decisions.

Theme 2: Creating Conditions for Participation: Leadership Through Relational Engagement

The second significant theme relates to learner disengagement manifesting as passive withdrawal rather than overt resistance. This pattern was noted across multiple reflective entries, particularly during whole-class questioning sessions. Learners sat quietly, avoided eye contact, and waited for others to answer rather than risking incorrect responses themselves. This pattern appeared more pronounced among learners who had previously participated confidently, which I interpreted as a possible shift in their willingness to take intellectual risks.

Reflective extract, 19 March: I asked a question. Silence. I waited, ten seconds, twenty. Normally someone would attempt an answer. A hand slowly went up halfway, then down again. Later, a learner told me, "I knew the answer, but I wasn't sure it was right." Fear of being wrong has increased dramatically. They would rather say nothing than risk embarrassment.

Reflective extract, 22 May: I tried something different today. Instead of whole class questioning, I used "think, pair, share" with structured sentence starters: "I think the answer is ___ because ___." The sentence starter reduced cognitive load; they didn't have to simultaneously formulate content and structure. Participation improved. One learner who never volunteers said, "I think it's 5x because the variable is the same." Correct. When I affirmed her,

she smiled, genuinely surprised at herself. Later she attempted another without prompting. This isn't just pedagogy. It's leadership of learning climate.

These extracts demonstrate how pedagogical micro-leadership operates through contextual responsiveness. The decision to use sentence starters was not prescribed by any curriculum document or departmental directive. It emerged from professional judgement about what specific learners needed in that moment. Distributed leadership theory typically examines how tasks are distributed across people. Here, leadership is distributed across instructional strategies, each strategy representing a micro-decision about how to create conditions for learning when learners cannot create those conditions themselves. These observations are interpretive: they reflect my perception of changed participation in the moment, rather than independently measured outcomes, and are reported as such.

Theme 3: Leadership Through Collaborative Expertise: Informal Professional Influence

The third theme relates to professional interaction creating informal leadership enactment opportunities. Conversations revealed shared concerns regarding learners' conceptual difficulty, lack of confidence, and reduced engagement. Colleagues frequently approached me to discuss how particular concepts could be explained more effectively or lessons adapted for learner understanding.

Reflective extract, 3 April: A colleague from the Economic and Management Sciences department appeared at my classroom door. "How do you teach percentages? My learners need to calculate VAT and profit margins, but they struggle to find a percentage of a quantity." We spent twenty minutes after school discussing concrete models, using 100 grids and counters, step-by-step breakdown, and where Grade 7s typically get stuck. She tried my approach the next day and said it helped. Later that week, another teacher from the same department asked the same question. Word spreads.

Reflective extract, 15 June: The EMS colleague who first approached me about percentages stopped me in the corridor. "Your method for teaching percentages is working," she said. "But I've been thinking, why are we solving this alone? There should be a folder or something where we document what works for Grade 7 topics across subjects." She's right. I've shared strategies with four teachers now. Two are using the whiteboard technique for integers. One adapted my counters analogy for teaching ratio and proportion. But none of this is recorded anywhere. If I

were absent, if I changed schools, that knowledge would walk out with me. The school has no memory of what we learned works.

These extracts reveal the structural invisibility of pedagogical micro-leadership. Individual expertise develops but is not captured; collaboration occurs but is not systematised; leadership is enacted but not recognised. The colleague's insight about a *folder* points toward a practical intervention that schools could implement at minimal cost, but currently does not exist. Structural invisibility is not inevitable; it is a design choice embedded in how schools prioritise knowledge management. Although I hold no formal leadership position, colleagues' willingness to seek input suggests recognition of professional expertise. French and Raven's expert power, influence derived from recognised competence, operated through credibility rather than authority. However, these acts remained unrecognised: no mechanism documented or valued this collaboration. Krahenbuhl and Fuller (2021) note such expertise is relied upon but not institutionally acknowledged.

Discussion

The three themes together show that teacher leadership is enacted through instructional decisions about pacing, re-teaching, and creating conditions for participation, rather than through formal positions. This section theorises these findings and considers implications for distributed leadership theory and school practice.

Table 2: Summary of Key Themes and Contributions

Theme	Key Findings	Theoretical Connection	Contribution to Leadership Scholarship
1. Conceptual Difficulty & Re-teaching	Leadership enacted in real-time decisions about slowing down or redesigning instruction.	Extends Distributed Leadership (Spillane, 2006) to the intra-actor level.	Provides basis for the new concept of pedagogical micro-leadership.

2. Learner Disengagement as Withdrawal	Leadership creates psychological safety through responsive strategies.	Demonstrates operationalisation of Referent Power (French & Raven, 1959).	Shows how leadership builds trust and re-engages learners in a post-crisis climate.
3. Informal Professional Collaboration	Leadership flows through sharing expertise but remains structurally invisible.	Illustrates use of Expert Power (French & Raven, 1959).	Highlights need for formal mechanisms to recognise and capture teacher-led expertise.

Pedagogical Micro-Leadership: Extending Distributed Leadership Theory

The findings suggest that distributed leadership theory, as it has typically been applied, may benefit from a more granular unit of analysis. Spillane (2006) conceptualises leadership as distributed across actors, interactions, and situations, but existing scholarship has focused primarily on distribution across organisational roles. The present study reveals leadership distributed within a single teacher's practice, across instructional micro-decisions made in response to learner needs. I term this pedagogical micro-leadership: the exercise of leadership through moment-to-moment instructional judgements about pacing, explanation transformation, scaffolding, and assessment adaptation.

Theme 1 illustrates this through re-teaching decisions. Each re-teaching moment required answering: Should I slow down or maintain pacing? How can I transform this explanation differently? When is understanding sufficient to proceed? These are pedagogical questions but also leadership questions, as they involve balancing competing accountabilities, exercising professional judgement under uncertainty, and taking responsibility for learner outcomes despite systemic constraints. Distributed leadership theory, as it has predominantly been applied, has directed analytical attention primarily toward inter-actor distribution, leadership stretched across people and situations Spillane (2006). This study suggests that attending to intra-actor distribution, the micro-decisions through which a single teacher negotiates competing demands, may enrich the framework's analytical reach without displacing its existing configurations. The proposal is offered cautiously: it is not that distributed leadership

theory is deficient, but that its application to classroom-level practice may benefit from a more granular unit of analysis. Whether intra-actor distribution warrants formal incorporation into the theory, or is better understood as a complementary lens, is a question for further conceptual and empirical work.

A distinction must be drawn between good teaching and pedagogical micro-leadership. Good teaching concerns instructional effectiveness: the use of strategies that facilitate learning. Pedagogical micro-leadership, by contrast, concerns the exercise of influence, professional judgement, and responsibility under conditions of competing accountabilities. The decision to abandon a lesson plan and reteach (as in the 9 June extract) is good teaching if it improves learning; it is pedagogical micro-leadership when it involves negotiating systemic pressures, taking professional risk, and making consequential decisions that shape learning outcomes beyond routine instructional competence. This distinction is important because not all good teaching constitutes leadership; leadership requires the exercise of influence and responsibility in contexts where professional judgement is exercised against competing demands. This study moves teacher leadership from a special category (reserved for those who lead professional development or serve on committees) to a universal dimension of classroom practice.

This extension matters because post-COVID-19 conditions have intensified leadership demands: in this study, many learners demonstrated foundational gaps affecting grade-level engagement, confidence was fragile, and pacing schedules could not assume uniform readiness. The analytical gain of naming these instructional responses as pedagogical micro-leadership rather than good teaching is that teachers exercise professional judgement under competing pressures, take responsibility for learner outcomes despite systemic constraints, and navigate accountability without formal authority or policy guidance. This reframing has implications for how schools understand, support, and value teacher practice.

Power and Agency in Pedagogical Leadership

French and Raven's (1959) framework illuminates how pedagogical micro-leadership operates without positional authority. Theme 2 demonstrated referent power operating through trust-based relationships, enabling learner engagement. Learners participated not because the teacher held coercive or reward power, but because relational safety was established. This finding extends understanding of power in classrooms: pedagogical leadership effectiveness depends significantly on referent power, which requires intentional relational investment. In

post-COVID-19 contexts, where learner confidence appeared fragile in my classroom, referent power became a key enabler for learning rather than a supplementary soft skill. Theme 3 demonstrated expert power operating through professional credibility with colleagues. Influence occurred because teaching strategies were perceived as effective, not because of hierarchical position.

Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of agency illuminates contextual constraints shaping leadership enactment. Agency was evident in decisions to depart from pacing schedules (Theme 1) and to create alternative participation structures (Theme 2). However, agency operated within constraints: curriculum accountability pressures, limited time, and absence of formal recognition for informal leadership. This suggests pedagogical micro-leadership requires not only individual capacity but also enabling school conditions. Lukes' (2005) three-dimensional view of power is particularly instructive here: the pacing schedule does not merely constrain action; it shapes what teachers see as possible. When a teacher abandons a lesson plan (as in the 9 June extract), they are exercising agency against a powerful structural force that frames pace as the primary accountability metric. That act of professional judgement is itself a leadership practice, but it carries potential professional risk.

Structural Invisibility of Pedagogical Leadership

A concerning finding is that pedagogical micro-leadership remained largely institutionally unrecognised, though there were some indications of informal recognition: colleagues sought advice, and one proposed a shared resource folder, suggesting that while individual expertise was valued, the school lacked systematic structures to capture it. No formal mechanism documented re-teaching adaptations, relational strategies addressing disengagement, or collaborative expertise sharing. This supports Krahenbuhl and Fuller's (2021) observation that informal teacher leadership is often invisible within hierarchical structures, creating a disconnection between contribution and recognition.

The invisibility matters for two reasons. First, it affects sustainability. Teachers enacting pedagogical leadership without recognition or systemic support risk burnout, particularly in post-COVID-19 conditions where leadership demands have intensified. The reflective extracts show sustained, cognitively demanding work, creating analogies, redesigning activities, managing pacing tensions, and rebuilding learner confidence. Without structural validation, this work becomes an invisible emotional and intellectual tax on individual teachers. Second,

invisibility blocks organisational learning: expertise remains individual, not collective professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). The informal collaboration described in Theme 3 was generative but fragile, dependent on individual relationships rather than systemic support. The colleague's proposal for a "folder" was a recognition that the school had no organisational memory of effective strategies, a fundamental failure of knowledge management that perpetuates inefficiency and isolates teachers.

Addressing this invisibility requires concrete action from school leaders. First, formal recognition mechanisms, such as documenting instructional adaptations, establishing teacher-led learning communities, or including pedagogical leadership in appraisals, would validate this invisible work. Schools might introduce a simple digital log where teachers record one "pedagogical leadership moment" weekly, serving both recognition and knowledge-sharing functions. Second, protecting space for professional collaboration requires prioritising time for dialogue rather than assuming it will emerge despite competing demands. Schools could protect regular time for cross-departmental pedagogical problem-solving sessions focused on specific learner difficulties, an intervention requiring intentional scheduling rather than additional funding. Third, the tension between curriculum pacing requirements and pedagogical leadership suggests policymakers should reconsider accountability systems that assume uniform pacing. A modest policy change, allowing teachers to submit modified pacing plans with justifications, or shifting monitoring from lesson completion to learner understanding indicators, would signal trust while maintaining accountability. Fourth, school leaders might reconsider how distributed leadership is conceptualised within their institutions. If leadership is understood as distributed only across formal roles or only through visible collaborative activities, pedagogical micro-leadership will remain unrecognised. Developing more inclusive leadership frameworks that value instructional decision-making as leadership could strengthen both teacher agency and organisational capacity, potentially through revising job descriptions, recognition awards, or promotion criteria to explicitly include documented examples of pedagogical micro-leadership.

Contribution

This study contributes to teacher leadership scholarship in four ways. First, it conceptualises pedagogical micro-leadership, leadership enacted through instructional micro-decisions rather than across organisational roles, providing analytical language for a phenomenon previously

described as 'good teaching' rather than leadership. This naming matters because what is not named is not systematically valued.

Second, building on this conceptualisation, it proposes an extension to distributed leadership theory by drawing attention to intra-actor leadership distribution, inviting the framework to account for micro-decisions within individual practice. This theoretical extension opens new research directions: if leadership can be distributed within a single actor across time and tasks, then the unit of analysis for leadership studies should expand to include the cognitive and ethical negotiations that occur inside teaching practice.

Third, it demonstrates how post-COVID-19 conditions intensify everyday leadership demands at classroom level. In this study, the frequency and complexity of instructional decisions about pacing, re-teaching, and creating conditions for participation were experienced as amplified relative to the expectations described in curriculum policy, as reflected in the ongoing adaptations documented across reflective entries. Rather than claiming causal proof, this finding highlights how crisis contexts can render visible leadership work that may have been less noticeable under normal conditions. The pandemic did not create pedagogical micro-leadership; good teachers have always made these decisions, but it amplified the frequency, complexity, and consequences of those decisions, making them more urgently in need of theorisation.

Fourth, it provides empirical evidence from a South African public school context, contributing to post-COVID-19 teacher leadership research from an under-represented setting. Much teacher leadership research originates from high-income, high-resource contexts, with a focus on formal leadership roles or collaborative structures. This study shows that the theoretical concerns of distributed leadership and agency are equally, perhaps more, relevant in high accountability systems where teachers navigate acute tensions between systemic demands and learner realities. Resource constraint is not only a matter of physical infrastructure; it can also take the form of constrained professional discretion and time within accountability regimes.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, as a self-study of a single teacher's practice, the findings cannot establish how typical or atypical these experiences are across the broader South African teaching workforce. The value of self-study lies not in statistical generalisability but in what Flyvbjerg (2006) terms "exemplary generalisability", the capacity of a well-chosen

case to generate insight applicable to other contexts through careful comparison. Readers in similarly high-accountability contexts, where professional discretion is constrained by prescriptive pacing and monitoring, may recognise patterns even while specific conditions differ. Future research employing comparative case study designs across multiple teachers, schools, or provinces would help identify contextual factors that enable or constrain pedagogical micro-leadership.

Second, the study relies on my own reflective accounts as the primary data source. While self-study methodology values insider perspective, the absence of multiple data sources, such as classroom observations by an external researcher, learner interviews, or colleague perspectives on the same events, means the findings represent one teacher's interpretations of classroom experiences. This does not invalidate the findings, but it does mean that other perspectives on the same events might have revealed different or additional insights. Future research employing multiple data sources could strengthen the evidence base for pedagogical micro-leadership.

Third, the study's focus on my own practice means learner perspectives are absent. Learners experienced the pedagogical leadership described but were not asked how they perceived or experienced it. Future research employing participatory methods, such as learner voice groups, photo voice, or co-authored reflections, could illuminate how pedagogical leadership is received from the learner side, potentially revealing disconnects between teacher intentions and learner interpretations.

Fourth, the study was conducted in a single school. Pedagogical micro-leadership might operate differently in schools with high staff turnover, weak collegial cultures, or more rigid accountability enforcement. Research in diverse South African school contexts, rural schools, no-fee schools, and independent schools, would strengthen understanding of how context moderates the enactment and recognition of pedagogical leadership.

Fifth, pedagogical micro-leadership may have negative dimensions that this study does not address. For example, it could enable avoidance of systemic accountability, or allow schools to normalise inadequate resourcing by celebrating teacher heroism rather than demanding structural change. Pedagogical micro-leadership, like any form of professional discretion, can serve either enabling or defensive purposes. Future research should examine boundary conditions distinguishing responsible professional judgement from problematic individualisation of systemic failures.

Conclusion

Teacher leadership, in this context, is pedagogical: it is enacted through everyday decisions about pacing, re-teaching, and creating conditions for participation, rather than through formal positions or hierarchical authority. These decisions involve exercising professional judgement under competing pressures, taking responsibility for learner outcomes despite systemic constraints, and navigating accountability expectations without formal authority or policy guidance.

The study's key contribution is the conceptualisation of pedagogical micro-leadership, leadership exercised through consequential instructional decisions made by an individual teacher in response to learner needs. This extends distributed leadership theory by identifying intra-actor distribution alongside the more commonly examined inter-actor distribution. The findings also demonstrate how expert and referent power (French & Raven, 1959) enable pedagogical leadership without positional authority, and how agency operates within constrained accountability environments (Priestley et al., 2015).

The study has implications for policy and practice at four levels. At teacher level, recognising pedagogical micro-leadership as leadership rather than merely good teaching reframes how teachers understand and value their own instructional decisions. At school level, professional development might acknowledge expertise already present among staff and create structured opportunities for collaborative reflection, addressing the structural invisibility of informal expertise sharing identified in Theme 3. At school leadership level, protecting space for professional conversation and collaboration would support the teacher agency that Themes 1 and 2 show was exercised largely without systemic accommodation. At policy level, reconsidering accountability systems that assume uniform pacing would acknowledge that post-COVID-19 conditions require adaptive professional judgement; the department head's response in Theme 1, noting that the teacher was 'behind schedule' while offering no accommodation, illustrates the gap between recognition and support.

Visibility alone is insufficient. Recognition must include time, support, and resources for teachers to exercise pedagogical leadership, not simply additional documentation requirements. Without such structural response, pedagogical micro-leadership risks becoming another expectation added to teachers' already overloaded responsibilities without corresponding support or recognition.

The pandemic disrupted education globally, but it also created an opportunity to reimagine what counts as leadership in schools. Pedagogical micro-leadership offers one conceptual starting point for that re-imagination, recognising that in every classroom, every day, teachers are leading, whether or not their systems have language to name it or structures to support it.

References

Bondie, R. S., Dahnke, C., & Zusho, A. (2019). How does changing "one-size-fits-all" to differentiated instruction affect teaching? *Review of Research in Education, 43*(1), 336–362.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3(2)*, 77-101.

Bush, T. (2020). School leadership in times of crisis: Lessons from Covid-19. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *48*(6), 1021-1039.

Department of Basic Education. (2020). *Curriculum recovery plan 2020*. Government Printer.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *12*(2), 219-245.

Fourie, M., & Naidoo, P. (2022). Teachers' experiences and perspectives during Covid-19: A South African case study. *Perspectives in Education*, *40*(4), 154-169.

French, J. R. P., & Raven, B. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in social power* (pp. 150-167). University of Michigan Press.

Fullan, M. (2021). *Leading in a culture of change* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Oxford Polytechnic.

Gronn, P. (2021). *The view from inside: Understanding leadership in schools*. Routledge.

Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2020). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. Teachers College Press.

Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2020). Covid-19 and education leadership: The case for resilience and innovation. *School Leadership & Management*, *40*(5), 393-397.

Hollweck, T., Upenieks, K., & Kutsyuruba, B. (2021). Teacher agency in times of crisis. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, *6*(4), 321-336.

Ingersoll, R. M., & Collins, G. (2020). Accountability, control, and teacher autonomy in the United States. In P. D. Pearson & E. H. Hiebert (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of literacy instruction* (pp. 313-326). SAGE.

Kitchen, J., Berry, A., & Russell, T. (2022). *Self-study in teacher education research: Opportunities and challenges*. Springer.

Koopman, R., & Koopman, A. (2021). Leading through disruption: Case narratives from South African teachers. *South African Journal of Education Leadership and Management*, *9*(2), 1-12.

Krahenbuhl, K., & Fuller, K. (2021). Invisible leaders: The professional cost of informal leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *49*(6), 904-920.

LaBoskey, V. K. (2004). The methodology of self-study and its theoretical underpinnings. In J. Loughran, M. Hamilton, V. LaBoskey, & T. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 817-869). Springer.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A radical view* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Mpungose, C. B. (2020). Emergent transition from face-to-face to online learning in a South African University in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 7*(1), 1–9.

Nguyen, H. T. M., Harris, J., & Ng, D. (2021). Teacher leadership as a key to education recovery post-Covid-19. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, *41*(3), 373-387.

Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Samaras, A. P. (2011). *Self-study teacher research: Improving your practice through collaborative inquiry*. Sage.

Spaull, N., & Van der Berg, S. (2020). Counting the cost: Covid-19 school closures in South Africa and its impact on children. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, *10*(1), 1-13.

Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. Jossey-Bass.