

Article

First Level Leadership in Schools: Evidence from Secondary Schools Across Australia

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Abstract: This article presents the results of an investigation into the phenomenon of ‘first level leadership’ in schools. The current theorisation of school leadership largely includes senior and middle leaders. Yet there is evidence in schools, as well as recent research, about the existence of ‘first level leaders’. Some scholars might argue that this equates to teacher leadership, but that term is often confounded with middle leadership. First level leadership includes the efforts of teachers who hold positions of responsibility, but experience smaller spans of influence than middle leaders. The study reported here represents the initial phase of a multi-phase research program aimed at clarifying who first level leaders are and what they do. The aim of the present study was to identify evidence of first level leadership from role descriptions, explanations of governance and leadership structures. The official websites of 675 secondary schools from all sectors and states of Australia were investigated to identify potential first level leadership positions, resulting in evidence from 87 schools. Confirmation of these positions was achieved through descriptions of responsibilities and jurisdictional documents such as role descriptions. The positions included coaches, coordinators and assistant heads. The article concludes with implications for educational leadership theory as well as policy and practices relating to developing school leaders.

Keywords: first level leadership; middle leadership; senior leadership; emergent leadership; teacher leadership; span of influence; bureaucratic theory



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1. Introduction

The considerable growth of research interest in middle leadership and, relatedly, teacher leadership has led to a broadly accepted conceptualisation of school leadership levels comprising only senior and middle layers [1–3]. Such a view, however, oversimplifies how leadership happens in schools, and places schools apart from most other types of organisations that have at least three levels of leadership overseeing the work of other members of staff [4,5].

The current study was driven by two points. Firstly, given that schools can be large in terms of numbers of staff, it is unlikely that leadership would occur solely within the domains of the senior and middle leadership echelons. Secondly, there is already anecdotal and research evidence pointing to the existence of first level leaders. These points will be elaborated on further in the next sections.

This article reports on the results of an initial exploratory study (the first phase in a multi-phase research program) that aimed to identify evidence of first level leadership and, in so doing, identify formally named positions of responsibility that may become the focus of more detailed research. The theoretical background section comprises a justification, definition and description of first level leadership and how it relates to middle leadership and teacher leadership. This is followed by an explanation of the methods used in this study. The results of the study are presented and the findings are discussed. The article concludes with implications for research, theory and practice relating to educational leadership in schools.

The aim of the study, which was exploratory in nature, was to look for evidence of first level leadership in Australian secondary schools by examining publically available information available on school websites. The research questions driving the study were as follows:

- RQ1: What evidence exists for first level leadership in secondary schools from publically available information?
- RQ2: Who are the first level leaders in these secondary schools?

2. Theoretical Background

The examination of levels of leadership in schools and, in particular, the exploration of specific layers of leadership responsibility lends itself to be informed by classical management theory. Weber's bureaucratic theory, in particular, describes hierarchical divisions of responsibility within organisations that could be interpreted as levels of authority [5,6]. Schools tend to have hierarchical organisational structures [7–9], and secondary schools are likely to be more hierarchical than primary schools due to the way teaching subject areas are organised [10], as well as their typically larger size [11]. For this reason, examining schools through the lens of bureaucratic theory makes sense in that the different levels of leadership existing in schools today are somewhat congruent with the bureaucratic model described by Weber, as levels of 'authority' appear to be commensurate with hierarchical 'positions', and the subsequent divisions of administrative or managerial labour help the organisation to run efficiently [12,13].

The utilization of distributed leadership theory was also considered as a lens for this study. First level leadership might represent leadership distribution in terms of workload, but the concept of distributed leadership also includes individuals with no formal leadership positions [14]. This research focuses only on individuals with formal positions, and so it was decided not to include that perspective at this early exploratory stage.

This being said, the study reported here does not take a solely managerialist view of school leadership per se, but rather, bureaucratic theory enables the levels of school leadership responsibilities to be understood [13,15]. It also needs to be pointed out that whilst some have asserted that classical management theories are outdated because the nature of relationships between leadership and employees is regarded as more flexible and interactive nowadays [4,5], bureaucratic theory has a long history of contribution to the study of organisational structures [16] and continues to influence management and leadership theory [12,15].

2.1. The Hierarchical Structure of Schools

It is not unusual for schools to be thought of as 'flatter' compared to other organisations because of the relative ease with which teachers can interact with the principal, for example, and the relational nature of school leadership generally [17,18]. Despite Beare's assertion in 2006 that modern schools will be less hierarchical and have more network-based structures [19], in the 2020s schools continue to be hierarchical in nature, with leadership responsibilities distributed across levels of authority [7,9,20]. This is not to say that leadership behavior is strictly authoritarian or 'top-down' oriented [21], but that leadership work is shared by the principal with others who take on roles that help the school to run efficiently [20,22]. The roles (tasks and duties) performed by senior leaders, such as the deputy principals, are likely to be larger and more far-reaching compared to those of middle leaders [1], but all are sharing the administrative or managerial labour of leadership to an extent commensurate with the level of their appointed position [6,23].

Secondary schools are likely to have more formal leadership positions than primary schools (as a general rule; there are exceptions) due to their departmentalised nature. For example, subject areas require middle leaders such as department heads (the position names vary) to lead them [24], and cohort leaders share the welfare and pastoral workload reflecting the academic and personal needs of large cohorts of students [25]. Some of these middle leaders might have more junior leaders assisting them [26]. The level of

leadership responsibility can be established, at least initially, by looking at the position's span of influence.

2.2. The Concept of Span of Influence

Span of influence refers to the number of individuals who are influenced by a leader. The concept as applied here has its origins in the 'sphere of influence' idea described by Jennings in 1937, which concerns how leaders (formal or informal) come to affect the actions and beliefs of others and, in so doing, influence them [27]. Span of influence also has origins in the more recent concepts of span of control, also known as span of management [4,5], which refers to the number of staff that leaders or managers supervise, or, put another way, how many staff report to a person in a more senior position [28]. Jennings' 'sphere' conceptualisation reflected how leaders emerge and develop within a group, while the 'span' concept, found predominantly in corporate/business literature, relates to individuals who hold positions of authority as managers or supervisors.

Combining them both to land on a concept called span of influence accounts for both the organic ways leadership can form relationally, such as happens with emergent or teacher leaders [29], and the influences of those in formal positions of responsibility in schools ranging from senior leaders to first level leaders [23]. The concept of span of influence is an important one for schools because it explains the way school leadership structures develop the way they do.

In an era when leadership responsibilities are ever-increasing and growing more demanding for principals [30], a principal's ability to oversee and support every staff member becomes quite limited. Their span of influence is across the whole school [20], but personally looking after each staff member becomes impossible (or in small schools, more difficult). This requires other leaders to take on some of the work. Initially, this would have been senior leaders such as deputies. However, middle leaders have become increasingly important as the span of influence of senior leaders also becomes difficult to manage, and leadership needs to be distributed further [1,31].

To put it simply, there are only so many people any school leader can manage effectively, which necessitates the formation of additional leader positions [32]. What this division of leadership labour does is create levels of management where the complexity of work as well as span of influence tends to reduce from the senior level down [33].

Research is reporting that middle leaders experience intense workload pressures [2,8]. Some of this may emanate from the potential for that hierarchical level to experience several spans of influence, ranging from a small team for some tasks to a whole faculty for others [34], depending on what they are doing. Given the increasing workloads occurring at this leadership level, and evidence already existing (as shall be described in the next section), there is need to consider a level of leadership below what is currently referred to as 'middle' in schools.

2.3. The Concept of First Level Leadership

The initial theoretical case for first level leadership was made in a previous article that used examples of leadership positions below middle management/leadership, and included literature about other occupations as well as evidence from a recent national study of educational middle and senior leader capabilities [26]. While that report contains the reasoning and detail underpinning first level leadership conceptually, it is helpful to include some explanation here also.

First level leaders are those who hold minor formal positions of responsibility and have influence over other staff members to a level less profound than middle-level leaders. Their span of influence is usually smaller than that of middle leaders. The level of reach and complexity of their work is usually less than that expected of middle leaders. First level leaders are often, but not always, found in roles that 'assist' middle leaders by sharing some of their administrative and managerial labour [26].

These types of leaders exist in other occupations and industries, where first-line, middle and senior leaders and managers are part of the leadership mix in many organisations [4,5,35,36]. First-line leaders (sometimes called front-line managers) have a variety of nomenclatures depending on the nature of the organisation, including coordinators, team leaders and supervisors [5,28,37]. Specific examples found in the literature from other professions include ward managers in nursing, clinical leaders in medicine and junior leaders (those ranked below captain) in defense forces [26].

While common across many other fields, the idea of first level leadership is new for education. The argument made here is that schools are not that different compared to other organisations in terms of the way leadership levels and the sharing of administrative labour are structured, but this is not widely recognised in the field of educational leadership. The current scholarship on school leadership focuses on senior leaders, especially principals, and increasingly, middle leaders [38], with some conflation reported between the latter and teacher leaders [29].

In the earlier work, two types of first level leaders were identified: emergent and junior [26,38]. After analyses of the data from the current study and in response to comments from colleagues in educational leadership, my conceptualisation of first level leaders focuses on those with formal positions of responsibility in a school, emergent leadership, mainly informal, has been removed. This is due to the fact that, while individuals demonstrating emergent leadership are starting to exert influence, they do not hold any special responsibilities and are predominantly engaged in teaching (or other routine duties if non-teaching). However, as first level leaders often stem from emergent leadership, or, to put it another way, emergent leadership behaviours result in people being selected for first level leader jobs [26], it is worth briefly describing emergent leadership.

2.4. Emergent Leadership

Emergent leadership is not a new concept. It has, for example, been described as occurring “*independently of formal leadership structures and positions*” by Watson and Scribner (p. 465) [39]. The concept of emergent leadership has origins in the notion of ‘leadership emergence’ described in the fields of social and managerial psychology [40,41]. Emergent leaders in schools may be teachers (but also other staff) who are new to the school (and mostly new to teaching) and who do not hold any special position of responsibility, but who exert influence on other teachers (and other staff). They might be recognised by other teachers as leaders (or experts) in a given area. They are likely to be described as ‘future leaders’ and might be influential by virtue of new knowledge they share, or personality traits [42].

In the context of schools, emergent leadership has sometimes been equated to teacher leadership as both engage in similar leadership behaviours, including sharing new teaching methods and mentoring peers [43,44]. However, these should still be viewed as distinct concepts [26]. Two examples of instances of emergent leadership in schools include a new graduate teacher showing others in the stage team new pedagogical techniques, and an early career teacher significantly influencing the work of a committee or team.

2.5. First Level Leadership in Schools

First level leaders in schools are staff members who hold a minor formal position of responsibility. More often than not their responsibility has a formal name, but this job title may not necessarily be among the official positions named in enterprise agreements or the system documents that describe formal leadership positions [26]. Their title might be an artefact of a school’s own organisational chart, reflecting the needs of that community. First level leaders may include those who assist middle leaders (such as assistant subject heads) and what some jurisdictions refer to as Highly Accomplished Teachers (or HATs) [45] or Advanced Skills Teachers (or ASTs) in Australia and other countries [46]. First level leadership might possibly be the next logical step for emergent leaders to move to as they steadily gain experience and confidence [26].

The span of influence of first level leaders may be quite small, perhaps a small team or a subset of a subject-based faculty. For example, a teacher assigned to support the work of the head of science might only look after the biology curriculum and the relevant group who teach biology to senior classes, and is likely to have a smaller span of influence than the head of department. Likewise, the coverage of tasks will be less extensive and rather limited in reach compared to the head (G. Di Bella, personal communication, 12 December 2016).

First level leaders address the issues that middle leaders do not have time for. They invariably take on responsibilities that help teaching programs and events (for example) to run smoothly, and that other leaders are unable to do [47]. They may also fulfil a guiding role to do with the needs of colleagues, when senior or middle leaders are unable to, in activities ranging from providing moral support to demonstrating new technologies [42,48].

Anecdotal evidence of first level leadership is not hard to find. At conferences and during informal conversations with school staff, as well as in my own experiences, many examples have come to light. Looking to my own experiences, one of my first positions of responsibility came during my first year as a teacher. As the principal was aware that I was able to play a musical instrument, I was given the role of creative arts reference person in a primary school. My tasks were to support the creative arts coordinator by keeping inventories of music instrument supplies and providing assistance to teachers who needed ideas to teach music lessons. My success here led to other first level leadership positions and eventually provided the needed experiences for a successful application for a middle leader position in another school. Experiences shared by others (all secondary teachers) include literacy resource person, coordinator of team competitive sport and student representative council advisor.

Research evidence for first level leadership is also starting to build. The term itself is not new, and is established in corporate and business literature. First level leadership, as a level of hierarchy operating below middle leadership, has been described in other occupational contexts [48,49]. In non-educational contexts, first level leadership has been used as an umbrella term accounting for front-line and first-line managers [50].

The earlier work by De Nobile [26] provided evidence from a national study of non-principal leader positions emanating from the Australian Professional Teaching Standards at the Highly Accomplished and Lead levels [51], as well as a number of jurisdictional position descriptions. In addition, studies have reported on team facilitators operating under the supervision of middle leaders [52] and middle leader duties delegated down to other teachers [1]. While discussing the findings of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP), Gurr made clear that leadership in schools goes beyond just senior and middle [53].

Interestingly, more recent work by Lipscombe et al. made distinctions between middle leaders as formally appointed leaders and teacher leaders as informal influencers, suggesting another level of leadership besides middle and senior [2]. However, that study brings to light problems of definition that are threatening to confuse the concept of first level leadership before it comes into wider use in education. The models of leadership described by government school authorities in Western Australia [54] and more recently New South Wales [55] include 'teacher leaders' hierarchically below (or preceding) middle leaders. There is a danger in this terminology due to the prospect of conceptual confusion. Earlier research, for example, has placed teacher leadership and middle leadership at more or less the same hierarchical level [56]. Therefore, the differences between the two concepts (as well as the overlapping notions) should be made clear.

2.6. Teacher Leadership and the Terminology Problem

If the concept of teacher leadership had not been utilised before, it would probably be just fine to ascribe first level leaders the name 'teacher leaders' instead, and associate with that term all the elements used to describe first level leadership here. However, as suggested in earlier research on middle leadership, 'teacher leadership' is a separate concept [31], even though it is sometimes also associated with the work of middle leaders [26], and I

would warn that use such terminology for first level leaders and leadership will muddy the conceptual waters significantly.

Teacher leadership has been described as the efforts of teachers who are still based in the classroom and also contribute to the professional development of other teachers, improving teaching and learning in the school, and thereby make a difference to student outcomes [57–59]. Teacher leadership has been reported to happen formally through positions of responsibility such as grade team leader, instructional leader, teacher on special assignment (TOSA), master teacher and subject department chair [58,60,61]. They can also operate informally by helping other teachers, sharing innovative practices, and taking a lead role in collaborative work with other teachers [57,59,62].

Anyone who looks closely into the references cited above might notice that they originated from the U.S.A. based on American research. This is no coincidence. There is a clear preference for the idea of teacher leadership as opposed to middle leadership in that part of the world. Many of the formal teacher leadership positions listed above could be interpreted as middle leadership, especially the grade leader and department chair, which are often noted as prominent middle leader job titles [1,31]. Other positions, such as the TOSA, would fit neatly within the conceptualisation of first level leadership [26].

The point being made here is that teacher leadership may be seen as middle leadership by a different name depending on geographical areas, and that this is one of the reasons for the confusion around both terms. In other parts of the world, such as Australia, the U.K. and parts of Asia, middle leadership is the dominant terminology to describe teachers based in classrooms but having significant leadership responsibilities beyond their classrooms [63–65].

Others have argued for a distinction to be made between middle leadership and teacher leadership on the basis that middle leaders usually hold formal positions in the school organisational hierarchy, while teacher leaders work informally, holding no formal position of responsibility [66,67]. In addition, some have positioned teacher leadership hierarchically below middle leadership [68]. Relatedly, there exist many reports of teacher leadership happening among individuals who do not have formal responsibilities but are doing some significant work, such as in teacher skill development, at a level similar to first level leadership [43,59].

With all these conflicting conceptualisations considered, it can be seen that teacher leadership has been asserted to be the same as middle leadership [29] as well as distinct from middle leadership [2]. Given all this, and the way first level leadership has been conceptualised [26], the most pragmatic way to deal with the terminology problem is to accept that in some jurisdictions, teacher leaders may also work alongside, but operate informally, compared to those who hold formal positions as middle leaders as well as first level leaders, while in other jurisdictions, ‘teacher leader’ is the term given to what the former jurisdictions consider middle- or first level leaders.

2.7. Formal School Leadership at Three Levels

What is clear at this point, though, is that there is recognition of leadership other than middle and senior in schools. It is proposed that there are three levels of formal leadership in schools. The term first level leadership is clearer conceptually than other terms such as ‘teacher leadership’ if one is setting out to describe staff members who have positions of responsibility, but are not middle or senior leaders.

There is a need right now to establish a more definitive conceptualisation of what first level leadership is, who the first level leaders are, and what they actually do. The exploratory study reported here is an initial step towards more in-depth empirical research in this exciting area of leadership theory. The purpose of the study described in the following sections was to identify likely first level leadership positions by looking at publically available information.

3. Method

Australian school websites often provide information about staffing, including members of the leadership team. Therefore, information available from these online spaces was the main source of data. Secondary schools were chosen as these tend to have larger staff than primary schools in the same location, and are more hierarchical given departmental structures. Government, Catholic systemic and independent secondary schools from every state and territory of Australia were included to capture the fullest possible range of leadership positions considering the different permutations of leadership nomenclature between those sectors [31].

The method for identifying likely positions was informed by bureaucratic theory. Position title names and (where possible) position descriptions were semantically analysed for indications of a 'rank order', level of authority, relationship to a supervisor or other forms of hierarchical organisational structures that indicated likelihood of first level leadership [6,13]. For example, an assistant head of subject or a second in charge working under a person who would be considered a middle leader according to the well-cited descriptions offered by De Nobile [31] or Grootenboer [1] would be identified as a potential first level leader. Other criteria for identification are listed in Section 3.3 below.

As this study involved the use of key words and written descriptions, a qualitative approach was warranted. In particular, a conventional content analysis technique described by Hsieh and Shannon [69] was used to identify the key responsibilities of identified positions from information on the relevant school websites, as well any supporting jurisdictional or industrial documentation such as position descriptions.

3.1. Sampling

An iterative form of the systemic sampling technique [70] was used to identify schools and collect data. Using a list of schools for each sector, every tenth government school, every fifth Catholic school and every third independent school was selected for searching. If not enough schools were found in the first iteration, the procedure would start again with the remaining schools until the desired number of possible first level leader positions was reached. In some cases, all schools within a state sector (for example, all Catholic systemic schools in Tasmania) were searched as the technique did not produce the desired number of positions. In these cases, a form of purposive sampling [70] based on sector was implemented, in which schools were searched alphabetically as they appeared on the list, excluding, of course, those school sites already inspected via the five-school interval systemic sampling iterations. When the desired number of positions was found, the sampling would cease. In some cases, the minimum desired number of positions was not reached.

The number of school websites to be searched was proportioned approximately according to the percentage of Australian schools in each sector [70], but also to ensure enough sources to capture data from independent schools. Initially, a formula of 10 Government + 5 Catholic + 5 Independent schools was used. This meant that, in the case of government schools, websites would be randomly searched until a total of 10 potential first level leadership positions were identified, at which point the search stopped and attention would focus on finding 5 positions in Catholic systemic schools. This worked well for states with larger populations (New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland), but not for others, so the formula was adjusted to 5 Government + 3 Catholic + 2 Independent for the rest of the states. Searches initially focused on metropolitan schools, before moving to regional locations.

3.2. Data Collection

The data collection process for each website was identical. The first step was to look for information about 'Staff' and 'Leadership Team' and other similar links. If these did not contain the required information, a deeper search of the website would be performed, including examining newsletters, annual reports, handbooks and other material. Once a

potential first level leadership position was identified, a search was made for any information about the roles performed by that person. This included searches of jurisdictional (such as Northern Territory Department of Education) or sector (such as New South Wales Independent Schools Association) websites, including leadership position descriptions and other information about leadership positions, including training information and enterprise agreements. It was not always possible to find such information from these sources.

3.3. Data Analysis

Position names were entered into a spreadsheet according to state or territory, then by sector (government, catholic systemic, independent). Any data from jurisdictional authorities were used to ascertain the responsibilities of each position along with any information offered by the school website. Identified positions were then compared within each sector and across states and sectors to identify any common trends. Jurisdictional data and any additional information on the positions found on the school websites were content-analysed, and any key words relating to responsibilities, tasks or hierarchical position were identified and coded [69] in order to determine if the relevant position was first level leadership, in accord with the criteria listed below. One example of a commonly occurring theme was 'minor-noncurricular', which comprised data segments relating to individuals who looked after such activities as school representative council and school band. Another key theme was that of 'assist middle leader', where the key words were 'assist', 'help', and similar ones related to a middle leader that a given position was associated with.

Confirmation bias, described by Peters [71] as a researcher's "tendency to search for information that supports their beliefs and ignore or distort data contradicting them" (p. 1351), was a potential ethical and trustworthiness issue [70]. In order to minimise the risk of biased results, a number of strategies were built into the research design. First, the wide and random sampling of schools across states and sectors discouraged a restricted and potentially skewed dataset. Second, referral to jurisdictional and other documentation relating to identified positions was undertaken where possible so that they could be confirmed or disconfirmed as first level leadership. Finally, a set of criteria was developed to aid in the identification and confirmation of likely first level leadership positions.

Criteria for the identification of positions as first level were based on the conceptualisation of first level leadership emerging from this study and reported above. Categorisation as first level leadership was judged on the balance of the criteria. Not all of the criteria needed to be met. The five key criteria included:

- Assistant to or associate of a middle leader (such as subject head);
- Team leaders or equivalent looking position titles;
- Coordinators of specific school operations (but not cohorts or subjects);
- Leaders or managers of minor areas/activities (such as SRC);
- Lead(ing), senior and highly accomplished teachers.

4. Results

The results are firstly presented here in general terms. This is followed by detailed descriptions of some first level leadership positions based on school information, as well as position descriptions and other jurisdictional information.

Government school websites were the most transparent in terms of staff listings. It was easier to locate lists of positions of responsibility and even staff member names alongside them compared to school websites from the other two sectors. It was also interesting to note that if school websites had menu links such as 'Leadership', 'Our Leadership Team' or 'Our People', they mostly listed senior executive staff members and did not provide a whole staff list. Other schools had links to 'Our Staff' but not to 'Leadership', but fortunately school leaders were sometimes included in the staff list. These were the best site links to search in terms of time efficiency. A summary of the school websites included in the search is presented in Table 1. Total numbers for each state and sector are indicated in bold.

Table 1. School websites searched across Australia.

State	Government	Catholic	Independent	All Sectors
New South Wales	35	14	47	96
Victoria	50	49	55	154
Queensland	49	21	83	153
Western Australia	51	29	18	98
South Australia	24	14	29	66
Tasmania	24	7	18	49
Australian Capital Territory	17	5	15	37
Northern Territory	12	5	5	22
TOTAL	261	144	270	675

4.1. Junior Leadership Positions

A total of 675 school websites were eventually examined. Of these, only 87 schools (13%) provided information about positions likely to be categorised as first level leadership. This should not be interpreted as a sign that schools did not have first level leaders. Rather, the overwhelming majority of school websites only listed senior leaders as part of an ‘executive’ or ‘leadership team’. Indeed, many school websites did not have staff lists either. According to the sampling strategy, if there was no listing anywhere on the school website, the search moved on to the next school.

It was clear that the government school sector provided more information about leadership positions than Catholic systemic or independent schools. A summary of the results obtained across states and sectors is presented in Table 2. Again, total numbers for each state and sector are indicated in bold.

Table 2. First level leadership positions identified.

State	Government	Catholic	Independent	All Sectors
New South Wales	10	5	5	20
Victoria	10	1	1	12
Queensland	10	3	2	15
Western Australia	5	3	2	10
South Australia	5	3	2	10
Tasmania	5	3	2	10
Australian Capital Territory	3	1	2	6
Northern Territory	1	2	1	4
TOTAL	49	21	17	87

As part of the iterative identification process attention turned to the next random school once a probable first level leadership position was found. However, it is worth noting that several schools had more than one such position. For example, a government boys’ high school north-western Sydney, New South Wales (NSW), had an Assistant Advisor and an Instructional Specialist on staff. A Catholic systemic secondary college in South Australia had Assistant Heads and Coordinators; an independent grammar school in Perth, Western Australia employed Assistant Heads of Subject and a Head of Science for specific cohorts, such as Year 8. So, to be clear, there were more than 87 possible first level leadership positions at these schools. Table 3 below lists the position titles of confirmed first level leadership according to state and sector.

In order to confirm each position, information about that individual was looked for on the school website in sources like the newsletter or other links. If this was not available, jurisdictional or sector-based documents such as position descriptions were looked for. In terms of many of these positions, though, the fact that they were assisting a middle leader position was enough for confirmation, as this was one of the criteria for selection. In other instances, the use of descriptive nomenclature, such as ‘Coordinator—Year 9 maths’ under

the aegis of a head of mathematics, pointed to the criteria relating to leading small areas or units; hence, they were confirmed as first level leadership.

Table 3. Position titles identified by state and sector.

State	Government	Catholic Systemic	Independent
NSW	Assistant Advisor (4) Coordinator (3) Instructional Leader Staff w special responsibility Organiser	Assistant Subject Coordinator (3) Coordinator—not subject/year (2)	Assistant Head (2) Assistant Coordinator (2) Welfare Coordinator
VIC	Learning Specialist (4) Coordinator (3) Assistant House Leader (2) Team Leader	Team Leader	Team Leader
QLD	Coordinator (6) L&T Coach (3) House Leader	Assistant Leader (2) House Leader	Coordinator (2)
WA	2IC (3) * Coordinator Co-HOLA **	Coordinator (3)	Assistant Head (2)
SA	Leader—Minor area (2) Coordinator (2) Assistant LCM	Assistant Head Coordinator Coach	Coordinator—not subject/year Instructional Coach
TAS	Advanced Skills Teacher (3) Year Coordinator Grade Leader	Assistant Coordinator House Leader Lead Teacher	Year Mentor Coordinator
ACT	Assistant Year Coordinator Year Coordinator (Pri) Transitions Coordinator	Year Pastoral Advisor	Assistant Head (2)
NT	Senior Teacher 1	Coordinator (2)	Highly Accomplished Teacher

* 2IC = second in charge, ** Co-HOLA = Co-Head of learning area.

The most common positions were that of ‘Assistant (Head, Advisor, Coordinator)’ and ‘Coordinator’. The coordinators included here were special positions of responsibility away from whole subject areas or cohorts (which many schools also had, of course, in their middle leadership echelons). The coordinators in this study were looking after more limited or specialised areas. Given the numbers of them, it is worth examining these positions in more detail.

4.2. Assistant Head Positions

‘Assistant Heads’ of subject, ‘Assistant Advisors’, ‘Assistant Coordinators’ and so on, as the nomenclature suggested, assisted with some of the responsibilities of their middle leader colleagues. At a Catholic brothers’ college in western Sydney, NSW, each subject area was overseen by a middle leader, named ‘Key Leader’ (equivalent to a head of subject). Most of these portfolios also had ‘Assistant Key Leaders’ as well. A similar arrangement existed for leaders of cohorts. At this school, there was also a ‘Year Leader of Wellbeing’ and an ‘Assistant Year Leader of Wellbeing’ for every grade level.

This type of shared leadership was not unique to that Catholic systemic school from NSW. At a government high school in northern Sydney, NSW, for example, there were Year Advisors (cohort leaders) for every grade. Each was supported by an ‘Assistant Year Advisor’. At an independent Anglican school in Western Australia, each Head of House (a cross-age cohort grouping) was supported by an ‘Assistant Head of House’. At a Catholic secondary college in Tasmania, an ‘Assistant Coordinator’ (first level leader) looked after

the music learning area, under the larger subject area of Performing & Visual Arts, which was headed by a 'Learning Leader' (middle leader).

The main task of these assistant leaders appeared to be to help out with administration, and step in when the relevant middle leader was unavailable. These individuals were leading and managing a 'slice' of the larger 'pie' that comprised the responsibilities of a particular middle leader. The span of influence was likely to be smaller than that of the associated middle leader due to the nature of the tasks. This kind of work typifies how first level leadership has been conceptualised for this research [26,38].

Even though they met the criteria for first level leadership listed above, it was difficult to find government school departmental jurisdictional role descriptions for these leaders from those states searched in relation to this specific position [72,73]. However, there was supporting evidence in other sectors. Historically, Catholic schools in some NSW Diocesan systems had 1 point 'Assistant Coordinator' positions [74]. In secondary schools, these were often converted to assistant head of subject positions. There is evidence that these positions still operate in Catholic systemic schools. The role of 'Assistant Coordinator' for English at a catholic school from south western Sydney is described as a 1 point coordinator [75].

The 'Assistant Head of English' at an independent Catholic secondary college in northern Sydney, NSW, was another case in point. Information gathered from a recently published position description provides helpful insights into the nature of this job [76]. This position reports to the Head of the English department at the school and assists with tasks delegated by the head. The assistant head may be asked to look after English for a particular cohort, review teaching programs, do data entry from assessment tasks, and perform a range of other specific tasks that support the responsibilities of the Head of the English department. This clearly looks like first level leadership, given that they will also have a smaller span of influence and task intensity than the head.

An 'Assistant Head of English' position was located at another independent school. This had similar responsibilities, but was particularly focused on leading English teaching within a stage cohort, acting closely with the Head of English. The range of possible tasks listed in both role descriptions suggests that significant time in the assistant role would lead to an easy transition to middle leadership in the head of department role should that be necessary. This role description was congruent with the conception of first level leadership that frames this study.

4.3. Coordinator Positions

The coordinators identified in the study were not subject coordinators or year/cohort coordinators, as these are regarded as middle leaders in schools [1,31]. The coordinators listed as potential first level leaders were individuals appointed to a special area of responsibility covering a small number of staff or a limited facet of teaching program (not as expansive as a subject area). Going back to the Catholic brothers' college in western Sydney, several coordinators were listed as leaders of specific areas including internal sports, external sports, and student representative council. At a large government secondary college in regional Victoria, coordinators were appointed for careers and international students. At another government secondary school in the inner suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia, the coordinators of 'Innovation in Humanities and Social Sciences' and 'Entrepreneurial Innovation for Vocational Learning' looked after specific projects within larger areas.

Coordinators loomed large in Queensland government schools. At a very large state high school in the southern suburbs of Brisbane, coordinators shared cohort leadership duties with a 'Head of Year' for each grade. There were also coordinators for specific extra-curricular program areas, including junior debating, senior debating, dance, drama and instrumental music. At another very large state high school in Queensland, this time in the Gold Coast region, coordinators led programs as diverse as International Baccalaureate, gifted and talented and French immersion. Sports coordinators were operating in several schools across sectors.

The coordinators identified in this study were either supporting a middle leader within a larger portfolio area or leading and managing a small program such as extra-curricular debating or sports. Interestingly, coordinators of the nature reported here were not able to be found among the position descriptions publically available from the Queensland Department of Education website. On the other hand, there were position descriptions for coordinators working at a level equivalent to middle leadership, which were backed up by the recent industrial award, that described this level as 'Senior Teacher' [77]. That said, there is a clear information gap, at least for Queensland government schools, regarding positions of responsibility below senior teachers, even though lots of those positions exist.

4.4. Other Positions

Some other positions were confirmed as junior leadership jobs using jurisdictional documentation. There were five 'Coach' positions, as listed in Table 3. According to the official position description of coaches given by the Queensland education department, these individuals are chosen from the body of classroom teachers to lead the development of new teaching strategies through coaching and mentoring practices, as well as working with subject heads [73]. The nature of the role fits rather snugly within the conceptualisation of first level leadership developed for this study because they were influencing the work of teachers, steadily increasing their span of influence in the process and assisting the work of middle leaders.

A category of nomenclature rather unique to Western Australia was that of 'Second in Charge', often listed as '2IC'. The information from three government schools (Ashdale Secondary College, Joseph Banks Secondary College, and Thornlie Senior High School) suggests that 2IC's assisted heads of subject/learning area (often named Heads of Learning Area or Coordinators) [78–80]. There was no reference to 2IC's to be found in recent teaching industrial awards [81,82]. However, the descriptions of 2IC given by schools suggest these are individuals classified as 'Level 3 Classroom Teachers' because the duties for that classification parallel many of the tasks a second in charge of a learning area might do, such as professionally developing colleagues and some leadership activity [82].

Senior Teacher 1 and Highly Accomplished Teacher, from the Northern Territory Department of Education, were added to the roles listed in Table 3 when position descriptions were found. They were later located in schools during the final stages of that search. Space precludes a more detailed exploration here, but within the possibilities for Senior Teacher 1 were coaches of teaching and learning, coordinators of specific programs and assisting higher level Senior Teachers, such as those at level 2 or 3 (for comparison, Senior Teacher 4 is equivalent to deputy principal). The category of Highly Accomplished Teacher was identified in the recent industrial agreement and described as a teacher with high-level expertise, but no leadership role was explicitly stated [83].

4.5. Positions Not Confirmed as First Level Leadership

It was always likely that some positions identified in the scoping from websites would be disconfirmed as first level leadership. This was the case for two positions identified in the search: 'Aspiring Leaders' and 'Guidance Officer'.

Positions termed 'Aspiring Leader' were found in two large government single-sex schools in northern Sydney, NSW. The annual reports from both schools described aspiring leaders as those who were invited to participate in professional development to develop their leadership skills. This was judged more likely to be evidence of schools nurturing the capabilities of emergent leaders, rather than first level leadership per se, and with no further jurisdictional or school information available, they were removed from the list.

The other role that was identified in the website scoping study but disconfirmed after referral to jurisdictional documentation, and therefore not listed in Table 3, was that of 'Guidance Officer' in Queensland government schools. The position description for 'Guidance Officer' [73] referred to a schoolwide position with a large span of influ-

ence and responsibility for the implementation of programs across schools, these being responsibilities more aligned to those of middle leaders.

5. Discussion

The study reported in this article was aimed towards finding evidence for first level leadership in Australian secondary schools. In relation to the research questions, the results provided strong evidence that first level leaders are operating in Australian secondary schools, and that these leaders go by a wide variety of names and titles. Many of these were in assistive relationships with middle leaders or were coordinating small groups or activities. In this section, after potential limitations are pointed out, implications for theory and research as well as practice regarding the development of school leadership are discussed.

5.1. Limitations

Studies of this nature, where the researcher is outside looking into phenomena without directly being in contact with individuals, will always include a risk that something vital was missed, or that a key element could not be seen [70]. The fact that not all school websites presented complete staff listings and restricted the leadership positions shown to only include senior leaders was also an artefact of the ‘outside looking in’ perspective. The use of several criteria, based on a theoretically supported definition, to identify likely first level leadership positions, followed by the use of other information to confirm or disconfirm them, were methods intended to mitigate this issue, as well as confirmation bias. However, it is recognised that further research work would provide additional support for the findings reported here. These are addressed in the following section.

Another limitation could be that data was collected from one country. The focus was also just on secondary schools and not primary schools. The generalisability of the findings would obviously be increased if multiple counties and contexts were included [84]. Again, this issue is addressed in the following section regarding future research directions.

5.2. Implications for Theory and Future Research

The identification and confirmation of junior leadership positions in a large sampling of secondary schools across states and sectors of Australia provides some justification to propose that there are at least three levels of leadership operating in schools: senior level, middle level and first level. The presence of emergent leadership also cannot be denied, and the case for this has already been made [26]. Figure 1 illustrates the structure of leadership proposed to be typically occurring in secondary schools at least. This represents a general model of leadership that might be controversial in the field of education leadership because of the dominant senior–middle theoretical paradigm that currently seems to exist there. The findings reported here help to make the case for a different theoretical model of leadership structure in schools.

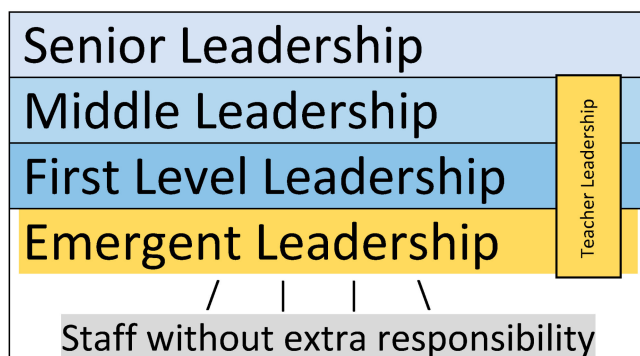


Figure 1. Proposed general model of leadership in schools.

In this proposed model, emergent leaders are situated among the staff without additional responsibilities or formal leadership positions. They are engaging in some leadership behaviour informally, but do not have a named responsibility or title [85]. Jurisdictional reports and policies refer to aspiring leaders within the teaching workforce, who are already starting to demonstrate leadership talent informally [54,55,86,87]. Indeed, some have already identified first level leadership in terms similar to the model being presented here. For example, the Tasmanian Catholic school system lists aspiring and emerging leaders [86]. They are an obvious link to teacher leaders, as several scholars have pointed out [88–90], even though they are distinct concepts [26]. Due to the ways they are positioned in the wider literature, teacher leaders may be identified among emergent, first level or middle leaders [29,68]. In the figure, emergent and teacher leadership are in a similar shading to denote they can also be informal leaders.

In terms of directions for future research, there is much to do. There is research to be done into the nature of the positions classified as first level leadership. Qualitative studies will uncover what roles they perform, who they report to, the number of staff they oversee or otherwise influence, and the level of skill required. These data can then be used to further inform the model of first level leadership proposed here, as well as to support and consolidate the three-level leadership model, which has already been alluded to in previous educational literature [2,23,53], and which brings educational leadership theory into line with structures that are well established in other contexts [5,25,37].

An obvious direction for future research is to conduct similar investigations with qualitative follow-up work in primary schools. Primary schools are not without a variety of leadership levels, as previous scholars have indicated [91,92], but this is an area of scant research attention, and it deserves the effort of investigation. Likewise, similar research in other countries, starting with those that have similar structures to Australian schools, such as in New Zealand and the U.K. [93], would benefit theory building in this field.

Quantitative research could then be done to explore the roles first level leaders undertake and how these compare to middle leadership roles. This would include some measure of span of influence in order to help differentiate between middle- and first level leadership. This research means the nomenclature of some positions might need to change [26]. Qualitative and quantitative research could also be focused on determining the professional development needs of first level leaders compared to middle and other leaders to promote leadership succession in schools [17,23].

The empirical data from qualitative and quantitative studies can then support a well-understood and credible model of leadership in schools. It is anticipated that this new theoretical model would recognise first level leadership in schools, and perhaps necessitate a timely re-interpretation of middle leadership from the current predominant view, operating between teachers and senior leaders [1,3,24,68], to a view that is more refined and in line with other occupations, where middle leadership gets its name from being the middle level of leadership between the first level and senior level.

5.3. Implications for Practice

The implications for practice should naturally follow on from theory-building and research. A three-tier leadership model for schools would indicate that position classifications, and therefore remuneration, within industrial agreements would need to change. Such change would surely mean refinements to job design and considerations of job scope of all leadership positions in schools, as well as position descriptions (and criteria) that are more realistic and better reflecting of the roles and responsibilities required [4,36].

There has been concern expressed about the need for quality leadership preparation and development policy and offerings in Australia [17,30]. Principal preparation does not start with deputies, but should constitute a gradual development of capabilities through different leadership levels [23,42]. Therefore, another benefit of research and theory building would be insights into more targeted, and relevant, leadership recruitment and professional development policies and strategies. These would be more likely to meet the needs of

aspiring leaders at the stage where they are at, and therefore be better than what exists now. Emergent leaders wishing to work towards formal leadership positions may have a clearer path and better information about key capabilities they need to develop.

Naturally, the acceptance of an additional leadership echelon is likely to provide aspiring (and emergent) leaders in schools with the gradual, paced and defined leadership development pathway that is recommended in previous research [17,42,94]. This should eventually become enshrined in the leadership development policies at state and federal levels.

The most crucial implication of better-defined leadership structures, and more efficient job design and professional development, will be better outcomes for students. By this I mean two things, as follows: better experiences of school due to (potentially) more support from better developed leaders, as well as (again potentially) improved academic achievement, facilitated by better-developed leaders (and indeed teams of leaders) who are promoting excellence in teacher work and instructional practice, as well as looking after the academic and other interests of students.

6. Conclusions

This research successfully found evidence of first level leadership in a sampling of Australian secondary schools, as well as the nomenclatures by which these leaders might be known. Potential limitations were noted. Nevertheless, the findings provide a useful contribution to knowledge through the differentiation of three leadership levels, as well as —emergent leadership and teacher leadership. While emergent leadership was not the focus of this study, it received some attention for reasons of origin, as well as its inclusion as part of first level leadership in my previous work [26]. Teacher leadership was briefly addressed because of the conceptual problems explained earlier.

Given these findings and what has been asserted in the previous section, it must also be remembered that this was the initial phase in a larger research program focused on investigating first level leadership in schools. In the larger picture, this is a work in progress. What I have attempted to do in this article is to provide evidence of the existence of first level leaders in schools, and outline implications of this and future work. The students we teach deserve the best education no matter what sector or state. We know that leadership can impact student outcomes. Having better-designed leadership structures, and better-prepared leaders, at all levels in schools will surely help.

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