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Editorial

Proactively Responding to Leadership Challenges and Constraints

In the previous issue of this journal, six articles were presented as a special edition in response to a call for creative responses to leadership challenges and constraints from the international educational research community. From a broad range of contexts in varying education fields, the authors demonstrated creativity in educational leadership inclusive of advocacy, policy making, improved learning environments, imagination and future envisioning, and student agency. Interestingly, the initial call on the theme of "creative responses" produced a large number of articles which we accepted with interest as indicative of two perspectives: 1) that there is a lot of great work being done in response to leadership challenges and constraints; and 2) that educational leadership is beseeched by the increasing mountain of challenges and constraints in a wide range of contexts. This issue is an acceptance of some of those extra articles which have produced another set of creative responses. This time we are presented with titles that indicate balancing, adapting, understanding, celebrating, leading, and developing—all presumably requiring skills of commitment, confidence, and competence at varying levels of educational leadership careers and in a range of different contexts.

Whilst the response to the theme of creative responses attracted an inordinate number of articles, the theme that runs through all the articles is not novel, leading one to ask how much of this is new and why there appears to be an ongoing, seemingly burdensome view of challenges and constraints. While surveillance of the context in which leaders find themselves is essential for establishing the groundwork of effective, contemporary educational leadership, the first question might be: Do I approach the situation reactively or proactively? The second question is: How?

It may be unsurprising that many might say "proactively" but then surprisingly find themselves working "reactively". Have leaders become hardwired to respond reactively no matter the challenges and constraints without first unearthing the nature of those challenges and constraints? What if what is required is a mindset shift to first assess and question the potential challenge or constraint and work strategically and with courage to take up the proactive response. Pause and consider this scenario:

> The system/district supervisor sends a message to the principal for an impending routine planning visit: "I will be visiting you, on X day, with Y agenda".
>
> Any one of three responses from the principal could have occurred: 1) acknowledge the direction and ensure their availability no matter what other issue might already be on their calendar; 2) ask for some negotiation of time and/or agenda; or 3) respond with: "We, inclusive of the leadership team, will prepare for your visit on [maybe requiring some negotiation of day/time], and would like to include these agenda items [directly relevant to the context of the school]".

The first two responses pose the potentiality of challenges and constraints imposed upon the school regardless of whether they might be relevant to the school context. Whereas, the third response allows the local context to be the front door of leading and managing in their school for their community—a leader who leads their community strategically and with courage.

Therefore, the articles selected and presented in this issue further highlight the contextual socio-cultural, economic, political pressures on schools and the capacity of leaders to adapt to this complexity, often calling for a change in mindset. In the first article, Carolyn Wade and Natalie Thackwell explore the ongoing challenges leaders have when dealing with parent–school relationships in the need to balance competing expectations, navigate systemic constraints, and manage the emotional labour inherent in this work. In particular, they highlight the need for leaders to have adaptive and creative capacity to enable them to balance relational trust-building with the operational demands of school governance. In addition, they conclude that their research contributes to discussions on leadership sustainability, policy reform, and the future of inclusive school–community partnerships. The second article, authored by Sharon Friesen and Barbara Brown, follows the theme on the capability of leaders to be not only adaptive but also creative as often they are required to turn crisis into opportunity. They emphasise the need for leaders to have adaptive expertise to creatively address systemic constraints, including disruptions to learning, diverse student needs, and varying teacher confidence. Their actions need to transform uncertainty into an opportunity for systemic growth, resilience, and innovation. They conclude, adaptive leadership, grounded in creative problem-solving and resilient practices, can overcome systemic constraints to enhance teaching quality and student wellbeing, even in the most turbulent times.

The next two articles call for policy and practice reforms that foster more equitable and inclusive leadership pathways and improve educational outcomes. In both articles, Jo Kingsman and Leanne Crosswell, and Winnie Kwofie address organisational complexity based on gender with a focus on women. The next article, presented by Susan Bradbeer, also addresses the challenge for women leaders as she explores the complexity and challenges faced by women leaders in Australian rural schools and the creative ways in which they enact their roles. Whilst this research highlights opportunities and obstacles faced by rural educational leaders, she emphasises the importance of context and the need for a deeper understanding of rural leadership development, as well as the implications for supporting and empowering future leaders while offering new knowledge to address systemic issues within rural educational communities.

The sixth article, by Gerald Maraia, addresses the challenge for school leaders to lead schools during political complexity. This research, in particular, examines the experiences, perspectives, and challenges of aspiring school leaders before and immediately after the 2024 U.S. presidential election, particularly in the context of the political divisiveness and anti-inclusionary rhetoric that occurred in schools during this period. He concludes that the implications are that school leaders must be able to navigate political polarisation creatively and to do so by centring humanising and inquiry-based leadership approaches. The final article of this issue is timely. It raises the need for professional development of leaders. This article, a systematic quantitative literature review conducted by Liz Benson, Donna Pendergast, and Peter Grootenboer, examines the literature on how middle leaders in secondary schools develop their leading practices. As the focus on this review is on professional and leadership development, their conclusion is most timely,

that is, there is a high priority need for an understanding of how to develop middle leaders. Their research highlights that development programs largely focus on personal attributes rather than leading practice, and programs are frequently generic, lacking customisation to meet the diverse career stages. Given that aspiring and middle level leaders are involved in leading with others in schools as well as moving into senior leadership positions in the future, there is need for creative, adaptive, contextually appropriate leadership. This is a theme that is embedded in the articles in this issue, calling for carefully designed and systemic supported leadership development programs that focus not just on personal attributes but also on the need for relational, creative, innovative problem solving organisation-wide capabilities.

While all the articles acknowledge that challenges will be complex and ongoing, there is need for leaders to be proactive, requiring creative problem solving, innovative thinking, and courageous responses to contextual complexity. And now, more than ever, from the editorial team perspective, current and aspiring leaders are obliged to invest in a range of professional development approaches (such as from commitment to professional organisations to possible external inputs) that inspire and support growth of leadership capabilities. Such capabilities need to harness both the professional needs of the individual and the individual's ability to adapt to and respond with relevance in the ever-changing world.

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Balancing Competing Expectations: Creative Leadership in Parent Engagement

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ABSTRACT: Parent engagement is widely recognised as essential to student success, yet school leaders face ongoing challenges in balancing competing expectations, navigating systemic constraints, and managing the emotional labour inherent in this work. This study, grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, examines how primary school leaders in Queensland, Australia, employ creative leadership strategies to address these complexities.

Findings reveal that leaders contend with tensions between policy mandates and parental expectations, the intensification of relational and administrative responsibilities, and the increasing demand for real-time, personalised communication. To navigate these challenges, leaders implement adaptive strategies such as differentiated communication methods, proactive conflict resolution, and shared decision-making frameworks. These approaches help to build trust, align school and family priorities, and create inclusive engagement practices that respond to diverse community needs.

This study highlights the broader implications of policy-driven engagement expectations, emphasising how leaders must balance relational trust-building with the operational demands of school governance. It demonstrates the adaptive capacity of creative leadership in sustaining equitable parent–school relationships while cautioning against the risks of workload intensification. By shedding light on the systemic and relational dimensions of parent engagement, this research contributes to discussions on leadership sustainability, policy reform, and the future of inclusive school–community partnerships.

Key words: Creative leadership, parent engagement, relational trust, school–community relationships, systemic constraints

Introduction

Parent engagement is widely acknowledged as fundamental to student success, with research consistently linking strong school–family partnerships to improved academic achievement, emotional wellbeing, and social development (Emerson et al., 2012; Epstein, 2005). In Australia, national policy frameworks such as the *Family–School Partnerships Framework* (Department of Education and Training, 2018) emphasise collaboration and shared responsibility for children's learning. Unlike parent involvement, which often consists of one-off instances of participation in school activities, parent engagement is an ongoing process, built over time through sustained relational interactions. It is grounded in trust, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to student outcomes (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Lyon, 2018).

Despite its policy emphasis, meaningful parent engagement remains a complex challenge for school leaders. Communication barriers, diverse expectations, and systemic inequities can hinder collaboration between families and schools (Saltmarsh et al., 2019). Engagement practices often reflect middle-class norms, inadvertently marginalising families from diverse cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Lea et al., 2011). Additionally, neoliberal education policies have reframed engagement within a market-driven framework, positioning parents as consumers and schools as service providers, which can shift the focus from collaboration to accountability and competition (Lyon, 2018; Saltmarsh et al., 2019). These structural and ideological tensions place significant demands on school leaders, who must navigate limited resources while responding to competing expectations for transparency and responsiveness (Keddie et al., 2020).

This study examines how primary school leaders in Queensland, Australia, navigate the complexities of parent engagement. Moving beyond the well-documented benefits of engagement, it explores the relational, emotional, and systemic challenges of leading these partnerships in contemporary school contexts. Specifically, it investigates how school leaders interpret and respond to these challenges, offering insights into the tensions that shape parent–school relationships.

Grounded in a Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study focuses on two key themes: the challenges of balancing competing expectations in parent engagement and the adaptive strategies leaders employ to foster trust, collaboration, and systemic responsiveness. By situating these findings within broader discussions on educational leadership, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between policy, practice, and the realities of engagement work in schools.

Literature Review

Defining Parent Engagement

Parent engagement encompasses a range of relational practices that foster collaboration between families and schools to support student learning and wellbeing (Emerson et al., 2012). Unlike parent involvement, which centres on participation in school activities, engagement focuses

on trust-based partnerships that emphasise shared accountability and respect (Department of Education and Training, 2018). In Australia, national frameworks such as the Family–School Partnerships Framework highlight the role of engagement in promoting student success and reducing educational inequities (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

While research affirms the benefits of parent engagement, including improved academic outcomes and stronger school climates, achieving equitable collaboration remains challenging. Structural barriers, deficit-based school practices, and systemic inequities disproportionately affect marginalised families, limiting their participation (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced approach that recognises diverse family contexts and dismantles systemic barriers to engagement.

Engagement Policy and Neoliberal Impacts

Neoliberalism, broadly defined, refers to a political and economic rationality that privileges market logic, competition, individual responsibility, and decentralised governance (Keddie, 2016). In education, this manifests through policies that promote school choice, accountability, and performance measurement, recasting schools as service providers and parents as consumers (Ball, 2012). These dynamics have profoundly shaped the evolution of parent engagement policy in Australia over the past two decades.

This policy emphasis on engagement in Australia reflects a broader effort to lift educational outcomes by activating families as partners in school improvement. National declarations such as the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) and the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019) have positioned family–school partnerships as central to addressing disparities in achievement and opportunity. State-level frameworks; such as Victoria's Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) and Queensland's Parent and Community Engagement Framework (PACE), emphasise the role of parents in supporting learning, enhancing performance, and contributing to governance (Department of Education, 2023). These policy moves reflect a clear alignment with global trends that reconfigure education systems around metrics, accountability, and localised responsibility.

While these frameworks promote more inclusive rhetoric around family–school collaboration (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014), they are also situated within a neoliberal policy logic that increasingly ties engagement to performance outcomes. Parent involvement is framed less as a democratic practice rooted in trust and reciprocity, and more as a tool for monitoring, governance, and competitive positioning (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2017; Vincent, 2017). Parents are encouraged to make "informed choices" about schooling, interpret achievement data, and participate in formal structures like school councils, roles that often privilege already-advantaged families and reinforce existing inequities (Blackmore, 2010; Crozier & Davies, 2007).

These policy settings create tensions for school leaders, who must foster inclusive, relational partnerships with families while managing performance demands in an increasingly marketised system. Australia's hybrid governance model centralises curriculum and assessment, while devolving school operations. This intensifies pressures on principals, who are positioned as both relational leaders and institutional managers (Lingard et al., 2013). The result is a hybrid form of leadership in which engagement is simultaneously ethical and instrumental. As Gobby and

Niesche (2019) argue, school leadership is increasingly depoliticised, stripped of its potential to address structural inequity and reframed as a technical function of school effectiveness. This shift leaves many leaders navigating emotional and professional strain as they try to reconcile their equity commitments with growing accountability imperatives.

The Role of Leadership

School leaders play a critical role in bridging the gap between policy expectations and the realities of parent engagement. Effective engagement requires leaders to cultivate trust, foster relational partnerships, and adapt strategies to meet the needs of their communities (Heffernan & Mills, 2022). Relational leadership, grounded in empathy, collaboration, and equity, has been shown to enhance engagement, particularly in diverse and disadvantaged contexts (Blackmore, 2010; Lyon, 2018).

However, under neoliberal governance, school leaders face increasing demands to balance compliance, relational labour, and the expectations of vocal parent groups, often without adequate systemic support (Saltmarsh et al., 2019). Managing conflict, negotiating power dynamics, and addressing engagement inequities can impose significant emotional and professional strain (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Riley, 2019).

While existing research highlights the benefits and barriers of parent engagement, less attention has been given to how school leaders navigate its complexities. Studies often focus on engagement outcomes or family challenges rather than the lived experiences of those managing these dynamics. Furthermore, the intersection of policy mandates, neoliberal pressures, and relational leadership remains underexplored, particularly in the Australian context.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the lived experiences of primary school leaders in Queensland, Australia, as they navigate the challenges of parent engagement. By exploring the relational and systemic tensions embedded in engagement practices, this research sheds light on the creative strategies leaders employ to balance competing expectations. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how engagement policies are operationalised in schools and offers insights into developing more sustainable and equitable approaches to school–family partnerships.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, grounded in the interpretive traditions of Gadamerian hermeneutics. This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of school leaders navigating parent engagement, emphasising the relational, contextual, and interpretive dimensions of their work. Hermeneutic phenomenology was selected for its capacity to uncover the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences within broader socio-political and educational landscapes, aligning closely with the study's aim to understand how leaders interpret and respond to the complexities of parent engagement.

Participants

The study involved 12 primary school principals from Queensland, Australia; selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. Participant selection criteria included (a) professional experience, (b) educational context, (c) school size and year levels, and (d) geographical location.

Participants ranged from newly appointed to experienced leaders across urban, regional, and remote areas, representing public and faith-based schools. This diversity enriched the data, enabling an exploration of both shared and unique leadership experiences in parent engagement. To protect confidentiality, participant names are pseudonyms, and school locations have been generalised.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, providing participants with the time and space to explore their lived experiences and construct their own narratives, consistent with hermeneutic phenomenological approaches (Englander, 2012). This method aligns with the Socratic-hermeneutic framework, emphasising dynamic dialogue between the researcher and participants, referred to as "co-inquirers" (Dinkins, 2005). These dialogues were characterised by open-ended questioning and mutual reflection, fostering deeper insights and evolving interpretations throughout the interview process. Guided by the principles of the hermeneutic circle and fusion of horizons, this process encouraged an iterative, collaborative examination of participants' experiences, enabling both researcher and participant to reach new understandings (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015).

The 90-minute interviews, structured around key research questions, provided flexibility to explore emergent themes. The interviewer followed phenomenological interview protocols (Englander, 2012), prioritising genuine connection, active listening, and amplifying overlooked voices and experiences.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was grounded in Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology (Gadamer, 1975) and Inductive Thematic Analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2018), allowing for a nuanced exploration of the relational and systemic complexities in participants' experiences. Gadamer's framework provided the philosophical foundation for understanding the essence of these experiences, while thematic analysis offered a structured approach for identifying and refining themes (Dahlberg, 2006).

The analysis began with an immersive process of familiarisation, where the researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts to engage deeply with the data. Key segments were coded to identify recurring ideas and experiences related to parent engagement, which were then grouped into broader themes through iterative review.

The themes were refined through multiple rounds to ensure alignment with the research questions, drawing on Gadamer's hermeneutic circle to deepen interpretation by examining the

interplay between individual data segments and the whole. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, with evolving interpretations documented and colleague input sought to enhance the credibility of the findings. Once the themes were finalised, their significance was assessed in relation to the study's aims, and a detailed narrative was developed, integrating participant voices, experiences, strategies, and contextual analysis. Guided by Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1975), this narrative construction involved a dialogic engagement between the participants' accounts, relevant policy discourses, and the researcher's evolving interpretive lens. The interplay between policy, practice, and parent engagement was not treated as a static relationship but as a dynamic site of meaning-making. In this way, thematic development reflected not only what school leaders said, but how their experiences resonated with, resisted, or reinterpreted broader systemic and relational conditions.

Findings

This research forms part of a broader study examining the lived experiences of school leaders in navigating the complexities of parent engagement within the contemporary educational landscape. While the larger study identified eight overarching themes through a Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this manuscript focuses on two key themes:

1. The challenges of leading parent engagement in schools, and;
2. The creative and adaptive strategies leaders employ in response to these challenges.

Findings reveal how systemic constraints, relational demands, and leadership realities shape parent engagement, positioning it as both a challenge and catalyst for creative leadership. Leaders must balance competing expectations while fostering meaningful partnerships, offering insights into the operationalisation of engagement policies and sustainable leadership practices.

Challenges of Parent Engagement

The findings of this study reveal the complex and often contradictory nature of parent engagement within primary school leadership. While engagement is widely promoted as a cornerstone of student success (Emerson et al., 2012), the lived experiences of school leaders illustrate how it is also a site of significant tension, emotional labour, and systemic constraint. This section explores three key challenges: balancing expectations and demands, navigating conflicts between policy guidelines and community needs, and managing time constraints. These challenges highlight the dual pressures of relational leadership and systemic accountability, illustrating how leaders must constantly mediate between competing imperatives.

Balancing Expectations and Demands

School leaders navigate a contested terrain of competing parental expectations, institutional constraints, and policy mandates. Participants described the challenge of balancing individual parental demands with broader school–community needs, a difficulty heightened by the

marketisation of education, which frames parents as consumers with increased service expectations (Gobby & Niesche, 2019).

Shane, an experienced principal of an affluent inner-city Catholic primary school, captured this tension: "Parents expect us to fix everything, from their child's academic struggles to their social issues. There's this constant pressure to meet their expectations, and sometimes they are completely misaligned with what we can realistically do". This reflects emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), where leaders must manage parental anxieties while maintaining trust, even when expectations conflict with school priorities (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010). This burden is intensified by policy reforms promoting hyper-accountability and consumer-driven relationships between schools and families (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014).

Alex, principal of a large, high-ICSEA state primary school in an inner-city area, further illustrated this misalignment: "I've had parents walk into the office demanding to know why their child isn't getting top marks, without understanding the broader challenges their child faces". This disconnect reflects Auerbach's (2007) critique of the unrealistic and contradictory expectations placed on school leaders, particularly in systems that emphasise parental accountability for student achievement while simultaneously under-resourcing schools (Gerrard et al., 2025).

Parental expectations further complicate these negotiations, with competing views on pedagogy, discipline, and governance. As Alex noted: "Parents come with such different expectations; some want no homework, others want hours of it for their kids. Finding a middle ground is nearly impossible, but it's essential to communicate and set realistic boundaries".

This aligns with role intensification (Dicke et al., 2024), where leaders manage relational engagement alongside policy mandates, often without systemic support (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022). The emotional and professional toll of these tensions increases when parental behaviours escalate into aggression or entitlement, posing occupational risks for school leaders (Maxwell & Riley, 2016).

Leanne, principal of a large rural public school, described a particularly confronting encounter: "We had one parent who outright threatened me and another deputy over a minor disciplinary issue. It escalated so fast, and it left me questioning my safety in this role". This aligns with research on rising parental aggression, exacerbated by the erosion of professional boundaries in an era of social media and heightened scrutiny (Heffernan & Mills, 2022).

Parental entitlement further compounds these challenges, particularly in fee-paying schools, where financial contributions often lead to expectations of preferential treatment (Gobby & Niesche, 2019). Denis, principal of a public school in a remote mining town, noted: "There's a sense of entitlement with some parents - they come in with this attitude that because they're paying fees or donating, they should get special treatment". Such attitudes reflect neoliberal discourses that commodify education, shifting engagement from collaboration to consumer demand (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014).

The consumerisation of education not only alters parental expectations but reshapes the policy landscape, creating misalignments between standardised policy frameworks and the realities of engagement (Lingard et al., 2013). As schools are positioned as service providers, leaders must deliver engagement strategies that meet compliance mandates while managing complex parent–school relationships (Saltmarsh et al., 2019). This tension forces leaders to

negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes circumvent formal directives to maintain effective engagement.

Wade (2025) highlights that leaders frequently adapt engagement strategies to align with their school's socio-cultural context, even when these adaptations conflict with formal policy. This paradox, where engagement is both a mandate and a constraint, positions school leaders as both policy enforcers and community mediators (Gerrard et al., 2025). Participants' experiences illustrate the disjuncture between policy expectations and school-level realities, a systemic friction explored in the next section.

Conflicting Expectations Between Policy Guidelines and Community Needs

Participants described the ongoing challenge of reconciling policy mandates with the diverse needs of their school communities. Standardised engagement models often fail to account for local contexts, placing leaders in the difficult position of negotiating between rigid frameworks and community realities (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010).

Neoliberal policies, which position schools as service providers, assume engagement can be regulated through compliance frameworks (Gobby & Niesche, 2019; Lingard et al., 2013). However, participants highlighted how these policies often contradict the socio-economic and cultural complexities of their communities.

Leaders expressed frustration that policies assume homogeneity, disregarding varying parental capacities, socio-economic constraints, and community needs. Stephen, a veteran principal in a remote Indigenous community, illustrated this challenge:

> We have policies that say one thing, but then we have families that are struggling in ways that these policies don't account for. I have parents telling me, "This just doesn't work for us" and I get it. But my hands are tied.

This mirrors critiques of engagement policies privileging middle-class parental norms while failing to recognise barriers faced by marginalised communities (Gerrard et al., 2025). While Saltmarsh & McPherson (2022) argue that engagement strategies should be flexible, leaders often remain bound by rigid compliance expectations that do not reflect their school populations.

A key contradiction in policy frameworks is that engagement is presented as a standardised process, yet leaders are expected to tailor it to their communities, without the flexibility or resources to do so (Lingard et al., 2013). Denis described this disconnect:

> A lot of our policies assume that all parents are available, well-resourced, and can engage in school activities. That's just not the reality. Many of our families are doing shift work, juggling multiple jobs, or facing other struggles, but the system still expects them to be actively engaged in the way policymakers imagine.

This aligns with critiques of neoliberal engagement models, which privilege parents with time, financial stability, and cultural capital (Gerrard et al., 2025). Research shows that when engagement is framed as a responsibility rather than a right, it reinforces inequities by placing unrealistic demands on families (Posey-Maddox, 2014).

Alex expressed frustration at the bureaucratic barriers that hinder engagement: "It's frustrating because we are told to foster parent engagement, but when we try to create meaningful

opportunities for involvement, we run into bureaucratic barriers that prevent us from making real change". This reflects Saltmarsh et al.'s (2019) argument that compliance-driven policies hinder meaningful collaboration, leaving leaders unable to tailor engagement strategies to their communities.

Similarly, Adam, principal of a Catholic school in a low socio-economic community, described the difficulty of mediating between parental expectations and systemic inflexibility: "I feel like I spend half my time explaining to parents why I can't do what they're asking, even when I agree with them. There's such a disconnect between the policy level and the real needs on the ground". This highlights the paradox of policy-driven engagement; while leaders are tasked with building partnerships with parents, they must do so within constraints that limit genuine collaboration (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014).

Finally, Susan, principal of a public metropolitan school, articulated the frustration of having to defend policies that do not align with local needs:

> I had a parent say to me, "Why do we need to do it this way?" And my honest answer was, "Because the policy says so". That's a hard conversation to have when you know the policy doesn't make sense in this context.

The misalignment between policy guidelines and the realities of school communities presents significant challenges for school leaders, who must mediate between rigid policy frameworks and diverse parental expectations. These findings illustrate how leaders often function as policy interpreters rather than implementers, informally adjusting engagement strategies to align with the socio-cultural and economic conditions of their school communities (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010). However, these adaptations come with personal and professional risks, as leaders balance compliance mandates with ethical responsibilities to their communities (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022).

In practice, leaders are not merely enacting engagement policies but negotiating their feasibility within local contexts, often without systemic support. As Wade (2025) argues, leaders face a dual burden; upholding engagement expectations while absorbing the emotional labour of reconciling conflicting demands. This challenge is compounded by the intensification of leadership roles, as engagement responsibilities become one of many competing pressures within already demanding workloads (Dicke et al., 2024).

This policy–community tension is closely tied to time constraints, as leaders struggle to balance meaningful engagement with broader school governance demands. While policies assume engagement is structured and ongoing, participants described it as highly reactive, crisis-driven, and consuming disproportionate leadership time.

Time Constraints

The time-intensive nature of parent engagement emerged as a persistent challenge for school leaders, reinforcing broader concerns around role intensification in educational leadership. Participants described the significant demands on their time, as they attempted to address parental concerns while managing the operational, administrative, and strategic responsibilities of their roles. Findings from the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Survey

reflect this sentiment, identifying "sheer quantity of work" as the most significant stressor for school leaders, scoring 8.19 out of 10 in terms of impact on wellbeing (Dicke et al., 2024, p. 9).

Parent engagement policies often assume that relational work can be seamlessly integrated into leadership responsibilities, yet participants described engagement as an ongoing and unpredictable demand, frequently consuming disproportionate amounts of their time. Kaylene reflected on the trade-offs required to meet these expectations: "Engaging with parents is important, but it often means other leadership tasks get pushed aside. There's never enough time to do it all". This aligns with research on leadership workload intensification, which highlights that the expanding scope of school leadership now encompasses significant relational and emotional labour, often at the expense of core instructional or strategic functions (Maxwell & Riley, 2017).

Similarly, Adam described the challenge of balancing the competing priorities of parent engagement, staff management, and school operations: "My mornings are spent meeting parents, my afternoons in meetings with staff, and somewhere in between, I'm expected to actually run the school". This supports Saltmarsh and McPherson's (2022) argument that the intensification of leadership roles has reshaped engagement into a reactive, rather than proactive process, where leaders are compelled to address immediate concerns rather than fostering long-term relational development.

The shift from proactive parent engagement to reactive problem solving was a recurring theme across participant experiences. Many leaders expressed a desire to foster meaningful, trust-based relationships with parents, yet found themselves overwhelmed by administrative compliance work and emergent crisis management. Stephen illustrated the extent of this shift: "It's way over 50% of my time dealing with parental concerns, and you can't always say no when they want to talk about their kids. But managing that time effectively while keeping a balance is critical". This tension was further emphasised by Leanne, who captured the emotional exhaustion of navigating competing demands: "I want to engage more with parents, but I find myself firefighting instead of having proactive conversations". This reflects Auerbach's (2007) critique of relational leadership, where systemic constraints and bureaucratic expectations frequently displace opportunities for authentic collaboration between families and schools. Instead of proactively engaging parents through structured, ongoing relationships, leaders often find themselves in a constant cycle of damage control (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014).

The interplay between time constraints, compliance pressures, and relational demands underscores the complexity of parent engagement as a leadership challenge. Rather than a structured, deliberate component of leadership practice, engagement is often highly reactive, consuming significant time without formal recognition of its impact on leadership wellbeing and sustainability (Maxwell & Riley, 2017).

These findings illustrate the need for creative leadership strategies that enable leaders to engage parents effectively, despite systemic constraints. The next section explores how leaders employ innovative, adaptive approaches to foster collaboration, build trust, and navigate the increasing complexities of engagement within contemporary school leadership.

Creative and Adaptive Ways to Engage Parents

The findings highlight the innovative and adaptive strategies school leaders employ to foster meaningful parent relationships, enhancing communication, trust, and inclusivity despite systemic and relational challenges. These strategies align with literature emphasising the role of relational leadership, adaptive governance, and community-responsive engagement in navigating parent–school interactions (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014).

While parent engagement often reflects tensions between policy mandates, community needs, hyper-accountability, and workload intensification, this section focuses on the creative strategies leaders use to navigate these pressures. Findings reveal that leaders who proactively build relationships, foster inclusive participation, and adopt flexible communication approaches can shift engagement from a reactive, compliance-driven process to a proactive, relational practice (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Reframing Parent Engagement as Shared Responsibility

A key strategy employed by school leaders is reframing parent engagement as a shared responsibility rather than a transactional demand. Instead of viewing parents as consumers or adversaries, participants described fostering trust-based, cooperative problem-solving models that position parents as valued partners. This aligns with research advocating for relational trust and participatory governance as central to sustainable engagement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022).

Sheree, a highly experienced principal of a small public school in a rural town, described how their school fosters structured collaborative engagement: “We regularly have team meetings that include teachers, learning support, and parents. Everyone comes to the table with ideas, and we agree on a shared plan. It’s empowering for parents to feel heard and part of the solution”. Moreover, Sheree illustrated how bringing multiple stakeholders together creates a collective responsibility for student outcomes:

> We’re going to have to work as a team to do this. So it’s me, I’ve got the learning support teacher, the parents, grandma was in on that one. Okay, what are we dealing with? What can you tell me about it? What’s your strategies? What’s your concerns?

This shared accountability model reflects Saltmarsh et al.’s (2019) argument that problem solving in school communities is most effective when it is collaborative and contextually responsive. Susan emphasised how reinforcing the idea of a “team” mentality helps parents feel engaged and valued in their child’s education:

> We say to parents all the time that we’re a team and we can only be as successful as we can if we’re all on that team. We talk often about, “You’ve got information that may help us, we’ve got information that may help you”. So parent engagement is making sure they know they’re part of the team.

Beyond structured meetings, leaders emphasised the importance of informal, everyday interactions in building trust with parents. Research by Bryk and Schneider (2002) suggests that

relational trust is developed through consistent, everyday interactions rather than formal engagement events.

Stephen highlighted how being present and approachable at school pick-up times creates opportunities for low-pressure interactions that help prevent tensions from escalating. Similarly, Kaylene described how informal coffee catchups after assemblies have proven to be an effective way to foster open, low-stakes conversations with parents: "We run coffee catchups after assemblies. It's casual and lets parents know they can approach us without feeling intimidated. These moments have been pivotal in fostering open communication".

Similarly, Alex emphasised the importance of ensuring that parents feel involved in disciplinary and behavioural decisions: "When addressing concerns about student behaviour, I involve both parents and teachers in creating a management plan. It's important for everyone to understand the why behind our approach". These examples align with Barr and Saltmarsh's (2014) argument that transparency and data-driven communication strengthen partnerships by fostering mutual understanding and shared goals.

These strategies counteract the consumerist model of education, where parents are positioned as demanding clients rather than collaborative partners (Gobby & Niesche, 2019). By framing engagement as a shared responsibility, leaders reduce conflict and foster stronger parent–school relationships.

Contextual Engagement Practices

The findings highlight that school leaders play a crucial role in fostering inclusivity in decision making, particularly within diverse and historically marginalised communities. Participants emphasised that engagement is not simply about compliance but about actively dismantling barriers that prevent certain parent groups from participating in meaningful ways. Research on equitable and community-centred leadership underscores the need for decision-making processes that acknowledge diverse perspectives, honour community knowledge, and ensure genuine inclusivity in governance (Khalifa et al., 2016; Santamaría, 2014).

Leanne elaborated on creating welcoming environments, stating: "Some parents have had bad experiences with schools in the past, so I make meetings as informal as possible, no desk barriers and no power imbalance. It's about making them feel comfortable and included". This effort aligns with principles of inclusive leadership, which prioritise equity and relational trust to counteract historical marginalisation in school communities (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Ensuring that physical and structural aspects of meetings are welcoming and non-hierarchical reflects best practices in inclusive engagement (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010).

Similarly, Shane described the importance of creating parent education sessions that empower families and remove accessibility barriers: "We started running short, practical sessions on things like reading strategies and emotional regulation. Parents felt they could contribute without being overwhelmed by formal structures". By focusing on accessible, non-intimidating learning environments, school leaders provide parents, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, with the confidence and tools to actively engage with their child's education (Posey-Maddox, 2014).

Moreover, ensuring teachers and leaders are visibly present and accessible was identified as another effective way to break down hierarchical barriers and foster informal engagement. Stephen described the importance of relational trust building: "I try to be visible at school pick-up times, just chatting with parents informally. These small interactions build rapport so that when issues arise, there's already a foundation of trust". This reflects research that underscores how daily, low-stakes interactions significantly contribute to sustained parental involvement and school–community cohesion (Posey-Maddox, 2014).

In sum, the findings demonstrate that inclusive engagement is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, school leaders must be strategic and responsive in ensuring that all families, regardless of socio-economic background, language barriers, or prior negative experiences with schooling, feel welcomed and supported in their participation. By fostering relational trust, reducing hierarchical barriers, incorporating cultural responsiveness, and prioritising accessible communication, school leaders can create genuinely inclusive school communities that empower and uplift all families (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Santamaría, 2014).

Adapting Communication Approaches: Digital Tools and Timely Engagement

Effective communication emerged as a cornerstone of creative leadership in parent engagement. Participants emphasised the importance of tailoring communication to meet diverse parent preferences and leveraging technology to foster engagement. These practices align with Auerbach's (2007) work, which highlights the critical role of proactive and context-sensitive communication in building relational trust and collaboration between schools and families.

Recognising the diversity of parent needs, school leaders have adapted their approaches to ensure accessibility and relevance. Denis noted: "We realised some parents preferred visual content, so we now send out short, one-minute videos alongside written updates. It's been well-received". Alex added: "For time-poor parents, we make communication accessible through multiple channels, including apps and social media, so they can engage on their own schedule".

School leaders increasingly rely on digital platforms to bridge communication gaps and connect with time-poor parents. Susan noted: "We use Seesaw to communicate directly with parents. It's new for us this year, and we believe it will work better for parent engagement. Parents love it, and it's a game-changer".

These examples align with research highlighting the benefits of technology in enhancing accessibility and personalisation in communication (Blackmore, 2010; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022). Digital tools allow leaders to accommodate diverse parent needs while maintaining consistent and transparent engagement, a critical factor in fostering trust and collaboration. However, Creagh et al. (2023) caution that the integration of digital communication strategies also contributes to workload intensification, expanding expectations for leaders' availability and responsiveness. While technology can streamline processes, it often results in an "always-on" culture, where school leaders are required to manage parent communications outside of traditional working hours, further exacerbating the pressures of role intensification.

Digital tools such as social media platforms have become integral to parent engagement strategies. Susan noted: "We use Facebook Live for events like book week and cross-country, so parents who can't attend in person still feel part of the school community". Similarly, Paul

described how leveraging video messages and social media updates improved parental involvement: “We make sure parents know what’s happening by sharing short, engaging updates, whether it’s a quick video from assembly or a post about what’s coming up. It keeps them in the loop without overwhelming them”.

The integration of social media aligns with broader trends in educational leadership, where platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are used to enhance transparency and accessibility (Dicke et al., 2024). Social media fosters a sense of inclusion and immediacy, enabling parents to stay informed and engaged regardless of their physical presence at events. But at what cost? If digital communication increases accessibility, does it also blur the boundaries between professional and personal time, adding yet another layer to leaders’ expanding workloads? At what point does engagement become expectation, another responsibility school leaders must manage in an already overstretched role?

Beyond digital platforms, some leaders emphasised the importance of immediacy in communication. Margaret described how her team prioritises quick responses to parental concerns: “If a parent has a question, we respond within hours, not days. That builds trust and shows we value their input”. Other participants noted how reducing formality in communication channels encouraged greater participation from parents. Leanne reflected on how informal messaging systems helped streamline interactions: “We try to keep emails and messages short, to the point, and reassuring. Parents appreciate clarity without the excess formality”.

By utilising multi-channel communication strategies, prioritising responsiveness, and embracing digital innovation, school leaders are actively overcoming the challenge of time constraints while strengthening parental engagement.

However, while these strategies effectively benefit parents by providing accessible, real-time communication, they also add considerable demands on already time-poor school leaders. The pressure to maintain constant availability and quick response times compounds existing time management challenges, creating concerns about long-term sustainability. These implications will be further explored in the next section, where considerations for addressing time poverty in educational leadership will be examined (Creagh et al., 2023; McKay, 2024).

Implications

The findings of this study underscore the complex and often competing demands school leaders navigate in fostering meaningful parent engagement. While creative leadership strategies such as adaptive communication, collaborative partnerships, and inclusive practices enhance accessibility and relational trust, they also contribute to workload intensification and amplify the emotional labour required of school leaders. Emotional labour in this case, refers to the regulation and management of feelings to meet professional expectations, often requiring leaders to suppress their own emotions in order to display patience, empathy, and composure in their interactions with parents (Hochschild, 1983). School leaders must balance engagement with parents alongside extensive administrative and compliance responsibilities, often without additional structural support. Without systemic reforms to address workload intensification, these leadership strategies risk becoming unsustainable. Work intensification, characterised by an increasing number of tasks

and the acceleration of decision-making processes (Creagh et al., 2023), places significant strain on school leaders' time and wellbeing. Addressing these pressures requires greater policy flexibility, improved resourcing, and targeted professional support to ensure that parent engagement is a shared institutional responsibility rather than an additional burden on already overstretched leaders.

Future research should further explore the long-term sustainability of creative leadership strategies in parent engagement, particularly in relation to leader wellbeing and role intensification. Investigating the impact of workload distribution models and support mechanisms, such as distributed leadership approaches or the role of parent engagement coordinators, could provide deeper insights into sustainable solutions. Additionally, comparative studies across different education systems or policy contexts would offer a broader understanding of how various governance structures impact parent–school relationships and leader efficacy.

Policymakers must ensure engagement expectations align with the realities of school leadership workloads. Policies that acknowledge the emotional and relational labour involved in parent engagement, rather than treating it as an administrative function are essential. Schools require clearer guidelines, training, and resources to implement inclusive and effective engagement strategies. Greater flexibility in policy mandates, coupled with targeted professional development, would empower school leaders to balance systemic accountability with relational trust-building in a sustainable manner.

Declaration

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How Adaptive Leaders Turned Crisis Into Opportunity

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ABSTRACT: This article explores how leaders from four diverse school authorities embraced visionary, forward-thinking leadership to navigate the implementation of the Alberta professional practice standards amid the challenges of a global pandemic. The research revealed how school and district leaders employed adaptive expertise to creatively address systemic constraints, including disruptions to learning, diverse student needs, and varying teacher confidence. Key themes included fostering professional learning cultures, promoting inclusion, and developing collaborative networks. By leveraging competency, organisational, and leadership drivers, these leaders built capacity, sustained learning communities, and responded effectively to both technical and adaptive challenges. Their actions transformed uncertainty into an opportunity for systemic growth, resilience, and innovation. The findings highlighted that adaptive leadership, grounded in creative problem solving and resilient practices, can overcome systemic constraints to enhance teaching quality and student wellbeing, even in the most turbulent times. This research underscores the critical role of leadership in shaping educational ecosystems that thrive in adversity.

Key words: School leadership, system leadership, implementation drivers, adaptive leadership, professional standards

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic placed unprecedented pressure on education systems across the globe, requiring leaders to navigate rapidly changing circumstances while maintaining continuity of learning and care. In Alberta, Canada, school and system leaders—principals and superintendents—faced the extraordinary task of leading during a time of uncertainty while also

responding to the province-wide implementation of newly mandated professional practice standards: the Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) and the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS) (Government of Alberta, 2023). These two professional standards define the competencies and indicators of effective leadership in Alberta's education system and were formally enacted seven months prior to the onset of the pandemic.

Leaders were required to implement these standards while simultaneously addressing complex and immediate challenges: abrupt transitions to online learning, uneven student access to technology, concerns about staff and student wellbeing, and the need to maintain instructional and relational continuity during prolonged disruption. Many had no formal preparation in crisis leadership, yet were expected to make rapid, high-stakes decisions to ensure stability for students, staff, and communities.

To understand how leaders responded to these layered challenges, a collaborative research team from four Alberta universities conducted a multi-year study under ethics certification REB18-2128 granted by the University of Calgary. This study draws on the concept of adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009), which is particularly relevant in crisis contexts that demand both innovation and resilience. Adaptive leadership emphasises learning, collaboration, and the capacity to act in the absence of certainty—conditions that characterised educational leadership during the pandemic. This study examined how the LQS and SLQS served not only as frameworks for leadership development but also as anchoring mechanisms that shaped the adaptive responses of school and system leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. It is guided by the research question: How did school and system leaders navigate leadership challenges during a global pandemic while implementing new professional practice standards?

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates two complementary theoretical frameworks: adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) and implementation drivers (Fixsen et al., 2005). Adaptive leadership focuses on the context of the study and emphasises the capacity of leaders to navigate complex and evolving challenges by addressing both technical problems (solvable through expertise and established procedures) and adaptive challenges (requiring shifts in values, beliefs, and behaviours) (Heifetz et al., 2009). The framework for implementation drivers identifies three interdependent drivers required for implementation—competency, organisation, and leadership drivers—that collectively ensure the fidelity and sustainability of systemic change efforts (Fixsen et al., 2005). Competency drivers focus on the skills and knowledge required for implementation, organisation drivers address systemic support and infrastructure, and leadership drivers guide both technical and adaptive solutions (Fixsen et al., 2005).

Adaptive Educational Leadership

Change is challenging and causes discomfort particularly for leaders. Heifetz et al. (2009) described adaptive leadership as a practice and way to manage changes and mitigate challenges. Many of today's challenges can be described as adaptive challenges that require new responses

and solutions requiring innovation, learning, and distributed leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009). Adaptive leadership is defined as "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" and draws on an ecological view that "successful adaptations enable a living system to take the best from its history into the future" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14). From a K–12 school leadership perspective, thriving and achieving adaptive success would be considered optimal learning in the system (Government of Alberta, 2023). Adaptive success requires leaders to: build on the past by identifying what needs to be preserved and what can be expended; experiment, improvise, and expect failures; value diversity and variation in the collective; understand there will be losses and defensive patterns that need counteraction; and recognise that progress and culture changes take time and require persistence (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Many authors have described the evolution of various leadership theories and leadership styles chronologically (Corbett, 2024; Storey, 2016). These accounts often begin with the trait approach in the 1900s when great leaders were thought to be born with innate characteristics for success using a top-down leadership approach, through to the turn of the century when a more integrative or distributed leadership approach focused on multi-level leadership and connections (Corbett, 2024; Storey, 2016). In broad terms, traditional models of leadership generally focused on addressing technical or routine problems by applying existing knowledge and using established problem-solving strategies. "The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 19). In response to crisis situations, an adaptive capacity or leadership approach requires leaders to manage disequilibrium and move beyond technical problems using an integrative and multi-level approach that requires iterative learning and sense making, experimentation, learning from failure, and an openness to navigate complex and evolving problems of practice (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) further develop this framework by identifying the dynamic capabilities of adaptive leadership, including the ability to hold tension, generate innovation through conflict, and leverage relationships across a system. They argue that "conflicting without connecting is not productive and can be destructive" (p. 100), and that effective adaptive leadership involves brokering, connecting, facilitating, and energising systems to trigger growth, learning, and creativity. Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) extend this understanding of adaptive leadership in education by arguing that the pandemic was not merely a disruption to be managed, but a profound call to reimagine leadership as a moral, collaborative, and future-oriented practice grounded in professional capital, collective responsibility, and adaptive expertise. Their insights are echoed across a growing body of international research highlighting adaptive leadership as key to enabling schools to respond, recover, and reimagine educational practice amid crises.

Pagdilao and Paguyo (2023) emphasised the importance of strategic, transformative, and adaptive leadership in the implementation of learning continuity plans. Bush (2023) highlighted the necessity of rapid adaptation and sense making, while Reyes-Guerra et al. (2021) identified flexibility and shifting priorities as defining features of effective crisis leadership. In the Philippines, Famero (2024) documented the emergence of adaptive leadership models from collective principal practices. Studies in Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand (Striepe et al., 2023), as well as in the United Kingdom and Greece (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Shaw, 2022), further emphasised the importance of collaborative, relational, and future-focused leadership in

promoting resilience and community wellbeing. Together, these studies reinforce the relevance of adaptive leadership not only as a theoretical lens, but as a dynamic and practical framework enacted by K–12 leaders navigating complex and shifting conditions.

Implementation Drivers

In a review of implementation literature, Fixsen et al. (2005) defined implementation as a "specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions" (p. 5). Aligning with the view of adaptive leadership, the framework for implementation drivers describes leadership as practices that can be recognised in the system instead of as one leader's traits. The following three categories of implementation drivers are described by Fixsen et al. (2018) as practices to achieve competencies and confidence for everyone involved in the new ways of work: (a) competency drivers – components to develop, improve and sustain one's ability to use an intervention as intended in order to benefit children, families and communities; (b) organisation drivers – components to create and sustain hospitable organisational and system environments for full and effective use of intended services; and (c) leadership drivers – components to provide the right leadership strategies for the types of leadership challenges. These drivers can be used to help assess implementation of an innovation in a system at various stages of implementation (e.g., exploration, installation, initial implementation, full implementation, innovation and sustainability) (Fixsen et al., 2005).

The intersection of adaptive leadership and implementation drivers lies in the recognition that technical and adaptive challenges coexist in complex systems. While the framework for implementation drivers identifies the structural supports necessary for change, adaptive leadership helps explain how leaders mobilise people, navigate value tensions, and sustain the energy needed to transform practice. The framework for leadership drivers, in particular, explicitly calls for matching leadership responses to the type of challenge—technical or adaptive—which mirrors the logic of adaptive leadership theory.

Additionally, while this study centres on adaptive leadership, it is informed by related leadership approaches. Collaborative and distributed leadership focus on shared responsibility, professional agency, and the capacity of networks to sustain improvement. Transformational leadership emphasises vision, inspiration, and deep change. These approaches share important overlaps with adaptive leadership but do not emphasise the same engagement with conflict, disequilibrium, and iterative problem solving—qualities that made adaptive leadership particularly salient during the COVID-19 crisis.

Together, these frameworks provide a lens through which to examine how school and system leaders navigated systemic constraints, including the global pandemic, while implementing Alberta's professional practice standards. The integration of adaptive leadership with the framework for implementation drivers illuminates the dynamic interplay between the context, individual capacities, organisational structures, and leadership practices.

Review of Relevant Literature

The following selected literature provides the foundation for the study and examines the professional practice standards in the context of the study and internationally, as well as literature about educational leadership during times of crisis and learning disruptions, such as the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Professional Practice Standards for Leaders in Alberta and Beyond

Professional practice standards for educational leaders have evolved over time to codify expectations for leadership excellence and accountability. The introduction of the Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) and Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS) in 2019 marked a shift from informal leadership guidelines to standardised competencies, ensuring a cohesive leadership framework across Alberta's education system (Government of Alberta, 2023; Stelmach et al., 2019). These standards emphasise leadership as a learning-centred practice, reinforcing student achievement, professional learning, and systemic accountability (Murphy, 2017).

While Alberta mandates leadership standards for school and system leaders, other jurisdictions take varied approaches. Ontario requires a structured Principal's Qualification Program (Ontario College of Teachers, 2023), whereas British Columbia's Leadership Standards emphasise self-assessment. Internationally, structured leadership frameworks exist in the U.S., China, and the U.K. (Scottish College for Educational Leadership, 2019; Wei, 2017). In the U.S., the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) framework is widely adopted, and states such as Massachusetts integrate leadership standards into educator evaluation systems (Murphy, 2017). Globally, Australia and Hong Kong link leadership expectations directly to student learning outcomes (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014). Research suggests that structured leadership development programs enhance leadership effectiveness, particularly when combined with mentorship and coaching (Mosher et al., 2022; Young, 2020).

The Rationale for Leadership Standards

Educational leadership standards serve three primary functions: (1) supporting student learning and wellbeing, (2) guiding professional learning, and (3) evaluating leadership performance (Ontario Institute for Educational Leadership, 2013; Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). Alberta's LQS and SLQS reflect these goals by embedding leadership competencies within preparation programs and ongoing professional learning. This mirrors practices in Ontario, which integrates leadership standards into professional development pathways, and Australia, where self-assessment tools enable leaders to track their progress (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014). In the U.S., leadership evaluation frameworks such as Texas's Principal Evaluation and Support System (T-PESS) link leadership effectiveness to student achievement, influencing tenure and advancement decisions (Oregon Department of Education, 2023; Texas Education Agency, 2019). Leadership standards ensure consistency in leadership expectations while allowing for local adaptability (Commission on

Teacher Credentialing, 2014). Alberta's standards, like those of other high-performing systems, define leadership as a dynamic process of growth and reflection rather than a static set of competencies (Brown et al., 2018; Young et al., 2017). Leadership standards shape effective school leadership practices by fostering professional learning cultures, competency-based certification, and leadership accountability.

Leadership Standards Across Systems

Alberta's leadership standards align with broader national and international trends. In Canada, leadership standards vary by province, with some jurisdictions adopting mandatory certification programs while others rely on competency-based frameworks (Stelmach et al., 2019). Ontario's Principal's Qualification Program is one of the most structured, integrating leadership competencies into a certification process administered by the Ontario College of Teachers (2023). British Columbia's Leadership Standards (BCPVPA Leadership Standards Review Committee, 2019) and Educational Leadership Consortium of Nova Scotia (2025) similarly define leadership competencies but focus more on self-assessment and professional growth rather than certification.

Internationally, the United States has taken a structured approach to leadership standards, with all 50 states adopting variations of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (Evans et al., 2020; Murphy, 2017). The Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework takes this a step further by structuring leadership effectiveness through indicators, elements, and descriptors, ensuring a detailed career continuum for school leaders (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2024). Research suggests that structured leadership standards enhance leadership effectiveness when coupled with mentoring and leadership coaching programs (Thomas et al., 2024).

Beyond North America, regions such as China and Hong Kong have leveraged leadership standards to establish global legitimacy in education (Wei, 2017). The Competency Framework for Southeast Asian School Heads (SEAMEO INNOTECH Learning Management Office, 2014) outlines five competency domains and 170 indicators, emphasising strategic leadership and instructional excellence. Similarly, Scotland's Into Headship qualification and England's National Standards for School Leadership provide tiered leadership certification pathways, ensuring alignment between leadership preparation and professional practice (Scottish College for Educational Leadership, 2019).

Educational Leadership During Crisis: Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for leadership that is both adaptive and responsive. School leaders faced multiple challenges, including learning continuity, equity gaps, and mental health concerns (Parveen et al., 2022). Studies highlight that distributed leadership, collaborative networks, and professional learning communities (PLCs) were key strategies in maintaining instructional effectiveness and system resilience (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; De Voto & Superfine, 2023; Harris, 2020). In a comparative study, Tipping and Dennis (2022) found that PLC structures and adaptive leadership approaches helped school leaders manage the

transition to online learning, emphasising teacher collaboration and student engagement. Similarly, Azorín (2020) argued that shifting from individual to collective leadership practices fostered resilience during the crisis. Harris and Jones (2020) outlined seven key leadership competencies necessary during times of crisis: (1) context-responsive leadership, (2) expanded leadership preparation programs, (3) prioritisation of self-care, (4) technological fluency, (5) crisis and change management skills, (6) leveraging community partnerships, and (7) distributed leadership.

In addition to emphasising adaptive leadership, several studies also highlighted the evolving role of professional standards during crisis conditions. While professional standards were not always designed with crisis leadership in mind, the literature suggests that they retained value as anchoring frameworks. For example, Pagdilao and Paguyo (2023) found that maintaining focus on departmental objectives and leadership standards helped school heads in the Philippines provide direction and maintain coherence amidst uncertainty. Similarly, McLeod and Dulsky (2021) emphasised that a clear organisational vision, often embedded within standards, served as a critical guide for ethical and effective decision making under pressure.

However, the pandemic also exposed the need for flexibility and adaptation in how professional standards were interpreted and applied. Reyes-Guerra et al. (2021) documented how leaders had to shift away from rigid accountability expectations to prioritise care, safety, and wellbeing as fundamental values that were often not explicitly emphasised in traditional standards. Durrani et al. (2024) likewise reported that school leaders modified existing standards through flexible interpretation and realignment of priorities to fit the evolving crisis context.

These adaptations also revealed the limitations of some professional standards during a sustained crisis. Reyes-Guerra et al. (2021) noted that existing frameworks did not always equip leaders to act quickly or make morally complex decisions in highly ambiguous conditions, forcing them to "bend rules" and improvise. Wharton-Beck et al. (2022) further argued that leadership preparation programs and the standards that inform them need to evolve to incorporate crisis leadership skills explicitly, including trauma-informed practices, community resilience building, and rapid decision making.

Taken together, this body of literature reinforces that while professional leadership standards continued to guide educational leaders during the pandemic, they required interpretive flexibility and moral discernment to remain effective. Alberta's LQS and SLQS align with many of the international leadership models cited in this literature, positioning standards not as static benchmarks but as evolving frameworks capable of guiding responsive leadership in complex and uncertain environments.

Methods

This study draws on data from a larger four-year research project that examined the implementation of Alberta's professional practice standards across 35 school systems of which 10 also engaged in yearly interviews and focus groups contributing to yearly reports. The broader study involved superintendents (n=108), system and school leaders (n=1832), and teachers (n=5536), and was guided by a concurrent mixed methods design. In line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) emphasis on emergent inquiry, interview and focus group protocols evolved over time

based on preliminary findings and participant feedback. Questions during the interviews and focus groups explored how professional standards were enacted during the pandemic and included prompts such as: What have been the most helpful processes, supports, and/or structures in achieving competence in the standards? What changes have you observed in your teaching or leading? How did the pandemic conditions reveal insights about the competencies in your standard? Questions also invited participants to address the use of data in leadership practice and provide reflections on lessons learned, aligning with both adaptive leadership theory and the implementation drivers framework.

For the study referred to in this article, four school systems were purposively selected from the larger dataset because their leadership teams exemplified adaptive capacity during the COVID-19 crisis while maintaining a strong commitment to implementing Alberta's professional practice standards. These four systems were chosen for their demonstrated ability to use the crisis as an opportunity to deepen professional learning, sustain student engagement, and lead with coherence and care. Within these four systems, qualitative data were drawn from interviews and focus groups involving superintendents (n=5), a range of school and system leaders (n=144) (including assistant superintendents, directors, principals, and assistant principals), and teachers (n=397). Their responses offered rich, instructive examples of how leadership standards can be enacted flexibly and constructively in times of disruption.

We treat the leadership response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Alberta as a single, bounded case, consistent with Merriam's (1998) definition of qualitative case study as an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon within a defined context. The case is bounded by time (September 2019 to June 2023), place (Alberta), and phenomenon (leadership enactment during crisis), and focuses on how school and system leaders responded to the global pandemic while continuing to implement the province's LQS and SLQS.

Data Sources and Analysis

Primary data sources included annual in-depth qualitative reports compiled by the authors over the four-year period. These reports provided a detailed examination of leadership practices, student outcomes, and system-wide responses to evolving challenges. Each year, interview and focus group transcripts were analysed and compiled into the reports, which were then sent to school system leaders for review and verification. Data sources included information gathered from annual education reports which were prepared for the provincial education ministry by each school system. To enhance validity, data were triangulated across these sources and participant groups. The research team cross-checked emerging themes across interviews, focus groups, and documentary evidence, enabling confirmation and elaboration of findings.

Sixteen reports, including four reports for each of the four selected school systems, spanning four years, served as the primary data sources for this single case study. These reports were analysed using Fixsen et al.'s (2005) framework for implementation drivers, Saldaña's (2021) coding strategies, and the competencies articulated in the LQS and SLQS (Table 1).

Table 1

Leadership Quality Standard and Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard

LQS Competencies	SLQS Competencies
1. Fostering Effective Relationships	1. Building Effective Relationships
2. Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning	2. Modelling Commitment to Professional Learning
3. Embodying Visionary Leadership	3. Visionary Leadership
4. Leading a Learning Community	4. Leading Learning
5. Supporting the Application of Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit	5. Ensuring First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education for All Students
6. Providing Instructional Leadership	6. School Authority Operations and Resources
7. Developing Leadership Capacity	7. Supporting Effective Governance
8. Managing School Operations and Resources	
9. Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context	

Note. The SLQS applies to the superintendent of a school system who is appointed by a board pursuant to the Alberta *Education Act* and the chief deputy superintendent, if any, as referred to in the *Teaching Profession Act*. The LQS applies to school principals (including assistant, associate, and vice principals) and school system leaders (central office staff members other than the superintendent or chief deputy superintendent), required by their leadership position to hold an Alberta teaching certificate. (Government of Alberta, 2023)

A longitudinal thematic analysis was conducted to examine how leadership practices within these systems evolved over time. While each school system represented a distinct context, the analytic focus remained on understanding the broader case: how Alberta school and system leaders responded to the COVID-19 crisis while implementing professional practice standards. This iterative, inductive process allowed the research team to identify patterns of adaptation, resilience, and alignment with the LQS and SLQS under conditions of systemic disruption.

Findings

This study explored how school and system leaders from four diverse school systems employed adaptive expertise and implementation drivers to navigate the complexities of implementing Alberta's professional practice standards (Government of Alberta, 2023) during a global pandemic (Table 2).

Table 2

Four Diverse School Systems

System Pseudonym	Description of the System
System 1 (S1)	This is a K–9 public charter system located in an urban area of Alberta. Charter schools in Alberta all have a unique area of focus and a charter mandate, and this system specifically supports learners in developing proficiency in the English language. The system is also a member of the Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools. At the time of the research, the system operated two schools serving students from over 35 different countries and offered French, Urdu, and Arabic language options. The students are assessed for language needs in literacy and numeracy when entering the system. This system serves 1,329 students including many newcomers to Canada and employs over 75 teachers.
System 2 (S2)	This is a top-ranked private school system in an urban area of Alberta considered a non-profit society and charitable organisation where students pay yearly tuition fees for Kindergarten to Grade 12. The system is part of the Canadian Accredited Independent Schools, and it is governed by an elected Board of Directors and an Executive committee. At the time of the study the system included three schools. The system focuses on academic and personal achievements and emphasises character development, leadership training, and good citizenship and offers small class sizes with a maximum of 14 students per class. The system serves 1,985 students including students with diagnosed learning disabilities and employs over 100 teachers.
System 3 (S3)	This is a K–12 public school system located in a city in Alberta and the schools include a variety of programs of choice including pre-Kindergarten, French Immersion, Montessori, Christian Education, sports-focused and International Baccalaureate to students in Alberta. At the time of the study, the system included 18 schools. The system aims to provide a learning community in which every student succeeds. The system serves over 8,500 students and employs over 530 teachers.
System 4 (S4)	This K–12 school system covers a large geographical area (288,347 square kilometres) in rural Alberta and 95% of the student population identify as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit descent. Schools in this system are in municipalities, Métis Settlements and near First Nation reserves. At the time of the study, the system included 20 schools. The system aims to provide holistic educational opportunities and a welcoming, caring, respectful, safe, and healthy learning environment. The system serves over 2,000 students and employs over 220 teachers.

There were five interrelated themes that were generated from the data: professional learning cultures, evidence-based decision making, inclusion, collaborative networks, and constraints as opportunities.

Professional Learning Cultures

Leaders emphasised a shift from event-driven professional development to embedded, collaborative professional learning during COVID, representing the ways in which leaders adapted their practice and that of their school system by focusing on competency and organisation drivers. For example, in S3, collaborative inquiry served as the foundation for professional growth. Teachers reported measurable improvements in instructional practices and emphasised their increased autonomy: "We were empowered to lead our own growth. It wasn't just about compliance; it was about finding meaning in our practice". School leaders were supported by their system leaders in improving their professional learning. A school principal from S2 noted, "from our school system, there is the opportunity to pursue some leadership development. Mine this year was focused on relationships, so I'm trying to build some relationships among common elementary principals". This cultural transformation was further reinforced through professional growth plans that aligned with system-wide goals and individual interests and supported by school leaders and system leaders. These actions reflected LQS Competency 6, which calls on leaders to provide ongoing support for effective teaching and optimal learning through targeted professional learning opportunities.

Mentorship and coaching were also central to competency development. S4 expanded their professional learning to include Indigenous liaisons and Elders as mentors, addressing gaps in teachers' and leaders' knowledge of foundational Indigenous perspectives. Teachers from S4 noted improved cultural responsiveness in classrooms: "Our students see their culture reflected in the classroom now. It's been transformative for engagement". Similarly, teachers from S2 described this as an area of focus for professional learning and recognised: "It's not just about content. There are Indigenous ways of knowing, Indigenous ways of learning", and ways to design authentic and purposeful learning. These efforts are consistent with SLQS Competency 5, which emphasises supporting the application of foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit for the benefit of all students.

S2 also introduced a leadership training program, providing a set of modules related to the LQS for targeted mentorship and leadership development for aspiring leaders. This program focused on wellness, pluralism, and innovation, equipping participants with the skills to navigate both technical and adaptive challenges. A teacher from S2 acknowledged the support provided through this leadership opportunity: "I think they are supporting us and showing leadership in the fact that they are also providing us with opportunities to get more involved in leadership ourselves if we are interested". A principal from S2 reflected on their professional learning and growth:

> Once we went through the COVID stuff, I had a really big growth piece there because I felt a little caught off guard because I wasn't really ready for this emergency. A lot of my strengths are those personal relationships and touch points with staff and being, seeing them, and actually having a physical body there, and interacting with the kids. It was like the rug

> just went boom, and then I fell backwards. … I feel as I'm growing and getting better as a leader and as a person, I think that just reflects back on my staff and demonstrating to them that I am growing.

This reflection underscores how the leadership training program through S2 provided the necessary support for leaders to develop resilience, adapt to challenges, and model growth for their teams. It also illustrates how the LQS provided a structure for leadership development even amid the uncertainty of a global crisis, thereby addressing competency and organisation drivers.

Annual education reports confirmed that the teachers' and school leaders' use of evidence supported their growth in their professional practice. This evidence was used by principals and school leaders to determine their next cycle of improvements and the focus of their professional learning. S3 observed a shift in teachers and school leaders using evidence to inform daily teaching and leadership practices, with increased accountability noted in outcome metrics. S4 reported significant gains in instructional quality through targeted numeracy and literacy initiatives, particularly benefiting Indigenous students. These measurable outcomes underscore how Alberta's LQS and SLQS served not just as guiding documents but as catalysts for leadership action and instructional improvement.

Evidence-Based Decision Making

Data played a pivotal role in assessing policy implementation across all four systems. Leaders increasingly worked with teachers to rely on evidence-based decision making to refine instructional practices, track teacher growth, and shape leadership priorities. One teacher in S3 confirmed this approach and noted: "Collaborating with my team to implement the most effective teaching strategies and then assessing that strategy using a variety of tools to determine whether the changes were effective in improving student learning". S3 and S1 emphasised their use of teacher growth plans and instructional effectiveness data to guide professional development, ensuring alignment with competency frameworks through collaborative inquiry models.

In S4, outcome data played a crucial role in refining literacy and numeracy initiatives, particularly benefiting Indigenous students. Leaders leveraged student performance metrics to adjust instructional supports and professional learning opportunities, ensuring that culturally responsive teaching methods were embedded in daily practice. A school leader from S4 explained: "The school Elder did an excellent job of building confidence for us to take risks in the classroom, extending what we learned in her teachings within our classrooms". The use of data-driven decision making led to a stronger alignment between teaching practices, leadership priorities, and policy mandates. Even during the COVID period, these school systems increasingly used fidelity and outcome data to evaluate whether professional practice standards were being implemented as intended and whether these efforts were leading to measurable improvements in student learning.

As a result, school systems institutionalised data-informed decision-making processes, integrating assessment frameworks into leadership development, professional learning structures, and school improvement plans. These practices reflect LQS Competency 3 and SLQS Competency 2, which emphasise the use of evidence to inform practice, fostering continuous improvement, and supporting leadership decisions grounded in student learning outcomes. By embedding data use within instructional and leadership processes, system leaders demonstrated how the LQS and

SLQS served as a foundation for strategic improvement. By leveraging data as a tool for continuous improvement, leaders ensured that professional practice standards were not only implemented but meaningfully adapted to meet the diverse needs of educators and students alike.

Inclusion

Promoting inclusion emerged as a central priority, driven by organisational structures that supported equitable learning environments and aligned with professional practice standards. A systemic commitment to equity was evident in S4's focus on Indigenous education and place-based learning, which integrated cultural knowledge into literacy and numeracy initiatives. Teachers from S4 highlighted the importance of these leadership efforts: "Our practices now align with our students' values and heritage, creating a true sense of belonging". These initiatives reinforced the role of culturally responsive education in fostering student engagement and success.

Likewise, in the focus group with teachers from S2, participants described the support provided by school leaders during COVID to help guide the focus on inclusion to support all students: One participant noted:

> Our school leader has really embraced this time as, and she says it, that this is a gift. She uses the word pivot. I have found, she's really encouraging people to see this as a time to really reflect, and to think about how we can be more inclusive and how we can reach students. I have really noticed that kind of direction from her, and just about being more collaborative and more inclusive. I have noticed that's a big change this year.

This emphasis on reflection and collaboration strengthened inclusive practices across the system. Leaders operationalised the standards by intentionally modelling and supporting inclusive pedagogies and equity-focused decision making, in alignment with LQS Competency 5, which promotes leadership for equity and fairness.

S1 prioritised targeted supports for English language learners, recognising the importance of engaging families in the learning process. One learning coach from S1 expressed frustration in meeting student needs during COVID:

> I remember sometimes creating these videos, these recordings of myself and then turning off the recording and thinking, "That isn't going to work for this kid". I know they need something different. I know they need me beside them for this concept. That was very frustrating.

These experiences underscored the need for adaptive instructional approaches to support diverse learners.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, schools' focus on inclusion led to improved engagement and student outcomes. S2's emphasis on pluralism and professional learning about equity increased teacher confidence in addressing diverse learner needs. S3 fostered generative dialogue among educators, creating shared responsibility for student success. Annual education reports highlighted the impact of inclusion-focused strategies: S4 reported improved attendance among previously disengaged students due to culturally responsive practices, while S1 observed increased student engagement and family participation, particularly among English language learners. These findings illustrate how Alberta's LQS and SLQS served as a leadership compass,

anchoring inclusion efforts within the formal competencies that guide ethical and student-centred practice.

Collaborative Networks

Collaborative networks were essential in sustaining professional learning communities and enhancing leadership capacity. Teachers and school leaders described collaboration within grade teams, across schools, and through system-wide partnerships. Participants in the S1 teacher focus group noted: "This COVID online situation has enabled us as educators to connect with each other more … because there was less demand to be teaching". These networks included PLCs, mentorship programs, and external partnerships that facilitated shared learning and problem solving.

S3's partnership with a university strengthened collaborative inquiry, fostering reflective practice and intentional growth. One teacher highlighted the shift from individual to collective practice: "Perhaps the biggest area of change for me was moving from a privatised practice to a deprivatised, collaborative approach". Similarly, S2's collaboration with the Tsuut'ina Nation enriched professional learning and leadership practices, while S4 and S2 integrated Elders and local leaders into learning initiatives, reinforcing Indigenous perspectives and community connections. These efforts reflect LQS Competency 6 and SLQS Competency 7, which highlight the importance of fostering a culture of collaboration, shared leadership, and partnerships to support high-quality teaching and learning.

Teachers reported that these networks improved instructional quality and built stronger relationships with students. A teacher from S1 described connecting with a leadership network: "The charter schools in the city have implemented a charter school's leadership network, so they are trying to support each other as leaders to implement the LQS". Annual education reports confirmed these benefits, with S3 showing improved collaborative planning and evidence-informed instructional decisions, while S4 reported increased teacher confidence and instructional quality through community partnerships. These networks illustrate how the professional standards helped normalise distributed leadership, strengthen relational practices, and create the conditions for ongoing professional growth—particularly during times of disruption. Collaborative networks provided a foundation for sustained professional growth, fostering shared knowledge, collective problem solving, and alignment with professional practice standards.

Constraints as Opportunities

Leaders reframed COVID-related constraints as opportunities for adaptive and creative leadership. Teachers in S2 sought student feedback to refine instructional practices. One teacher reflected, "… to me, that was a challenge to provide both that grace and maintain a high level of expectations from the kids". Prioritising collaborative practices, such as "grace before grades", allowed educators to reconsider assessment approaches and incorporate more student input. Another teacher from S2 emphasised the value of student reflection: "I found that asking the students for feedback, especially the high school kids, because they can articulate it, was really important for my teaching and their learning".

In S1, leaders saw the shift to online teaching as job-embedded professional growth. One school leader shared: "Every day is a professional development day for us because of what we had to pivot to with technology. The discomfort came from taking on so much technology and teaching in a way we don't traditionally teach". This adaptation fostered innovation and strengthened teacher capacity. A principal from S2 highlighted the importance of "positive reframing" in response to constraints: "The pandemic has taught us that you have to be innovative and look at other ways to fulfill responsibilities. It lends itself to positive reframing on how we move forward". These findings demonstrate how leaders enacted LQS Competency 7 and SLQS Competency 6, which emphasise the capacity to lead innovation, support change, and respond to emerging challenges in creative and contextually responsive ways.

This mindset helped leaders and teachers shift their perspectives, using challenges as catalysts for long-term improvements in leadership. Rather than deviating from the professional standards, these adaptive responses illustrate how professional practice competencies were interpreted dynamically and served as guides for making principled decisions under pressure, sustaining professional learning, and centring student wellbeing.

These findings illustrate how adaptive leadership that was anchored in creative problem solving, collaboration, and resilience, enabled leaders to leverage competency, organisation, and leadership drivers to turn uncertainty into systemic growth. By aligning these strategies with professional practice standards, leaders built capacity, sustained learning communities, and promoted equity and inclusion, ultimately strengthening teaching quality and student wellbeing during turbulent times.

Discussion: Creative Leadership in Times of Crisis

The findings from this study illustrate that Alberta's professional practice standards—specifically the Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) and Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS) (Government of Alberta, 2023)—were not static policy documents during the crisis. Rather, they acted as structural anchors and sense-making frameworks that helped school and system leaders respond decisively and ethically. Whether navigating operational demands or reimagining inclusive professional learning, leaders consistently enacted core competencies outlined in the standards, reinforcing the role of policy frameworks in shaping leadership practice during disruption. Building on this foundation, successful leaders balanced both technical leadership (ensuring operational stability) and adaptive leadership (reimagining systemic structures). Notably, the leaders in this study relied on managerial and technical responses while embracing adaptive strategies, creative approaches, and sustained meaningful change over the duration of the study.

Bridging Standards, Crisis Leadership, and Implementation Science

This study illustrates how Alberta's professional practice standards functioned as stabilising frameworks that enabled adaptive responses to the COVID-19 crisis. While the LQS and SLQS were not explicitly designed for crisis conditions, their emphasis on instructional leadership, equity,

and visionary planning gave leaders a shared reference point during uncertainty. When viewed through the lens of implementation science, the standards provided coherence across competency, organisation, and leadership drivers (Fixsen et al., 2005). Leaders used the standards to scaffold instructional improvement (competency drivers), redesign professional learning systems (organisation drivers), and interpret emerging challenges through principled and relational decision making (leadership drivers).

The crisis exposed the need for adaptive leadership in order to enact these standards under rapidly changing conditions. For example, implementing LQS Competency 6 (Providing Instructional Leadership) required leaders to adapt professional development into collaborative inquiry models, while SLQS Competency 5 (Ensuring First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education for All Students) necessitated innovative partnerships and culturally responsive leadership. These adaptations exemplify the dynamic interaction between leadership frameworks, crisis demands, and the mechanisms described by Fixsen et al. (2005). The findings underscore that standards can both anchor and evolve in response to adaptive challenges, acting as guides for coherent implementation when supported by distributed leadership, data use, and relational trust.

Technical Leadership: Managing Immediate Challenges

Technical leadership ensured continuity by rapidly transitioning to online learning, distributing technology, and maintaining professional learning networks. One of the most critical areas of technical leadership was ensuring operational stability. Operational stability, however, was significantly challenged by evolving public health directives, resource constraints, and infrastructure limitations. School leaders had to respond quickly to staggered re-entry plans, hybrid teaching models, and shifting health and safety protocols, all of which strained administrative capacities. These conditions demanded agile resource management and ongoing adjustments to staffing, scheduling, and communication, demonstrating what Harris and Jones (2020) describe as the need for rapid logistical responsiveness to maintain learning continuity. At the same time, technological barriers, including lack of devices and reliable internet, exacerbated educational inequities, particularly in rural and Indigenous communities. S4's partnership with an internet service provider to provide internet hubs for families exemplifies the type of operational improvisation required. Leaders in all four school systems also faced intensifying concerns about mental health and wellbeing, as teachers and principals reported the emotional toll of uncertainty, isolation, and increased workload. In response, many prioritised care and connection over traditional accountability models, reflecting a recalibration of leadership priorities during crisis. These urgent responses addressed immediate, surface-level challenges rather than deeper systemic transformation, reinforcing Uhl-Bien and Arena's (2018) assertion that crisis leadership often defaults to technical problem solving rather than to adaptive or transformational change.

The strategic use of data emerged as another key component of technical leadership. School systems such as S1 and S3 leveraged student engagement metrics and learning outcome data to inform instructional effectiveness decisions. Leaders utilised these metrics to refine teaching strategies, enhance professional learning opportunities, and align leadership practices with the evolving challenges of remote and hybrid learning. This finding confirms De Voto and Superfine's (2023) argument that data-driven decision making was central to effective crisis management in

education during the pandemic. Furthermore, this aligns with the LQS Competency 4 (Leading a Learning Community) and SLQS Competency 4 (Leading Learning) in Alberta, both of which emphasise evidence-informed decision making and accountability as core leadership competencies (Government of Alberta, 2023).

Building collaborative networks was another essential element of technical leadership. Many school leaders strengthened existing professional networks to foster shared technical solutions and sustain learning communities. In S1, a leadership network facilitated peer mentoring and cross-school collaboration. Similarly, S4 expanded professional learning communities to support teachers in adapting to online instruction while also engaging Indigenous Elders as mentors. These networks provided necessary professional learning opportunities and sustained engagement during a time of significant disruption. The effectiveness of these networks aligns with findings from Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023), who argue that distributed leadership and collaborative networks are key strategies for responding to crises in education systems. Alberta's LQS and SLQS further reinforce the importance of fostering a collaborative culture within and across schools to enhance professional practice and student learning.

Adaptive Leadership: Transforming Constraints Into Opportunities

While technical leadership provided stability, adaptive leadership was essential for reimagining education beyond the immediate crisis. Adaptive leadership, as defined by Heifetz et al. (2009), requires leaders to navigate complex challenges that lack clear solutions, often necessitating shifts in values, beliefs, and behaviours. The findings indicate that leaders leveraged adaptive strategies to transform constraints into opportunities for growth and innovation, extending prior research by illustrating how leaders embedded adaptive expertise into policy implementation during a crisis.

One way leaders exercised adaptive leadership was by reframing the crisis as a catalyst for systemic change. These practices reflected the adaptive interpretation of Alberta's professional practice standards, particularly LQS Competency 3 (Embodying Visionary Leadership) and SLQS Competency 3 (Visionary Leadership), which encouraged leaders to innovate while remaining grounded in shared values and systemic goals. Rather than reacting solely to disruptions, the leaders recognised the pandemic as an opportunity to redesign learning systems and professional learning structures. For instance, S3 transitioned from traditional professional development models to educator-led (leaders and teachers) collaborative inquiry, empowering educators to take ownership of their growth. This result extends the work of Tipping and Dennis (2022), who highlighted the role of professional learning communities in supporting adaptive leadership during crisis but did not explore teacher-led inquiry as a central mechanism for leadership development. Similarly, S2 introduced a leadership training initiative focused on wellness, pluralism, and innovation, which emphasised long-term capacity building over compliance-based leadership approaches, confirming Harris and Jones' (2020) argument that crisis leadership requires expanding leadership training beyond technical competencies.

Another key characteristic of adaptive leadership was centring relationships over compliance. Leaders who prioritised relational leadership and community building experienced greater engagement from both staff and students. S4's integration of Indigenous Elders as

professional mentors demonstrated how leadership could be relational rather than purely managerial. A principal from the division reflected on how shifting professional learning to a relational model increased teacher engagement and cultural responsiveness in classrooms, reinforcing the significance of human-centred leadership during crisis situations. These findings confirm Uhl-Bien and Arena's (2018) argument that adaptive leadership is rooted in building relational networks and fostering distributed decision making rather than relying on hierarchical command structures.

Additionally, adaptive leaders embedded equity and inclusion as non-negotiable priorities within their leadership responses rather than treating them as secondary concerns. S2's pluralism initiative and S4's land-based learning programs became core pillars of professional learning, illustrating how adaptive leadership reinforced systemic shifts toward inclusive education. Leaders in S1 similarly emphasised targeted supports for English language learners, ensuring that their inclusion strategies extended beyond basic accommodation to become fundamental components of their professional learning programs. These findings expand on Azorín's (2020) assertion that educational systems should shift from individuality to collectivity in crisis leadership, demonstrating how inclusion-focused leadership strategies can serve as structural rather than incidental responses. These priorities align closely with the SLQS, which emphasises the responsibility of superintendents to promote equity and ensure responsive, culturally relevant leadership practices. These adaptive shifts mirror findings from international contexts, where leaders modified or reinterpreted professional standards to prioritise equity, flexibility, and wellbeing in times of disruption (Pagdilao & Paguyo, 2023; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021; Striepe et al., 2023).

The Interplay of Technical and Adaptive Leadership

Technical and adaptive leadership were necessary for leaders to navigate the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic. While technical leadership ensured immediate stability, adaptive leadership fostered resilience, transformation, and systemic growth. Leaders who successfully balanced both approaches were able to not only sustain learning communities but also use the crisis as a springboard for innovation and long-term improvement. This reinforces the argument that technical solutions alone are insufficient in times of systemic disruption which include both the implementation of a major policy initiative and responding to a global pandemic; rather, adaptive leadership must complement technical leadership to ensure educational ecosystems remain responsive, inclusive, and forward-thinking.

Implications

Findings from this study suggest that the interplay between technical and adaptive leadership competencies—framed and supported by Alberta's professional practice standards—shaped leadership effectiveness during systemic disruptions. School and system leaders' experiences demonstrate how professional learning opportunities that integrate real-world crisis scenarios contribute to the development of responsive and contextually grounded decision making.

Leaders who engaged in structured mentorship, networked learning, and collaborative inquiry were better positioned to navigate uncertainty and sustain professional learning communities.

The study highlights how adaptive leadership fosters resilience in schools when combined with relational approaches and innovation-driven initiatives, and fosters resilience in school systems. Participants' experiences illustrate that crisis conditions create opportunities for leaders to refine their practices, strengthen professional networks, and develop inclusive strategies that prioritise equity. The integration of culturally responsive leadership further emerged as a key consideration, influencing how leaders addressed systemic inequities and created learning environments that reflected the diverse needs of students and educators.

Policy frameworks that support both technical and adaptive leadership approaches were found to facilitate responsive decision making while maintaining system-wide coherence. The findings point to the role of leadership in shaping inclusive, equity-driven school cultures and sustaining long-term systemic improvements. By examining the ways in which leaders adapted to constraints, this study underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of leadership in complex educational environments, emphasising that resilience and adaptability are not static traits but cultivated capacities developed through experience and reflection. These findings affirm the importance of professional standards not just as regulatory tools but as developmental frameworks that guided leaders' adaptive capacity and principled decision making in moments of crisis and systemic uncertainty.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of technical and adaptive leadership in crisis contexts, it is not without limitations. First, the study is based on a specific regional context—Alberta, Canada—which, while offering important perspectives, may limit the generalisability of findings to other jurisdictions with different educational governance structures, policy frameworks, and socio-political landscapes. Future research could extend these findings by examining leadership responses in other provinces and international contexts to compare and contrast systemic differences. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess how adaptive practices evolve post-crisis and whether they lead to lasting systemic change. Additionally, investigating how leadership preparation programs integrate crisis leadership and adaptive capacity building would provide insight into sustaining professional standards in uncertain conditions.

Conclusion

This study highlights how adaptive leadership when paired with technical leadership, and guided by professional practice standards, enables schools and school system leaders to navigate crises while fostering systemic resilience. Leaders who successfully balance adaptive and technical leadership not only sustain learning communities but also use crises as opportunities to drive innovation and systemic growth. Leaders in the four school systems in this study embraced adaptive and technical leadership, ensuring operational stability while fostering innovation,

inclusion, and resilience during a crisis. These findings reinforce the importance of cultivating leadership that moves beyond crisis management toward sustainable change. These leaders were adept at addressing the technical requirements and adapting to the evolving challenges while implementing professional practice standards.

Future research could continue examining how leaders build adaptive capacity and sustain systemic improvements beyond immediate crisis conditions. By understanding the long-term effects of adaptive leadership practices, educational systems can move toward greater innovation, inclusivity, and preparedness for future challenges. These findings also affirm that Alberta's professional practice standards provided a durable framework that helped leaders anchor their decisions, navigate uncertainty, and sustain purposeful change. Ultimately, this study underscores the need for policies and practices that support leaders not only in managing crises but also in shaping educational environments that are dynamic, responsive, and equitable.

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Women in Senior Leadership: A Review of Gender Representation and Systemic Barriers in Australian Schools

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ABSTRACT: Women remain underrepresented in senior educational leadership despite making up the majority of the teaching workforce. This persistent gender gap reflects entrenched structural and cultural barriers limiting women's career progression in schools. Applying a feminist post-structuralist lens, this article presents a narrative review of Australian workforce data from 2019 to 2023 alongside leadership literature to explore systemic inequities affecting women's advancement into senior school leadership roles. Findings reveal a consistent representation gap and highlight how hegemonic masculinities shape leadership identity, recognition, and legitimacy. The article argues for reshaping leadership cultures through attunement, understood as leadership based on listening, humility, and shared power, and for prioritising gender-diverse succession planning and mentorship. It proposes targeted strategies to dismantle barriers related to career interruptions, gendered expectations, and organisational norms. Positioned as the first in a series investigating the intersections of gender, leadership, work, and care in education, this study underscores the urgent need for policy and practice reforms to foster more equitable and inclusive leadership pathways and improve educational outcomes.

Key words: Career barriers, feminist post-structuralism, gender diversity, gender norms, leadership identity, mentoring, succession planning, senior school leadership, women

Introduction

Women make up a significant portion of the global teaching workforce, but continue to be underrepresented in senior educational leadership positions worldwide (Bergmann et al., 2022). This gender imbalance at executive leadership level is not unique to the education sector. Internationally, women are underrepresented in senior leadership across most industries (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Modiha & Horne, 2024). This persistent widespread gender inequality is sustained by pervasive and rigid gender stereotypes and entrenched systemic and social barriers (Kali Pal et al., 2024; Women's Economic Equality Taskforce [WEET], 2023). These structural barriers manifest in multiple interconnected ways, ranging from unequal access to education and professional development, to discriminatory hiring and promotion practices and organisational cultures that continue to valorise traditionally masculine leadership traits (Setyaningrum & Juansih, 2024; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Moreover, women's contributions across sectors are frequently undervalued, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and marginalisation. Collectively, these factors obstruct women's career progression into senior leadership roles. The persistence of this issue on a global scale suggests that senior leadership must be understood not merely as a position or skillset, but as a site of identity work shaped by gendered discourses and contested notions of legitimacy (Blackmore, 2013; Nguyen, 2013; Zheng et al., 2021).

Responding to these challenges requires rethinking leadership itself. Educational leadership today demands more than procedural alignment and hierarchical control. As Fullan (2020, 2023) emphasises, effective leadership must combine two key elements: *alignment*, the structural coherence and policy consistency needed for system functioning, and *attunement*, the leader's capacity to read the cultural context, listen deeply, and respond with emotional intelligence and relational sensitivity. Attunement, often associated with traditionally feminised approaches, has been a consistent thread in Fullan's work over the past two decades (Fullan, 2002, 2018, 2021, 2023), and is understood as a practical expression of relational leadership. It involves knowing when to push, when to step back, and when to share power. These practices are increasingly vital for navigating the complexities of contemporary schooling and challenging entrenched masculine leadership norms, which tend to prioritise alignment and hierarchical control over relational attunement. However, transforming leadership approaches alone is insufficient without also addressing the entrenched structural inequities that persist within organisations and society.

Although structural inequity is often framed in institutional or economic terms, it also operates through routine, everyday practices and expectations. The assumption that opportunities are distributed fairly obscures the ongoing impacts of systemic disadvantage, including the uneven distribution of time, care responsibilities, and professional visibility. These patterns of exclusion are difficult to disrupt, particularly when they are normalised across generations and embedded in organisational cultures (Kali Pal et al., 2024; Srikanthan et al., 2024). In education, such dynamics emerge not only in organisational policies but also in subtle interactions that shape who is recognised, mentored, or seen as "leadership material" (Makarem et al., 2019; Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021). Understanding leadership as a gendered practice highlights the importance of interrogating how gender shapes access, advancement, and perceptions of competence in school leadership contexts (Bergmann et al., 2022; Bush, 2021). Inequality, when it is consistent, becomes imperceptible. It shapes both public outcomes and private expectations, often without being named.

This article begins with that premise. The gendered dynamics of leadership in education are not only the product of individual choices or workplace cultures but are also embedded within wider systems that have long structured women's time, energy, and opportunity (Blackmore & Sachs, 2012; Thompson & Stokes, 2024). What began as an investigation into gendered patterns of school leadership evolved into a deeper reflection on the systemic and social barriers that constrain women's career progression in education. Given the scope and complexity of these issues, we position this article as the first in a series of inquiries into the intersections between gender, work, leadership, and care in the education sector.

In this study, we interrogate what is occurring in the Australian context, against these international concerns around gender inequity at senior leadership level. Australia has made incremental and inconsistent progress towards improving the status of women in the broader community. According to the 2025 Status of Women Report Card, improvements can be seen in the number of women in federal parliament (44%), on Australian Government boards (54.4%) and holding post school qualifications (63.6%) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2025). However, significant disparities exist in leadership representation, pay equity, and workforce participation, with women earning on average for full-time equivalent, 21.1% less total remuneration than men. This article seeks to examine these issues within the teaching profession. Looking closely at the teaching workforce, historically dominated by women, provides a unique opportunity to explore how gendered barriers persist even in female-majority sectors.

For the purposes of this investigation, we understand *gender* to be a socially and culturally constructed concept encompassing differences in identity, expression, and lived experience as a man, woman, or non-binary person (Connell, 1995; World Health Organisation [WHO], n.d.). Given constraints in available literature and datasets, gender is discussed here in binary terms, although we acknowledge this oversimplifies the diversity present in the Australian community. *Gender equality* refers to equal access to conditions, treatment, and opportunities regardless of gender (United Nations, n.d.). *Gender equity* is the process of ensuring fairness, often requiring targeted interventions to redress historical and structural disadvantage (Waling, 2023). While inequality affects all women, it is compounded for those from marginalised social groups (Srikanthan et al., 2024). These definitions underpin the analysis presented in this article.

Using Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD) (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2025a, 2025b, 2025c), we examine the proportional representation of women in senior leadership roles (principals, deputy principals, and equivalents) from 2019 to 2023, providing insights into how gender disparities manifest over time and across diverse school contexts. Complementing this, a narrative review of leadership literature explores the policy, cultural, and structural factors shaping women's leadership trajectories, with particular focus on workplace culture, leadership norms, and systemic barriers affecting gender equity. The article concludes by proposing strategies to foster more inclusive and equitable educational leadership environments.

Gender Equity in Australia

Gender equity remains highly contested in Australia. While women now constitute 44% of federal parliament (Commonwealth of Australia, 2025) and are the world's most educated (Kali Pal et al., 2024; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023) they still earn significantly less than men, retire with less superannuation (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022), and face financial penalties linked to motherhood and caregiving (Commonwealth of Australia, 2025). Although economic inequality is frequently seen as "natural" or the result of personal choice, it is in fact sustained by the unequal burden of unpaid work and caring responsibilities carried by women (WEET, 2023). A body of evidence tracking these systemic disparities indicates that Australian women continue to experience "prevalent and persistent" inequality, that "impacts a woman's public and private experience across the entirety of her lifetime" (WEET, 2023, p. 11). Addressing these disparities is both a social justice concern and an economic imperative: the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce estimates that removing barriers to women's full workforce participation could unlock $128 billion annually (Srikanthan et al., 2024).

Despite this, pervasive societal attitudes and systemic factors continue to hinder national progress toward gender equality. Yet, momentum for change is building. The latest initiative, *Working for women: A strategy for gender equality (2024–2034)*, outlines a national vision for the next decade (Commonwealth of Australia, 2024). This ambitious strategy recognises that advancing gender equity requires addressing the interconnected realities of women's safety, caring responsibilities, economic equity, health, and decision-making participation. It calls for dismantling entrenched stereotypes and structural barriers limiting women's opportunities. Against this backdrop, we examine whether women's representation in senior leadership roles from 2019 to 2023 indicates Australian schools are becoming more inclusive and equitable workplaces.

Methodology

A narrative review approach was adopted to explore literature on gender representation in school leadership, with particular focus on the Australian education context. The review included a broad range of sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy papers, education reports, and selected grey literature to capture diverse perspectives. Academic literature was sourced using databases such as ERIC, Scopus, and ProQuest. Searches used terms such as "women in educational leadership", "school leadership and gender", "gendered experiences of female leaders in Australian schools", "senior leadership in schools", and "succession planning in education".

The study concentrated on literature published between 2000 and 2025, with some formative earlier works included for foundational context. Key inclusion criteria comprised relevance to school leadership, gender equity, and leadership development. An interpretive approach was applied, guided by a feminist post-structuralist lens that interrogates how leadership is constructed through discourse and institutional norms.

Gender in Senior School Leadership (Australia)

Publicly available Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD) were analysed to understand women's proportional representation in senior leadership roles within Australian schools (AITSL, 2025a). We applied variable categories such as "gender" and "deployed workforce" over a five-year period (2019–2023), focusing our investigation on actively deployed, permanent and part-time teaching staff. Those who held teaching registration but were not currently employed were excluded. Selected data tables accompany the analysis.

In 2023, women comprised 74% of the deployed teaching workforce (excluding early childhood and special schools) but held 70% of senior leadership roles—a four-percentage-point gap (Table 1) (AITSL, 2025b). This gender imbalance persisted across the five-year period, peaking at 7% in 2020 and dipping to 1% in 2021. The 2021 anomaly reflects the departure of around 140 male senior leaders, reducing male representation in leadership from 31% in 2020 to 26% in 2021. Despite this fluctuation, the average gender imbalance over five years was 4.2%. While modest and stable, this gap warranted further analysis.

Table 1: *Gender Balance of Senior Leaders in Australian Schools*

		Senior Leaders		**Workforce Deployed to Schools**
Year of survey	State	Men (%)	Women (%)	Women in Workforce (%)
2019	National	30%	70%	75%
2020	National	31%	69%	76%
2021	National	26%	74%	75%
2022	National	29%	71%	75%
2023	National	30%	70%	74%

Note: **Gender** was self-reported. Individuals who selected "other" or "unspecified" for gender, ATWD randomly allocated 50:50 to the label "men" or "women". The category of **Senior leaders** included School Principals including Deputy Principals and equivalents. (With the exception of Assistant Principals in New South Wales, where this role is considered and coded as a Middle leader role). The **Women in workforce** figures were taken from the deployed to school data for each year.

Adapted from AITSL. (2025b). *Senior Leaders and Gender* [Data File] and, *Deployed to Schools Workforce and Gender* [Data File]. Retrieved July 25, 2025, from Australian Teacher Workforce Data. https://atwd.aitsl.edu.au/data/trends-explore/workforce

To better understand this, we examined the data by school type: primary, combined, and secondary, recognising that structural and demographic differences influence staffing. Australian primary schools tend to be smaller, whereas secondary schools serve larger student populations with proportionally more teachers and leaders. According to the ATWD, 45% of middle leaders work in secondary schools compared to 24% in primary schools, while senior leadership roles are more concentrated in primary schools (59%) than in secondary (22%) (AITSL, 2025a). These

differences reflect distinct operational needs. Secondary schools generally have more layered leadership, with specialised middle roles like heads of department and year level coordinators to manage larger student cohorts and subject-specific teaching (De Nobile, 2024).These complex structures support a distributed leadership approach overseeing curriculum, pastoral care, and student outcomes (Dinham et al., 2018). By contrast, primary schools are smaller with fewer formal middle leaders (24%). Senior leaders in primary schools manage broader responsibilities across smaller teams, resulting in more centralised leadership and fewer layers between teachers and senior leaders.

Table 2. *Gender Balance of Senior Leaders in Australian Schools by School Type*

School Type	Year of survey	**Senior Leaders**		**Women in Workforce**	**Gender Imbalance**	
		Men (%)	Women (%)	By school type (%)	Women in workforce compared to senior leadership (%)	Average over 5 years
PRIMARY	2019	23%	77%	86%	9%	
Schools that educate Foundation to year 6 students.	2020	25%	75%	86%	11%	
	2021	23%	77%	81%	45	7.8%
	2022	23%	77%	85%	8%	
	2023	22%	78%	85%	7%	
COMBINED	2019	40%	60%	71%	11%	
Schools that educate a combination of Primary and Secondary students.	2020	37%	63%	72%	9%	
	2021	27%	73%	75%	2%	8.2%
	2022	37%	63%	72%	9%	
	2023	39%	61%	71%	10%	
SECONDARY	2019	44%	56%	66%	10%	
Schools that educate year 7 to year 12 students.	2020	42%	58%	66%	8%	
	2021	34%	66%	69%	3%	7.2%
	2022	43%	57%	64%	7%	
	2023	43%	57%	65%	8%	

Note: "Gender" was self-reported. Individuals who selected "other" or "unspecified" for gender, ATWD randomly allocated 50:50 to the label "men" or "women". "Senior leaders" included School Principals including Deputy Principals and equivalents. (With the exception of Assistant Principals in New South Wales, where this role is considered and coded as a Middle leader role). "Women in workforce" was taken from the deployed to school type data set for that year.

Adapted from AITSL. (2025b). *Senior Leaders, School Type and Gender* [Data File] and, *Deployed to Schools, School Type and Gender* [Data File]. Retrieved July 25, 2025, from Australian Teacher Workforce Data. https://atwd.aitsl.edu.au/data/trends-explore/workforce

A significant finding emerged when examining the senior leader data by school type. Gender disparity within senior leadership was evident in all school types and in every year of data collection. The imbalance averaged slightly higher than the overall 4.2% gap, with primary at 7.8%, combined at 8.2%, and secondary at 7.2% (AITSL, 2025c). Contrary to our hypothesis, differences in leadership models (centralised in primary and multi-layered in secondary schools) or workforce proportions did not lead to significant variation. Women experience similar underrepresentation in senior leadership across all school types.

These findings reveal persistent systemic inequalities faced by women on the path to senior leadership, even in heavily feminised primary settings (Gannon et al., 2024). They highlight the urgent need for targeted, meaningful interventions to achieve sustainable structural gender parity in Australian schools (Dicke et al., 2024; Jenkins, 2021; Madden, 2024; Thompson & Stokes, 2024). Underlying these gaps are deeper cultural barriers rooted in gendered norms that influence who is seen as suitable for leadership. Examining leadership through a gendered identity lens helps reveal how these norms shape the construction and recognition of leaders.

Leadership as Gendered Identity

Leadership is not simply a role assumed but an identity that is constructed, negotiated, and often contested (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). These constructions reflect gendered social norms and broader patterns of identity formation. Through social interactions and cultural narratives, gendered identities are discursively interpellated (Althusser, 1971; Kingsman & Davis, 2024), shaping how leadership identities are enacted, recognised, and interpreted. Central to understanding leadership identity is DeRue and Ashford's (2010) work on claims and grants, in which leadership emerges through claiming a role and receiving recognition within organisational and cultural contexts. These processes are informed by prevailing cultural scripts that privilege masculine traits, making it more difficult for women to have their leadership claims recognised and validated.

Leader identity work explores how individuals make sense of their leadership pathways, including origin and enactment stories. Zheng et al. (2021) identified four narrative identity frames—being, engaging, performing, and accepting—with notable gender differences. Women more often adopt the *engaging* frame, emphasising facilitation and collaboration, while men tend toward the *performing* frame, focusing on positional duty and responsibility. These frames are influenced by unequal access to leadership capital. Men are more likely to be promoted, presumed authoritative, and receive leadership training (Blackmore & Sachs, 2012; Johnston et al., 2020; Women & Leadership Australia, 2023). In contrast, women are socialised in ways that discourage assertiveness, reward humility, and penalise ambition (Amin et al., 2022), traits conflicting with dominant leadership discourses. Early leadership traits in girls may be criticised, undermining their later leadership legitimacy (Zheng et al., 2021). Consequently, women often overprepare with additional qualifications before applying for roles, perpetuating imposter syndrome even when more qualified than male peers (Ritt Gustad, 2024; Thompson & Stokes, 2024).

Women's reliance on the *engaging* frame, characterised by facilitation, coaching, and collaboration, involves continual emotional and relational work. These efforts are time- and

labour-intensive and lead to frequent leadership claims. This aligns with feminist critiques of the emotional and relational labour demanded of women leaders, which is often invisible and undervalued (Dicke et al., 2024; Kapoor et al., 2021). Arguably, this contributes not only to leaky leadership pipelines but also to higher levels of burnout and attrition as women's identity work remains unrecognised. These patterns illustrate how gender functions as a fundamental force shaping leadership, beyond demographic categories. Women's leadership identity work reflects systemic exclusion rather than personal failings, as institutional norms sustain male-dominated pathways while marginalising women's contributions. Without critical interrogation of leadership narratives and structures, advancing gender equity in educational leadership remains elusive. These dynamics influence mentoring, leadership styles, and the transformative potential of leadership diversity, explored later. Moreover, identity narratives offer crucial context for understanding contemporary educational leadership and how they intersect with established leadership theories in response to evolving educational demands.

Reshaping Leadership Cultures for Gender Equity

Meaningful change in educational leadership involves more than demographic representation. It requires shifts in how leadership is understood, who is seen as legitimate, and what leadership practices are valued. Inclusive and feminist-informed approaches reshape leadership models by challenging hierarchical norms and centring relational, ethical, and collaborative practices that open space for more equitable leadership pathways.

Gender Diversity as a Catalyst for Change

Diverse leadership, encompassing gender, ethnicity, religion, and ability, has been shown to foster more inclusive and collaborative school cultures (Wheaton & Moore, 2020), as well as support ethical values, enhance stakeholder involvement, and strengthen community ties (Coleman, 2012; Thompson & Stokes, 2024). Within this broader context, gender diversity in leadership not only improves organisational performance but also helps dismantle persistent gender stereotypes by fostering inclusive and supportive environments (Alahbabi & Dilawer, 2023; Mahmoud, 2024). Women often arrive in senior leadership roles with higher qualifications and more extensive professional experience than their male counterparts, bringing strengths that can enrich decision making, spark innovation, and promote positive organisational cultures (Ritt Gustad, 2024; Thompson & Stokes, 2024). Their leadership is also more likely to prioritise social justice agendas, translating into improved instructional leadership and more equitable school cultures (Blackmore, 2013; Outtrim, 2025). This focus contrasts with the target-driven, performance-oriented approaches more commonly attributed to men (Zheng et al., 2021).

Aiming for gender balance in school leadership has clear benefits. Women's leadership identity often centres on interpersonal and communication skills, fostering relational capital that enhances collaboration and team development (Dicke et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2021). These qualities contribute to positive organisational and cultural outcomes for schools (Blackmore, 2013;

Outtrim, 2025; Ritt Gustad, 2024), yet systemic barriers restrict women's access to senior roles, thereby limiting the full potential benefits of gender-diverse leadership.

Barriers to Women's Leadership Progression in Schools

Historically, educational leadership research reflected predominantly masculine experiences, positioning the white male perspective as the universal norm (Connell, 1993; Shakeshaft, 1989). Although feminist scholarship challenged these norms from the 1980s onward, masculine hegemony in leadership practice has persisted. At the same time, contemporary leadership thinkers such as Fullan (2020, 2021, 2023) argue that the complexity of modern schooling demands attunement: the ability to deeply understand context, build trust, and lead relationally. These approaches, long associated with women's leadership, are now recognised as essential for fostering equity, wellbeing, and adaptive capacity in schools. Even with these emerging ideals, gender disparities remain. ATWD data show women hold approximately 70% of senior leadership roles in Australian schools, yet they comprise about 78% of the teaching workforce. Men occupy nearly 30% of senior roles despite representing only 22% of teachers. National workforce data reflect similar patterns, with women holding only up to a third of senior leadership positions across Australian workplaces (ABS, 2024; Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2023; AITSL, 2025a). This gap highlights that representation alone does not guarantee equity; leadership culture—whose values, voices, and approaches are prioritised—remains deeply gendered (Blackmore, 2013; Bush, 2021; Thompson & Stokes, 2024; Watterston & Ehrich, 2024).

Research consistently identifies gendered stereotypes, exclusion from informal networks, and limited development opportunities as key obstacles to women's advancement (Blackmore & Sachs, 2012; Glass & Cook, 2018; Outtrim, 2025). Blackmore (2008) describes an educational paradox where initiatives promoting teacher leadership and lifelong learning coincided with neoliberal pressures such as increased workloads, casualisation, and heightened external accountability. These pressures disproportionately impact women, who constitute the majority of part-time and casual educators, eroding family-friendly work environments and contributing to job insecurity and unpaid overtime (Crimmins et al., 2021; Hardy, 2020; Ozga, 2020; Roberts, 2022). These systemic pressures are compounded by entrenched masculinist leadership cultures that dictate norms in senior roles (Nguyen, 2013; Tiwary & Gupta, 2022) with the COVID-19 pandemic adding another layer of complexity that further constrained women's leadership opportunities (Leo et al., 2022; Watson & Singh, 2022). Additionally, post-pandemic policy emphasis on workforce sustainability and wellbeing risks deprioritising gender equity commitments (ACARA, 2023).

The complex barriers that women face become even clearer when considering how interrupted careers and part-time roles shape leadership opportunities. As a result, women remain markedly underrepresented in senior educational leadership roles despite their majority presence in the teaching workforce (Allen et al., 2021). This underrepresentation is perpetuated by the prevalence of tokenistic middle-management positions that rarely lead to senior roles (Glass & Cook, 2018; Tiwary & Gupta, 2022). Furthermore, the enduring "glass ceiling" continues to block

advancement even as mounting evidence demonstrates that women provide highly effective and transformative leadership (Mareque et al., 2022; Outtrim, 2025). Compounding these structural barriers, women often face the dual challenge of needing to adopt traditionally masculine traits to navigate leadership spaces, while simultaneously contending with horizontal hostility from peers, both of which further undermine their leadership potential (Alqahtani, 2020; Mavin, 2008).

Interrupted Careers and Part-Time Employment

Gendered expectations largely assign primary caregiving responsibilities to women, which often restrict their capacity to commit to the full-time, continuous work schedules typically required for senior leadership positions (Kapoor et al., 2021; Women & Leadership Australia, 2023). Correspondingly, women make up 71.6% of Australia's part-time teaching workforce and over half of temporary positions (Workplace Gender Equality Agency Australia [WGEA], 2024). While these roles offer necessary flexibility, they are frequently associated with lower pay, job insecurity, and limited advancement opportunities (Strachan et al., 2014; Thompson & Stokes, 2024). Such employment patterns reinforce organisational norms that tie leadership potential to uninterrupted, full-time careers and traits traditionally coded as masculine, such as assertiveness and constant availability (Maheshwari, 2023; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024). Women balancing caregiving duties or seeking flexible work are therefore often excluded from leadership pipelines.

Cultural challenges compound these structural barriers, including experiences of imposter syndrome, a shortage of mentorship, and the devaluation of leadership styles characterised by collaboration and empathy, which are frequently associated with femininity (Gannon et al., 2024; Mavin, 2008). Moreover, lockdowns and school closures during the pandemic disproportionately increased women's caregiving responsibilities, disrupted career progression, and reshaped work practices, often in ways that reduced access to senior roles (Johnston et al., 2020; Leo et al., 2022). These challenges contribute to broader systemic inequities, as evidenced by the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior leadership despite their majority presence in teaching roles. Creating flexible career pathways, strengthening family supports, and shifting cultural perceptions to value diverse leadership approaches are crucial steps forward (Cofino & Botbyl, 2023; Mareque et al., 2022).

Equal Opportunity and Gendered Inequality

Since the 1970s, Australian Equal Employment Opportunity policies and gender equity initiatives have contributed to increases in women's workforce participation, particularly among middle-class groups (Blackmore, 2008; Flood et al., 2021). However, feminist scholars highlight that patriarchal institutional cultures have limited meaningful structural change (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Khraban & Vyhivska, 2024). By the 1990s, public focus shifted towards concerns over boys' educational achievement, framing feminism as a threat and diverting attention from women's advancement, a phenomenon often described as the "crisis in masculinity" (Eate et al., 2017; Martino, 2008). This discourse served to reinforce male privilege, normalise gender difference, and obscure ongoing inequalities within leadership and labour systems (Claussen, 2017; Flood et al., 2021).

Although reforms such as parental leave and equal pay legislation have improved conditions, women remain underrepresented in senior roles across many sectors, despite achieving higher tertiary education rates than men (ABS, 2024; OECD, 2023, 2024). These trends reflect entrenched cultural narratives that cast men as natural leaders and women as primary caregivers (Allen et al., 2021; Fuller, 2021). Feminist critiques argue that masculine norms embedded in these narratives continue to influence leadership discourses, marginalising women and other minoritised groups. Consequently, leadership remains a contested space where gendered legitimacy is continuously negotiated and constrained (Mareque et al., 2022; Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021).

Advancing Women's Leadership in Schools

Promoting women's leadership requires deliberate strategies to dismantle systemic barriers and foster equitable career progression. Central to this vision are sustainable leadership pipelines, meaningful support, and challenging traditional norms. Succession planning and mentoring are crucial in advancing women into senior leadership positions.

Succession Planning

Organisational success and leadership continuity depend on well-structured succession plans (Haynes & Ghosh, 2008; Lexa, 2011; Renihan, 2012). However, due to ongoing gender discrimination and the lack of formal succession planning, leadership pathways often maintain the status quo. Leaders tend to promote candidates who mirror their own identities and leadership styles, thereby excluding qualified women from advancement opportunities (González, 2010; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; Ritt Gustad, 2024; Smith & Sinkford, 2022).

Although women make up the majority of the education workforce, gendered expectations around caregiving and career interruptions continue to limit their leadership opportunities. This ongoing exclusion contributes to lower job satisfaction (April et al., 2011) and higher attrition rates among mid-career women educators (Graham et al., 2014; Ritt Gustad, 2024). Rising attrition of experienced female teachers subsequently undermines organisational performance and student outcomes (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Madigan & Kim, 2021). To counter this, formal, gender-inclusive succession plans are essential for building capacity and retaining diverse leadership talent (Borger et al., 2025; Storey et al., 2017).

Mentoring

Mentoring is a vital strategy that supports women's leadership development, improves job satisfaction, expands career opportunities, and delivers organisational benefits such as cultivating leaders and enhancing outcomes (Appie et al., 2020; Cofino & Botbyl, 2023; Conger & Fulmer, 2003; Ehrich & Kimber, 2016; Finney et al., 2012). Recognising that leaders are made, not born (Lexa, 2011; Mareque et al., 2022), underscores the importance of investing in mentoring, despite associated training costs. Effective programs address gendered barriers and combine developmental mentoring, based on shared power, with sponsorship mentoring, which involves advocacy by senior leaders (Ehrich & Kimber, 2016).

Drawing on Daloz's (2012) principles, effective mentoring balances challenge and support to foster mentees' growth and leadership readiness. Challenge involves providing mentees with stimulating experiences and thought-provoking questions that encourage reflection on their values, beliefs, and behaviours. Support complements this by offering active listening, encouragement, and emotional safety. Together, this combination of high challenge and high support creates an environment where mentees can develop the skills and confidence needed to advance into leadership roles.

Although women receive more mentoring than men, they often lack access to sponsorship mentoring, critical for career advancement (Glass & Cook, 2018; Ibarra et al., 2010). Women are also perceived as "risky" candidates, which limits the effectiveness of mentoring (Allen et al., 2021; Ritt Gustad, 2024). These gendered perceptions complicate mentoring relationships. Female mentees may face power imbalances when paired with male mentors, while some female mentors exhibit "queen bee" behaviours that undermine support (Mavin, 2008). As a result, women's access to advocacy remains uneven. In Ibarra et al.'s (2010) sample, 36% of women had female mentors, compared to just 11% of men. Men's greater likelihood of having male mentors in senior roles gives them easier access to influential networks and career advancement, exposing the gendered gap in leadership opportunities.

These challenges indicate that mentoring alone is insufficient to advance women's leadership. Mentoring must be integrated with structural strategies addressing leadership styles, organisational culture, and systemic inequalities (Cofino & Botbyl, 2023; Ehrich & Kimber, 2016; Ritt Gustad, 2024). Sustainable progress demands broader organisational and cultural changes that challenge entrenched norms and power dynamics. The following implications highlight priorities to support gender-equitable leadership in schools.

Implications

Gender equity in leadership remains a critical concern across corporate and educational sectors, as structural and cultural barriers continue to limit women's advancement into senior school leadership roles. With principal cohorts aging, and declining interest in principalship among teachers—particularly women—urgent and sustained investment in leadership development is necessary. Such investment is critical for maintaining organisational stability, retaining skilled educators, and improving educational outcomes (ACARA, 2023; Bush, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). One key approach to achieving this is effective succession planning, which must prioritise building leadership capacity among female educators to ensure both continuity and diversity in leadership. Advancing gender equity further requires that educational institutions actively challenge gender stereotypes in leadership, promote equity-based hiring and promotion practices, provide mentoring and leadership development opportunities for women, and accommodate diverse life circumstances, including caregiving roles.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The conditions under which leadership is cultivated and rewarded often reflect masculinised, hierarchical norms that disadvantage women and constrain diverse expressions of leadership (Khan et al., 2024; Khraban & Vyhivska, 2024). Applying a feminist post-structural lens reveals the need to interrogate the discourses, policies, and practices that shape who is recognised as a leader, how leadership identities are formed, and which leadership styles are valued (Makarem et al., 2019; Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021). When leadership is understood as identity-driven and relational rather than solely strategic or positional, educational systems can better support the collaborative and transformational approaches often demonstrated by women. These approaches are increasingly recognised as essential in today's complex school environments (Alahbabi & Dilawer, 2023; Fullan, 2020; Mahmoud, 2024; Zheng et al., 2021).

Because leadership can be taught, learned, and practiced, higher education institutions must commit to supporting and developing leadership training within initial teacher education. Embedding leadership studies into academic curricula, training courses, or extracurricular activities equips future educators with the skills to become effective professional and social leaders (Mareque et al., 2022). Educational policymakers should also promote teacher training programs that aim to transform gender norms, employing critical pedagogical approaches grounded in transformational learning principles to challenge deeply rooted beliefs and behaviours in schools (Spear & da Costa, 2018).

Further, beyond participation in established leadership activities, it is crucial to promote development of teamwork skills and "feminine" attributes linked to leadership success, such as advanced interpersonal, communication, and negotiation skills (Mareque et al., 2022). At the institutional level, public administrations need to design flexible, accessible training and projects that support women's leadership advancement, accommodate family and work commitments, and promote focused research on gender and leadership. Positive discrimination policies should be considered in recruiting for senior roles to counteract persistent gender biases, alongside broader social campaigns to raise awareness of occupational stereotypes.

Succession planning and leadership development pathways must be deliberate, transparent, and equity-focused, offering mentoring, sponsorship, and authentic leadership opportunities to women early in their careers (Khan et al., 2024; Mahmoud, 2024; Setyaningrum & Juansih, 2024). Shifting away from narrow, masculinised conceptions of leadership competency toward models recognising emotional intelligence, relational capacity, and adaptability is essential (Fullan, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2008; Thompson & Stokes, 2024). Initiatives such as co-principalship and distributed leadership models offer promising avenues for diversifying leadership pathways and addressing principal shortages (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

Australian policymakers must actively combat gender leadership imbalances through mentoring programs, addressing gender bias, and offering leadership training tailored to women (The Educator, 2024). Additionally, allocating funding for gender equity initiatives, including scholarships for leadership qualifications and resources to support schools in implementing recommended strategies, is a vital step toward systemic change (Mareque et al., 2022). Equally important is encouraging women to assume and aspire to leadership roles, not only as classroom teachers but also as deputy principals, principals, and other senior school leadership positions.

Alongside formal training, gaining leadership experience through active participation in leadership roles fosters the development of essential competencies and has a multiplying effect on women's leadership capabilities (Mareque et al., 2022).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this article provides an overview of gender inequity in senior school leadership, it does not address intersectionality or women's leadership motivations, which require further research for a more comprehensive understanding. Given the complexity of gender inequity in education, this work represents an initial step toward exploring the intersections between gender, professional practice, leadership, and care in educational contexts. Further research is needed on the effectiveness of gender-diverse succession planning models in Australian schools and their impact on representation and school performance. Additionally, studies should examine the role of gender in mentoring and sponsorship relationships, particularly how these dynamics support or constrain women's leadership trajectories (Makarem et al., 2019). Urgent investigation is also needed into factors contributing to the attrition of high-quality female teachers from the leadership pipeline (Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021).

Applying a feminist post-structuralist framework would provide deeper insight into how leadership is discursively constructed and performed within educational systems. It would also highlight how power, identity, and institutional norms intersect to shape women's leadership experiences and opportunities (Makarem et al., 2019; Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021).

Conclusion

This review, situated within neoliberal contexts, applies a feminist post-structuralist lens to examine how dominant discourses marginalise women in school leadership (Makarem et al., 2019; Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021). The Australian context provides a clear empirical grounding, revealing a persistent representation gap: although women constitute the majority of the teaching workforce, they remain underrepresented in senior leadership roles. This ongoing disparity highlights the urgency of addressing the structural and cultural barriers that limit women's advancement.

As the first article in a planned series exploring the intersections of gender, leadership, professional practice, and care in education, this study lays the foundation for further research and action in this critical area. By exposing systemic barriers and the persistent influence of hegemonic masculinities, these insights frame leadership as an intersection of identity, power, and practice that is deeply embedded within structural and cultural systems. In response to these challenges, immediate changes to leadership structures and mentoring programs are essential. Educational institutions and policymakers must prioritise gender-diverse succession planning and targeted professional development for women at early career stages. Such efforts will not only cultivate a more inclusive leadership pipeline but also challenge the entrenched norms that define legitimate leadership in schools.

Moreover, effective leadership in today's complex educational environments requires qualities beyond strategic or positional authority. Leadership that promotes deep learning, system

coherence, and wellbeing requires emotional intelligence and relational grounding. This calls for a renewed understanding of leadership in which attunement, grounded in listening, humility, and shared power, is recognised as a foundational practice for equitable and sustainable leadership (Fullan, 2020, 2021, 2023). Central to this shift is the recognition of leadership as identity-driven and relational, enabling educational systems to formally legitimise the engaging leadership often associated with women. Such a transformation holds the promise of fostering equity, building trust, and ultimately improving outcomes for both staff and students.

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Understanding Belonging in Physical Environments of Educational Institutions: A Multi-Case Study of Black Women Leaders in Facilities Management

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ABSTRACT: Facilities management (FM) leaders in educational institutions are responsible for planning, design, and distribution of physical environments—critical to students, faculty, and staff sense of belonging. The little available literature indicates FM is White male-dominated with a hegemonically masculinist and patriarchal culture. As a result, planning, design, and distribution decisions on physical environments are often characterised by White male consciousness and control which serve White males' needs while ignoring the needs of everyone else. In this article, I argue that White male-dominance in FM contributes to severe underrepresentation of Black women in FM and its leadership, exacerbating minoritised groups' sense of not belonging in educational institutions. Using a multi-case and a Black feminist framework to investigate four Black women executive leaders' experiences, my study revealed two complex structural barriers maintaining White male dominance in FM. First, FM is a poorly defined profession because my participants were unaware of its existence until later in their careers. Second, White male dominance and culture creates an environment that perpetuates behaviours, actions, and practices of racism and sexism to discourage Black women from leadership. Results from this study help us understand the link between underrepresentation of Black women leaders and sense of belonging.

Key words: Belonging, physical environment, Black women, facilities management, leadership

Introduction

Physical environments in educational institutions significantly impact students, faculty, and staff sense of belonging (Samura, 2018; Wilson et al., 2025). Crucially, this sense of belonging is connected to how these groups experience racism, sexism, and other oppressions within these

physical environments (Samura, 2018; Weisman, 1994; Wilson et al., 2025). Facilities management (FM) is often the professional entity in educational institutions responsible for physical environments. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) defines FM as an "organisation that integrates people, place, and process within the physical environment with the purpose of improving the quality of life of the people and the productivity of the core business" (Atkin & Brooks, 2021, p. 6).

The International Facility Management Association (IFMA) is a worldwide association for over 25,000 FM professionals in more than 140 countries. IFMA (2023) defines an FM leader as a person in a position of power and authority who influences decisions and attitudes of organisations' leadership as well as that of users of physical environments, government officials, suppliers, community leaders, and business partners in aligning the facility portfolio with the demands of the organisation's mission and available resources. This definition highlights FM leaders' influence in decisions relating to physical environments, making them key actors impacting students, faculty, and staff sense of belonging.

For example, Lipsitz (2007) theorised the hidden architecture of landscape by investigating how space is racialised, and race spatialised, illuminating the importance of spatial dimensions in lived experiences of race and racial dimensions in lived experiences of space. Lipsitz argued that individuals are subjected to a socially shared system of exclusion and inclusion based on the racial demography of the places where they live, work, play, and shop. He emphasised that leaders responsible for physical environments play a key role in disrupting this critical link connecting race and place to power.

No previous study has investigated FM organisation in educational institutions. Very limited research exists on FM, generally, and no data have been published on FM leadership (Badger & Garvin, 2007; Drion et al., 2012; Price, 2002; Sullivan et al., 2010). However, a large and growing body of literature has investigated FM-related professions and White, male-dominated careers such as construction and other physical environment professions, especially in Western countries (Atkin & Brooks, 2021; Hunte, 2018; National Women's Law Center [NWLC], 2014; Sang & Powell, 2012). Evidence from these studies suggests FM is a White, male-dominated profession with an ingrained hegemonically masculinist and patriarchal culture (Hunte, 2018; Kwofie, 2024; NWLC, 2014; Sang & Powell, 2012; Weisman, 1994).

Several lines of evidence indicate that such a culture reinforces White male control, entitlement, and feelings of superiority, perpetuating behaviours, actions, and practices of overt and subtle sexism, racism, and other oppressions (Hunte, 2018; Kwofie, 2024; Navarro-Astor et al., 2017; Weisman, 1994). This oppressive culture deters Black women and other minoritised individuals from pursuing the profession and its leadership, further reinforcing White male dominance. Consequently, decisions regarding the planning, design, construction, and distribution of physical environments become characterised by White male consciousness, experience, and control (Kwofie, 2024; Weisman, 1994).

The experience of a Black female colleague illustrates how FM leadership decisions about physical environments impact students, faculty, and staff sense of belonging. She reported that a White male colleague recommended that rather than creating a dedicated space for lactation, nursing mothers can make reservations to use a conference room for their lactation needs. Banks (1990) attributes such a recommendation to White male-designed physical environments that not

only fail to meet women's needs but also send exclusionary signals that discourage women's active participation in the professional world. Put simply, since White men do not need lactation rooms, lactation rooms are not needed.

This finding is echoed by Poljak et al.'s (2023) research examining the impact of space design in an academic library on diverse students. The study found that physical environments invoke physical and emotional safety, emotional wellbeing, and ownership that impact students' sense of belonging and feelings of inclusion or exclusion. Likewise, Wilson et al.'s (2025) investigation of faculty and staff sense of belonging found that organisational policies, practices, and sociopolitical structures in the work environment often favour and reward White men while undermining a sense of belonging for minoritised groups. These studies illustrate how White male dominance in FM leadership contributes to inequities in planning, design, and allocation decisions for physical environments, which in turn affect student, faculty, and staff sense of belonging.

In this article, I argue that minoritised groups' sense of not belonging in educational institutions is exacerbated by the severe underrepresentation of Black women in FM leadership. I selected Black women for this research due to my lived experience as often the only Black woman leader among my mostly White male peers in several FM organisations. The onlyness I experienced and the limited representation of Black women in FM leadership are further examples of ongoing injustice against Black women, which stems from the enslavement era and is perpetuated by a system that perceives White men as superior, and therefore more worthy of leadership positions (Kwofie, 2024). As a result, there are few, if any, Black women leaders in FM to advocate for physical environments that meet the needs of minoritised groups.

As noted previously, no study has investigated FM leadership in educational institutions or the experiences of Black women leaders in these organisations. Rather, existing studies focus mainly on the racialised, gendered, and other oppressive experiences of students, faculty, and staff in physical environments that exist in educational institutions (Samura, 2018; Wilson et al., 2025). To date, little attention has been paid to understanding the link between FM leadership and students, faculty, and staff sense of belonging. Genuinely addressing the problem of belonging in educational institutions requires taking seriously the underrepresentation of Black women in FM leadership.

To begin tackling this issue, this article employs a multi-case study methodology and Black feminist framework to examine the experiences of four Black women executives leading FM organisations in educational institutions. This article is organised in the following way. First, I provide an overview of Black women's leadership, highlighting what is already known about this topic. Second, I discuss the racialised, gendered, and oppressive dimensions of physical environments. Third, I describe my data collection method, data sources, and analytical approach. Fourth, I present my results and discuss my findings. Finally, I summarise the conclusion drawn from my findings, explaining the significance of this study and providing recommendations for future research and professional practice.

Black Women's Place in Leadership

Historical discourse has rarely recognised the leadership of Black women, although they have been in the forefront of many struggles for social justice, including the civil rights movement, reconstruction, voting rights, and women's rights (Giddings, 1984; Martin, 2019; Sales et al., 2020). Giddings (1984) asserts that societal perceptions of Black women as mothers, wives, and domestics from the era of enslavement continue to dismiss the social and political change Black women bring to their fight for equal rights and justice. This historical exclusion, alongside other political, economic, and organisational factors, contributes to the ongoing dismissal of Black women's leadership capabilities today.

Historically, Eurocentric Western ideologies have created images of leadership that favour heterosexual White men (Jackson & Rajai, 2021) and dismiss Black women's leadership because of their perceived societal images as domestics. This mismatch in perception undermines Black women's leadership capabilities and contributes to their exclusion from positions of power and authority (Allen & Lewis, 2016; Collins, 2022; Kwofie, 2024). Black women who do hold leadership positions historically occupied by White men are considered invaders (Gabriel, 2017), usurping roles that belong to White men and violating their normative racial roles as domestics and perceived gender roles as homemakers, wives, mothers, and caretakers (Allen & Lewis, 2016; Hall et al., 2012; Hunte, 2018).

Supporting this viewpoint, Powell et al. (2015) reported that Black women who pursue careers that are deemed as traditional for White men and "nontraditional" for Black women are often perceived as "crossing traditional boundaries into masculine games" (p. 922). The definition of traditional versus nontraditional professions is even codified by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), which defines occupations in which women (in this case, Black women) comprise 25% or less of the total workforce as "nontraditional" (Chun et al., 2009; Lekchiri & Kamm, 2020; NWLC, 2014). Powell et al. (2015) describe this underrepresentation of Black women as a "habitus"—a situation in which White men are presumed to be more qualified for positions, including leadership roles, in a profession (p. 921). The authors argue these stereotypical racial and gendered perceptions operate at both conscious and unconscious levels, reproducing racial and gender disparities by normalising racist and sexist behaviours, actions, and practices. These perceptions reinforce White male dominance in FM and its leadership, influence decisions on physical environments in educational institutions, and consequently contribute to feelings of not belonging.

The federal government has passed multiple legislative policies promoting equal opportunity and access in attempts to address the underrepresentation of minoritised groups like Black women in male-dominated occupations such as FM. For instance, the Kennedy administration's Executive Order 10925 in 1961 required all federally funded contractors and vendors to implement affirmative action measures to prohibit racial discrimination in hiring and employment practices (Chun et al., 2009; Hunte, 2018; NWLC, 2014). The Johnson administration's Executive Order 11246 in 1965 expanded the Civil Rights Act of 1964, charging the U.S. Secretary of Labor with ensuring that underrepresented groups such as Black women have equal employment and training opportunities on federal contracts (Chun et al., 2009; Hunte, 2018). Decades later, the 1991 Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW) Act amended the Job

Training Partnership Act of 1982 to encourage job training and employment for women in nontraditional fields like FM. In 1992, the Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations (WANTO) Technical Assistance Grant Program was enacted to help businesses provide apprenticeships and employment opportunities for women in nontraditional professions like FM.

While these legislative orders sought to encourage the recruitment and hiring of minoritised groups like Black women, they failed to address the hostile and oppressive culture that maintains White male dominance by restricting Black women's access to these professions and leadership positions. The underrepresentation of Black women in FM leadership has economic implications dating back to the enslavement era, when they were excluded from high-wage professions because of their social roles as domestics, wives, and mothers (Rothstein, 2017). Allen and Lewis (2016) characterise White male dominance in these professions as homosocial reproduction—a process whereby "White men shape organisational structures and leadership hierarchies in ways that replicate White male-dominated spaces, creating cumulative disadvantages for minoritized groups, Black women especially, which increases when higher levels of power are at stake" (p. 9). Such practices keep Black women away from these professions and positions of power and it is consistent with Wilson et al.'s (2025) finding that organisational policies, practices, and sociopolitical structures in educational institutions are set up to benefit only White men.

Collins (2022) observes that Black women are often excluded from high-paying professional and managerial roles and assigned to lower-status and lower-income positions that require them to take care of others rather than lead them. For example, the U.S. construction industry employed over 11.8 million people in 2022, creates approximately $1.8 trillion worth of structures every year, and provides a major career pipeline for FM professionals. Yet the 2023 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported that in 2021, Black women comprised only 0.7% of the construction workforce (U.S. BLS, 2023). Excluding Black women from this industry denies them access to both economic wealth and positions of power and authority, in turn preventing them from influencing decisions regarding physical environments (Associated General Contractors [AGC], 2023; U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2023).

Previous studies have also examined the organisational impact of the underrepresentation of Black women leaders in White male-dominated occupations like FM (Kwofie, 2024; Navarro-Astor et al., 2017). For example, in their systematic literature review examining barriers that limit women's career development in the construction industry, Navarro-Astor et al. (2017) describe the industry as historically "a site for gender discrimination" across several cultures (p. 200). The authors attribute the root cause of gender discrimination in the profession to an exclusionary "locker room" institutional culture that reinforces heterosexual male superiority by promoting harassment and discriminatory practices in job allocation, hiring, promotion, and compensation against women—in this case, Black women. By breeding White male dominance in FM leadership, this institutional culture inhibits representation of Black women leaders and yields exclusionary physical environment decisions. Such decisions create a sense of not belonging for minoritised communities expected to inhabit these environments.

Racialised, Gendered, and Oppressive Dimensions in Physical Environments

In her essay, "Toilets as a Feminist Issue: A True Story", Banks (1990) elucidates how a White male-designed physical environment is reflected in the design and distribution of basic facilities like restrooms. She argues that the lack of women's representation, generally in a decision-making position, specifically in influencing the design and distribution of basic facilities, produces restrooms that send signals of exclusion, discouraging women's active participation in the professional world. Similarly, Anthony and Dufresne (2007) examined the impact of public restrooms on the health and safety of women, men, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and caregivers. The authors found that historically, discrimination based on race, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation, and class is manifested in restrooms, as the planning, design, and distribution of facilities within physical environments reflect a power structure that typically favours White men.

To illuminate the pervasiveness of such discrimination within physical environments, Moore (2001) examined how restrooms for Congressional leaders in the U.S. Capitol are distributed. She reported that congresswomen's restrooms are far from the House Floor, whereas congressmen's restrooms are within a few feet of the Floor. Consequently, congresswomen must plan their trips to the restroom to avoid missing votes. These studies illuminate how White men's power and authority over physical environments limit Black women's participation in the professional world and leadership positions and perpetuate a cycle of not belonging for minoritised groups, including those serving in the highest levels of government.

Employing as my theoretical framework Collins' (2022) Black feminist thought (BFT), specifically her concepts of self-definition, self-reliance, and activism, I engaged four Black women executives in FM leadership to explore their experiences in FM. *Self-definition* highlights participants' raised consciousness—their familiarity with the oppressor's ways and language and their ability to extract meaning from their oppressive experiences while preventing the oppressor from knowing their self-defined stance. This stance encompasses a sense of empowerment, self-reliance, and independence and an ability to support oneself and others in negotiating and navigating the FM leadership power structure. *Self-reliance* enables participants to draw on their strengths, knowledge, and wisdom to negotiate and navigate oppressive experiences. Finally, the BFT concept of *activism* illuminates participants' engaged daily actions that resist, challenge, and confront oppression and their struggle for institutional transformation in their organisations, professions, and beyond.

Methods

I employed a qualitative multi-case study design (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2006), examining the experiences of four Black women executive leaders to gain insight into how they negotiate and navigate oppression in FM leadership. My research question was: How do Black women executives negotiate and navigate the structural barriers they encounter in FM to persist in leadership? I utilised a snowball sampling process to recruit my research participants from

LinkedIn Women in Facilities groups (Parker et al., 2019). My criteria for research participants included Black or African American women with at least five years of work experience and a minimum of two years in influential executive leadership positions in FM.

Data Collection

My data sources for this study included a questionnaire and two semi-structured interviews per participant. One interview included photo-elicitation of artifacts or objects of significance and a description of a key initiative or program that contributed significantly to the participant's leadership trajectory. I conducted follow-up member checks to ensure the data collected were complete and my analysis was trustworthy.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to collect information about participants' education and leadership position in FM, three words describing their leadership, an artifact or object of significance, and a key initiative or project that contributed significantly to their leadership development (McLafferty, 2010; Parfitt, 2005). The questionnaire was sent to each participant to complete before the first interview. These data were used to capture valuable information about each participant's behaviour, social interactions, attitudes, and perceptions (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). Table 1 presents some of the data collected from the questionnaire.

Table 1

Participants' Education and Experience in FM

Participant	Current Industry	First Position in FM	First College Degree	Current Position/ Authority	Years in FM	Years in Current Position
Participant 1	Higher Education	Facilities Manager	Mechanical Engineering. Completed 14 years after dropping out of college	Executive Facilities Officer	Less than 20 years	Less than 2 years
Participant 2	Global Humanitarian	Estate Officer	Land Economy	Executive Facilities Officer	Over 20 years	Less than 2 years
Participant 3	Higher Education/ Research/ Healthcare	Nursing/ FM Partner	Nursing	Highest-Ranking Administrative Officer	Over 30 years	Almost 6 years
Participant 4	Higher Education	Building Superintendent	Mechanical Engineering	Executive Facilities Officer	Over 10 years	Less than 5 years

Semi-Structured Interviews

I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each participant. The first interview, which was 60 minutes long, included photo-elicitation of artifacts or objects of significance and a discussion of a key initiative or program that contributed significantly to the participant's leadership development. The second interview was 45 minutes long, and it drilled deeper into each participant's experience as an FM leader. I also conducted follow-up member checks to ensure the completeness and trustworthiness of my data and analysis. I used Zoom video and audio to conduct my interviews. The questionnaire responses were imported into Microsoft Excel for analysis. The Zoom video and audio were transcribed and uploaded into Dedoose (Version 9.0, 2023) for coding.

Data Analysis

I used Microsoft Excel to analyse the questionnaire data and Dedoose (Version 9.0, 2023) to code and analyse the interview data (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Merriam, 2009; Saldaña, 2021). In the coding process, I first reviewed the data in the spreadsheet and read the transcript in Dedoose to familiarise myself with the data. Second, I conducted the initial data coding by assigning simple codes, then reviewed the data in the spreadsheet and transcript again to generate primary codes (Saldaña, 2021). Third, I read the transcript multiple times through the lens of my research question and theoretical framework, generating sub-codes aligned with primary codes that responded to my research question and highlighting key excerpts as evidence. Fourth, I used inductive coding to identify patterns and emerging themes (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Merriam, 2009; Saldaña, 2021; Silver & Lewins, 2014).

Strengths, Limitations, and Trustworthiness

This study utilised a multi-case study approach to provide deeper insights into the real-life experiences of each participant, generating strong, rich evidence (Gustafsson, 2017). Yet there are limitations to the multi-case study approach: It is complex and time consuming, and managing the data can be exhausting (Merriam, 2009). Nonetheless, drilling deeply into each participant's experiences yielded valuable results that were "intensely grounded in different empirical evidence and created a more convincing theory" (Gustafsson, 2017, p. 11). In addition, the small number of non-random cases comprising the study cannot be considered representative of the study population. Nevertheless, the findings enhance our understanding of the extent of Black women's underrepresentation in FM leadership and offer insights into the structural barriers that drive Black women away from the profession and its leadership.

Concerns about the sensitivity and integrity of the research were addressed by employing all the necessary training and care, following the protocol required to safeguard the data, protecting the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, and attending to my own positionality as a researcher. To ensure trustworthiness throughout the research process, I incorporated validity and reliability strategies including respondent validation and researcher reflexivity (Merriam, 2009). I shared the collected data, emerging themes, and my researcher interpretations with participants for

feedback through multiple member checks to eliminate the possibility of misinterpreting meanings or misrepresenting participants' perspectives (Merriam, 2009).

Finally, my positionality as a Black woman leader with multiple intersecting identities and lived experiences in FM also informs the focus of this research and the decision to select Black women as my research participants. My extensive professional background positions me as an insider in FM, and my familiarity with the culture and language of the field helped me earn my participants' trust. However, I was mindful of my personal beliefs, values, biases, and assumptions as I listened to each participant's stories. I reflected back on each story to ensure their voices, not mine, were amplified in my interpretation of the data.

Results

In this section, I present the three main themes that emerged from my data analysis: coincidental career, old boys' club, and code of exclusion. To add depth, Table 2 offers illustrative quotes for each theme. I describe these themes in detail below.

Table 2

Thematic Results: Participant Quotes

	Theme 1 **Coincidental Career**	**Theme 2** **Old Boys' Club**	**Theme 3: Code of Exclusion**
Participant 1	Nobody talks about FM, so most people have no idea what it is. If I had known what it was, I would have really liked it, because that's the kind of stuff I like doing at home.	And so, I think that's the biggest thing … if there were a man, a White man sitting in the chair, he would have credibility that … he deserved to be in the chair.	Especially if you're a Black woman, they expect every emotion is just anger. So you say, "No, I'm not angry. I'm adamant". But it's perceived as anger, or it's always perceived as attitude.
Participant 2	FM wasn't really known as a career option. I wasn't working in FM when I started working. I was in banking. I brought my background of understanding what people want and how people view certain things to FM.	You are often the only woman in the meeting and the only Black person. No one listens to you. You are often ignored.	FM is a White man's field. Black women find it hard to penetrate. I'm confident, yet I'm being seen as an outsider because I am a Black woman—the angry Black woman narrative. I feel and see this daily, subtle or overt. People try to push you down to stay in your place. We don't know what this place is, but White men know. They are constantly pushing to keep you in this place.

	Theme 1 Coincidental Career	Theme 2 Old Boys' Club	Theme 3: Code of Exclusion
Participant 3	My first degree was a bachelor's in nursing … My very first job in FM was as a Division Administrator at a research university where I was overseeing a few departments in the facilities organisation.	It is a really old boys' network … I have a bullshit (BS) meter for when people tell me something that is not true. They think they can use big words or technical terms, hoping I will think, "Oh wow, they really know what they are talking about". No. My BS meter goes off and starts flashing with noise because what they are telling me doesn't sound right. So I ask more questions because of my curiosity, then realise it's not exactly what they're saying.	They [White men] were paid at the current market level, and they seem to be okay. The women were vastly underpaid to the point two women left the organisation.
Participant 4	I graduated, didn't even get my certificate, but had to move out of housing. And I've been looking for jobs … an opportunity. So, he asked, "Well, what do you know? Do you know anything about boilers?" I said, "Of course I know about boilers. I can design a boiler. Actually, I learned to do that in school".	So, I would say as a woman, it's a male-dominated industry. You get that stereotype where if a gentleman wants to be more stern, then you know he's a leader. But if you're a woman who is confident and sure about the thing you want to get done, then they use a different term for you.	When I provide these White men with instructions, they say to their colleagues, "She told me to do X, but if I don't do it, what is she going to do about it? I want to see what she's going to do about it". My leadership is being challenged.

Coincidental Career

The first theme, Coincidental Career, arose when participants were asked how they got into the FM profession. None of my participants followed a well-defined path to FM. In fact, they were all unaware of the FM profession in college and when they began their careers. For example, Participant 1 dropped out of college while pursuing a mechanical engineering degree but returned 14 years later, after discovering FM, to complete her degree. She noted that she might have completed college the first time if her engineering program had offered information about career opportunities in FM.

Participant 2 earned a degree in nursing, completely unrelated to FM. Participants 1, 3, and 4 have degrees in mechanical engineering and land economy, fields related to FM. Yet none of them knew about the FM profession during college. Indeed, Participant 4, who became unhoused and unemployed immediately after graduating with an engineering degree, overlooked multiple open positions in FM because she was unfamiliar with the profession. In her illustrative quote in

Table 2, she shares her conversation with the director of a job centre who made her aware of her job opportunities in FM. Participant 3 was hired as a real estate officer after graduating college, yet for many years she was unaware that she was employed in the FM profession. She expressed that her excitement in discovering the many FM career opportunities is the main reason she is still in FM.

Old Boys' Club

Concerns about oppressive behaviours, actions, and practices in FM recurred throughout the dataset. The second theme, Old Boys' Club, describes how such patterns maintain and reinforce White male dominance. All participants reported that their colleagues, peers, direct reports, and service vendors, most of whom were White men, often perceived themselves as superior, more knowledgeable, and better qualified leaders regardless of their position or level of experience.

For example, Participant 1 described an incident in which her staff introduced her as their organisation's FM leader to a representative of an external service vendor—a White man contracted to provide service to her organisation. The participant recalled the dismissive look on this White man's face when he discovered she was a Black woman, noting that White men are often perceived instantly as leaders in FM. The participant reported that the vendor reacted to her identity by using technical engineering terminology to describe the service he was hired to provide, unaware that she was an engineer with thorough knowledge and understanding of the services requested.

Participant 3, who has a nursing degree, echoed this experience, reporting that some White men in her organisation use technical language to discuss FM issues, presuming she lacks knowledge and understanding of FM-related issues. She remarked that such dismissive and oppressive assumptions resulted from the White men's perceived superiority, entitlement, and control. I present her reaction to such oppressive experiences in Table 2.

Code of Exclusion

The third theme that emerged from the interviews was participants' sense that they were not welcomed or acknowledged in their leadership positions. I use the phrase *code of exclusion* to describe how oppressive behaviours, actions, and practices maintain and reinforce White male dominance in FM by showing hostility toward and discriminating against Black women. The participants described how these oppressive and hostile behaviours, actions, and practices sent exclusionary signals that made them feel diminished in their FM leadership positions. They reported that White men in their organisations often denied them the respect typically accorded to their leadership positions because of their identities as Black women.

For example, Participant 1 described an experience in which a White male colleague, a leader in another department, was recognised for work her team performed under her leadership. She explained that her White male colleague felt entitled to this recognition, and when she attempted to correct the university announcement to reflect the names of the staff who had actually performed the work and her request was ignored, he was unwilling to give up the recognition. She believed her predecessor in the position, a White man, would not have been subjected to any of

the dismissive experiences she encountered daily. This experience illustrates exclusionary practices that result from the perception that only White men are deserving of recognition for their leadership and acknowledgment of their accomplishments.

Participants 1 and 2 described how White male dominance in FM creates an impenetrable barrier for Black women. For example, Participant 1 emphasised that every emotion a Black woman expressed was perceived as anger or an attitude. Participant 2 echoed this experience, reporting that White male colleagues often mischaracterised her assertiveness as anger to create doubts about her suitability for leadership. As a result, she often altered her behaviour to make it difficult for people to read and misinterpret her emotions, which negatively affected her mental health.

Participant 3 recounted how before she assumed her current position overseeing FM in her organisation, the FM leadership—mostly White men—had established a power structure of competitive compensation, hiring, and promotion that benefited only White males. She reported that women in comparable positions were vastly underpaid, to the point that two women left the organisation. Similarly, Participant 4 described daily oppressive encounters with misogynoir (discrimination at the intersection of race and gender) in which her subordinates—most of whom were White men—refused to follow her directions or challenged her decisions, leaving her feeling diminished. She felt her leadership was constantly undermined by White male subordinates who refused to follow her directions and often dared her to respond to their insubordination.

These results illuminate how a poorly defined career path to FM and White male dominance coupled with oppressive behaviours, actions, and practices in the profession contribute to the severe underrepresentation of Black women. It is no surprise, then, that White male control, experience, and consciousness influence decisions that shape physical environments, undermining a sense of belonging for Black women and other minoritised groups.

Discussion

In reviewing the literature, no data were found linking the underrepresentation of Black women in FM leadership to the lack of a sense of belonging in the physical environments of educational institutions. This study investigated how the underrepresentation of Black women in FM leadership impacts a sense of belonging in educational institutions. The results reveal two key, complex structural barriers restricting Black women's access to FM, its leadership positions of power and authority. First, FM is a poorly defined profession, and it is therefore difficult for Black women to learn about this profession early and pursue careers in it. Second, FM is a White, male-dominated profession with a culture that reinforces oppressive behaviours, actions, and practices to exclude Black women from the profession and its leadership.

The finding that FM is a poorly defined profession supports the conclusion of previous literature that very little is known about FM due to the limited number of formal academic and technical programs that specifically prepare students for the profession (Badger & Garvin, 2007; Drion et al., 2012; Price, 2002; Sullivan et al., 2010). My results indicate that the lack of a well-defined path to the profession, coupled with an absence of information promoting the profession in academic programs, creates a structural barrier that restricts Black women's access to FM and

its leadership. This impediment helps maintain White male dominance in FM leadership and consequently in physical environment design and distribution decisions that promote exclusion and undermine a sense of belonging.

My findings also support existing literature on White male-dominated professions like FM. Studies investigating Black women's experiences in White, male-dominated professions report that Black women regularly encounter hostile, discriminatory, and harassing behaviours and actions from their White male colleagues and subordinates, who often dismiss their capabilities, intelligence, and experience as leaders (Allen & Lewis, 2016; Hunte, 2018; Kwofie, 2024; Sales et al., 2020; Weisman, 1994). In this way, the culture of FM privileges and reinforces White male control, entitlement, and superiority by supporting and reinforcing the belief that White men are more knowledgeable, credible, and qualified as leaders.

This culture creates and reinforces racist and sexist behaviours, actions, norms, and practices, erecting structural barriers that exclude Black women and drive them away from the profession and its leadership. By limiting or eliminating their representation in leadership and their ability to influence decisions that impact physical environments, White men maintain control (Allen & Lewis, 2016; Hunte, 2018; Kwofie, 2024; Sales et al., 2020; Weisman, 1994). Overall, my study identified two structural barriers—a poorly defined career path to FM and White male dominance—that contribute to the severe underrepresentation of Black women in the FM profession and its leadership. The resulting White male control, experiences, and consciousness that guide decisions shape physical environments in educational institutions and result in a sense of not belonging for Black women and other minoritised groups.

Conclusion

The results of my study reveal a poorly defined FM profession coupled with White male dominance that promotes an oppressive culture of racism, sexism, classism, and other intersecting oppressions that contribute to the underrepresentation of Black women in FM leadership. As a result, planning, design, and distribution decisions in physical environments are often shaped by dominant White male control, consciousness, and experience, meeting the needs of White males while sending signals of exclusion to and undermining belonging among minoritised groups.

Overall, my results suggest that addressing the structural barriers contributing to the underrepresentation of Black women in FM is critical for increasing a sense of belonging in educational institutions. These results have implications for beginning to uncover the link between the underrepresentation of Black women in FM leadership and sense of belonging, so we can provide necessary support for Black women to pursue careers and advance to leadership in FM. We need Black women leaders in FM positions of power and authority to influence decisions on the planning, design, and distribution of physical environments to create a sense of belonging for all students, faculty, and staff.

Significance of the Study

My study addresses a major gap in the educational FM research literature and offers vital knowledge that can help diversify the field to create physical campus environments that meet the needs of diverse students, faculty, and staff. This study also has significant implications for understanding how the dearth of Black women leaders in FM contributes to a lack of belonging in our educational institutions. It suggests the value of hosting career information sessions at institutions offering academic programs that are related to the FM profession and encouraging FM professional associations to provide scholarships, sponsorships, and internships aimed at recruiting Black women and other minoritised groups into the profession. Colleges, universities, and professional associations can collectively create well-defined career paths to help Black women and other minoritised groups more easily access FM and provide support to help them advance to and thrive in FM leadership so they can influence decisions on campus physical environments. Yet this work is only the beginning. Additional research is needed to fully understand conditions specifically in educational facilities management that contribute to the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership and how this impacts students, faculty, and staff sense of belonging.

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Celebrating the Creative Ways Women Lead in Rural Schools

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the complexity and challenges faced by women leaders in rural schools and the creative ways they enact their roles. The research is important because it highlights the opportunities and obstacles faced by rural educational leaders, around recruitment, managing workload, developing professional connection, personal work life balance and gendered issues. Furthermore, it makes an important contribution to understanding how much context matters when thinking about school leadership. Feminist poststructural discourse analysis and arts-based methodologies, including marginalia were used to gather, analyse, and interpret the data from interviews and creative point-in-time provocations with 12 female leaders in southwest Victoria, Australia. To retain anonymity, I produced fictional vignettes from the data that amplified the voices of leaders working in the margins of close-knit, rural communities. Each vignette provided a creative map leaders used to address professional challenges and constraints. By centring marginalised perspectives and employing arts-based methods, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of rural leadership development. The findings hold implications for supporting and empowering future leaders while offering new knowledge to address systemic issues within rural educational communities.

Key words: Leadership, identity, gender, context, rural

Introduction

The article aims to draw attention to the incredible work of women leading in rural schools. It explores the creative ways women embody, adapt, and transform their leadership opportunities into roles that allow them to play with diverse notions of a leadership self to meet the complex demands of leading schools in the "middle of nowhere" (Bradbeer, 2023). This research expands the idea that context matters as a way of understanding professional identity and leadership (Mockler, 2011) and contends that a disposition of "play" has shaped the lived experiences of women leaders in rural schools.

The teaching profession in Australia is in crisis. Recent data in the Teacher Workforce Shortage Issues Paper (Department of Education, 2021) predicts a significant shortfall of teachers due to an ageing population, the low status of the profession, and strained working conditions.

Globally, UNESCO (2024) predicts a shortfall of 44 million teachers by 2030. Post-Covid, educators operate in a state of VUCA—volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). Without innovative approaches to training and retaining teachers, there will be a dearth of leaders, and this issue is exacerbated in rural schools. For women in leadership, "double bind barriers" exist (Kise & Watterston, 2019, p. 45). The leadership gender gap in education is evident in the decreasing representation of women in these roles in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022, 2023; Elliott et al., 2022; McKenzie et al., 2014), and this is reflected internationally in data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017). Schools need effective, adaptive leaders who can shape the culture and build community (Longmuir et al., 2022). Women who dominate the teaching profession have career paths that are frequently non-linear and interrupted (Thompson & Stokes, 2023). This research study highlights the creative ways women respond to the opportunities and obstacles in leading rural schools and develops a new conceptual model and method for educational leadership research.

Research Question

This article argues that "identities, relationships and positions in [the] world" are negotiated in a contested space (Baxter, 2003, p. 1). Discursive repertoires are used to amplify the creative ways women struggle and engage with their leadership identity, and feminist poststructural discourse analysis (FPDA) challenges the linearity of women's rural school leadership trajectories and provides nuanced understandings of multiple competing subject positions. This research questions how women become leaders in rural schools and specifically how women are active co-constructors of their identity as leaders.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Educational research has largely overlooked the rural (Pini et al., 2015) and previous studies on professional isolation, workload intensification, and the experience of flux experienced by teachers and leaders in rural schools have negative connotations (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Walker-Gibbs et al., 2018). This research aims to understand the complex and competing experiences and intersectional considerations of female leaders in rural schools (Bradbeer, 2023). The current literature fails to address the cumulative impact of identity, gender, race, leadership, and the rural context (Hallinger, 2018) on the identity and experiences of women in leadership roles. The "playful" research design informed by FPDA (Baxter, 2003), arts-based methodologies (Kara, 2015), and marginalia (Truman, 2016), presents playful data annotations as complex, reflective understandings of being a female leader in a rural school.

Theoretical Framework

This research is integral to expanding knowledge of how women lead in rural schools. The rural as a place, space, and context cannot be assumed or ignored. Australian Standard Geographical Classification System (ABS, 2022) defines "rural and remote" as areas outside

Australia's major cities. Using this definition, the research advocates for a transformational, and relational presentation of the multiple subjectivities of women who lead in rural schools. According to Baxter (2003), women are positioned as simultaneously "powerful and powerless" (p. 9). Since Blackmore's (1999) early work, *Troubling Women*, there has been a dismantling of scholarship that both essentialised the notion of woman and pushed for a disruptive and progressive framing of gender (Fuller, 2021). This seismic shift in thinking about women and educational leadership rejected research by cis men in Western countries, which largely ignored the intersection of gender, race, class, and sexuality in the discussion of leadership. Alternative leadership paradigms include reflective feminist perspectives that draw on social justice issues for women, mapped against geographical, theoretical, empirical, leadership praxis, and chronological frames (Fuller, 2021).

The systemic and organisational issues that impede the way women become leaders in rural schools are challenged when conceptual frameworks are employed to examine the experiences of women and understand how they negotiate the knowledge, language, and power in their positions of leadership in rural schools. Foucauldian (Faubion, 1998) theories frame this study and articulate key ideas of language, knowledge, and power that inform discourse; specifically, how Foucault paved the way for feminist theories to shape thinking about gender, identity, and leadership. Poststructuralist theory is used as both a framework for the research and a method to investigate the identity formation of women who lead in rural schools. The data captured by adopting this conceptual framework build on the current understanding of the literature around identity, leadership, and the rural context. According to Baxter (2003), FPDA draws attention to the ways "speakers negotiate their identities, relationships and positions in their world" (p. 1) and it emphasises the importance of diversity and textual play that actively seeks out "troublesome issues" and the "unresolved tensions, competing perspectives, shifts of power, ambiguities, and contradictions inherent within all texts" (p. 2).

Literature Review

This study draws on scholarship that aligns professional identity and leadership issues with the rural.

Identity in Rural Educational Leadership

There is burgeoning interest in identity in education (Beijaard et al., 2004) and the role of context in professional identity formation. Professional identity is considered by Day et al. (2006) as organic, unstable, and responsive. For women in leadership in schools, professional identity "*is not just about being female but also about how race, culture, sexuality and class produced different forms of being, knowing and relating" (*Blackmore, 2020, p. 30, emphasis in original). Therefore, "adjectival leadership" (Niesche & Gowlett, 2015) or essentialised masculine or feminine archetypes of leadership (Kise & Watterston, 2019) place limitations on their role. Educational leadership is complex and characterised by competing notions of professional identity and personal agency. McKay et al. (2019) use alternative metaphors that challenge the understanding of school

leadership and offer researchers and practitioners a powerful frame for "defining reality, structuring experience, and understanding intangibles like nuanced feelings, abstract beliefs, and complex human experiences" (p. 84). Furthermore, the human and relational focus of leadership amplified in the work of Blackmore (2017) and Eacott (2019) echoes the "participatory, relational and interpersonal" leadership and identity observed in women's leadership practice (Cleveland & Cleveland, 2020, p. 2).

Challenges Specific to Rural School Leadership

School leadership in the rural is executed differently from leadership in metropolitan schools, and issues around recruiting, retaining, and the professional development of leaders all impact how the role of a leader is embodied. According to Heffernan (2021), the high turnover of principals in rural schools is often the consequence of inexperience, lack of cohesion between staff and students, challenging contexts, and a lack of stability and equity. Pipeline issues impact leadership recruitment and retention (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020). Equally problematic is how issues in the rural are often perceived as binaries, and this informs preconceptions of rurality and "teachers' real and imaginary positionings" (Walker-Gibbs et al., 2018, p. 301) within leadership discourse. According to Walker-Gibbs et al., deficit views of the rural as less than other dominant urban views of the world is a consistent theme in the literature. When the rural is characterised by a "dualism, of being different, yet the same" as the urban (Roberts & Green, 2013, p. 765), it undermines the unique claims of the students, teachers, and leaders in rural schools. Preston and Barnes (2017) note that while the rural context demands "differentiated attention", there remains a "paucity of research on this specialised focus" (p. 6).

Method

In the following section, the research context, participants, and data analysis are described.

Participants

Women in all schools across different education sectors (Government Catholic, and Independent) in Southwest Victoria, Australia were invited via email and word of mouth to participate in a professional learning opportunity. Twelve women volunteered to participate in the project, which had ethics approval from the university.

Table 1

Research Participant Summary Data

Participant	Pseudonym	Age in Years	Leadership Position	Sector/Level
1	Annabelle	58	Head of department	Independent secondary
2	Bek	47	Director of teaching and learning	Department P−12
3	Carla	53	Principal	Department primary
4	Dana	60	Head of department	Independent secondary
5	Ella	64	Assistant principal	Department P−12
6	Freda	55	Leading teacher	Department primary
7	Grace	45	Head of campus	Independent junior
8	Harriet	41	Head of department	Department secondary
9	Ivy	44	Head of early learning	Independent preschool
10	Jillian	45	Principal	Department primary
11	Kate	47	Deputy principal	Catholic primary
12	Leah	48	Deputy principal teaching and learning	Independent secondary

Note. P = Preparatory (Prep) year.

Data Collection Methods

The two-part data collection took place over the first semester of the school year. Qualitative semi-structured interviews ran for an average of 60 minutes, and questions focused on understanding the career trajectory of each leader, noting the entry point into teaching and the development of leadership in context. Interviews were transcribed, and a detailed reflective researcher journal was maintained, documenting the observations, questions, and ambiguities emerging from the data. Additionally, a series of arts-based email responses to provocations were used to elicit in-the-moment thinking about leadership. Participants were invited to respond to drawings, images, music, media, and guided visualisation. The FPDA method was employed to locate the ambiguities and contradictions in the data and facilitate deconstruction and self-reflection as the unresolved tensions in the data were located, the contradictions, and subtle shifts in power emerged, and the silences were noted. As a researcher, practitioner, and leader in a small community, my role was challenged. Ethical considerations in conducting research in a small town and issues of confidentiality influenced how I interrogated my complicit position in the study and maintained authenticity.

Data Analysis

Baxter's (2003) FPDA and Truman's (2016) marginalia were aligned to explore the dialogue between different texts emerging from the data. Truman (2016) advocates for educational

researchers to employ new materialism and ask hard questions about language, matter, logic, and performativity. Multimodal data were layered over the transcripts, offering decoupage texture and grit to the responses. While listening to the interview recordings, the data sets were analysed and annotations were made in the margins, creating connections and curiosities across the transcript. The multi-layered analysis created a dynamic alignment between the interview and email provocations. According to Truman (2016), layering texts upon texts disrupts the logic and flow of narratives and "destabilizes" and challenges preconceived "expectations" of analysis (p. 92). Baxter (2003) advocates for these guiding principles to the method:

> The central concern of the FPDA approach: namely to examine the ways in which [participants] negotiate their identities, relationships and positions in the world according to the ways in which they are *multiply* located in different discourses. (p. 10)

In sum, the new method emerging from the research design blended multimodal texts, re-readings, annotations, and responses as the basis for a text/fictional vignette produced as the analysed data for this research. Vignettes espouse the ideas and issues of the women leading in rural schools, offering contextual specificity, and provoking readers to think more deeply about data—the beliefs, values, emotions, and behaviours experienced by the women leading in rural schools. FPDA centres the marginalised voices as findings from the study, and it is the source of fictional narratives, that support the interpretation of the data.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

To ensure anonymity in a small rural community, careful attention was paid to the research design and methodology. The use of FPDA and arts-based approaches allowed the researcher to identify some of the opportunities and challenges experienced by women leading in rural schools, but the data set was small and confined to the southwest of Victoria. Not all the participants lived and worked in the same regional area, so there was some variation in the professional and personal experiences the women brought to the study. These limitations forced the development of a methodology fit for purpose in a rural setting, where anonymity is difficult.

Findings & Discussion

The research findings show that women who lead in rural schools occupy multiple subject positions and exist in competing discourses that simultaneously empower/disempower and amplify/silence their voices. FPDA reveals women's experience of leadership as three discursive sites of struggle: "middle of nowhere", being "better than the boys", and feeling "off balance".

Leading in the Middle of Nowhere

Women in this study felt disconnected from people, places, and ideas, revealing a literal and metaphorical isolation in rural areas. Annabelle, a leader who holds two head roles says: "I mean anybody in a rural school like this, you are isolated". Similarly, Harriet, who is a newly appointed head of faculty, says:

> I think we are quite geographically isolated here. … It is very hard to get resources to come to this town, it is a long way for people to travel, and I think that creates that closed mindset because you can't see outside of this little town, because it is very difficult, there are obstacles.

Jillian, a primary school principal, found it difficult moving from being an early career solo teacher in a remote school to a slightly larger rural one. Being in the "middle of nowhere", she had no "mentoring program" or support from the "powers that be", the people she reported to. There is tension working against a unilateral approach to leadership support and development. Women are often more likely than men to value relationships and the broad social justice goal of educational leadership (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010; Keddie & Holloway, 2020; Wilkinson & Bristol, 2017), as opposed to actively seeking career advancement, as Jillian's experience attests to. She claims she has "hidden" behind this narrative of being satisfied with the status quo, but her reflection about the bureaucracy reveals something different.

> We have to do the things the bigger schools do, we still have to do the policies, we have to have annual implementation plans, annual reports, school strategic plans, all those sorts of things. I have had a few debates with the Department [of Education] and said this does not work for our size school, and a few times they have agreed, but I have had to do it anyway.

The difference around leading in the rural is captured in Hannah's vignette:

> *But no one had warned her that the rural community would be so different and that it would somehow feel different. Hannah had a role and a set of responsibilities, but she was not a local; she had no shared history with these people or this town. It felt to Hannah that the parents were suspicious of her, and the wider community were content to watch from afar, wishing her to fail.*

Identity is temporally and socially constructed as a site of struggle. Women in this study draw on the paradox of the "middle of nowhere" as they navigate becoming leaders. Amplified feelings of failure and disconnection emerged as women in this study found creative and disruptive ways of leading in the margins.

Being Better Than the Boys

The data revealed a "better than the boys" discourse as women recounted their leadership experiences. There is a reference to a "boys club" where women are challenged to be better than their male colleagues as they compete for leadership positions and enact their role. OECD (2017) findings show an imbalance in gender mix in school leadership and Elliott et al. (2022) claim the leadership gender gap in education is compounded by a general crisis in the school leadership pipeline in Australia. Women's desire for leadership is a theme in the data and is epitomised in the excerpt from Marla's vignette:

> *She had appeared in Tony's office all bright and optimistic. Tony, however, was curt, pragmatic, and spoke in short, sharp bursts.*
>
> *She would not be interviewed for the DP role.*
>
> *Her application had been strong.*

He had other plans for her.

He wanted to support her leadership pathway.

He could not say what role that would be, yet.

He needed her to trust him.

Yes. The position had been offered to Grant.

Marla was devastated.

No, to be honest, she was angry and dismayed. This had not been an open interview process. She knew that Tony had been preparing Grant for leadership for some time, and she also knew that Grant did not have half the experience that she did. Perhaps this was more about confidence than competence, about the right connections rather than the right resume.

Tony did not see her as a leader. Yet.

These data confirm that there is not a lack of "ambition or capacities, but rather, it is the consequence of the limited opportunities created by the systemically gendered, cultural, social, and structural arrangements that inform women educators' choices and possibilities *relative* to their male colleagues" (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007, pp. 12–13). A key finding is that women are blocked from leadership because of the males who control the space (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Participants reiterated the idea of working under the "powers that be" and adapting their behaviour and expectations when working with groups of older, white men. There was little evidence of active promotion and development for leadership. Freda, a leading teacher, described her interactions with "boys" as difficult, stating the "fellas wouldn't like" her decisions and intimidated and harassed her. This was evident when she was appointed as co-assistant principal with a female colleague.

> Ally and I applied in the second round and Boy Y applied for it. Anyway, we got the job ... well! Shit hit the fan. It was not a happy thing. They just were so cross, they were blokes, they had been leading teachers, they expected that job.

Freda was circumspect about her leadership journey; her colleague resigned after six weeks, and she lasted only one term with the "boys" behaving badly. Freda knew "you have just got to read more than [the men], know more than them because they have just got this innate confidence in themselves".

To counter the entrenched bias against women in leadership, participants adopted the notion of play to disrupt power and advocate for change. Ella, an assistant principal, describes herself as a "human sacrifice" and the "fresh blood" the "powers that be" needed to make radical changes in education in the 1990s. She played with the language of sacrifice in her interview, creating an image of carnage and violence that described her leadership journey. Other participants echo the idea of play on a battlefield, challenging systems and individuals. Dana, a Head of Department, has used words like "crack" and "wrestles", throwing the "punches", painting a picture of her in a boxing ring, going round after round with the boys. Dana has a strong sense of social justice that drives her disruption of the system and fight for equity. "And I think they think I am being difficult, and probably sometimes I am. But it is not equitable, and it is not even part way towards equitable".

The "sisterhood" was central to women's leadership journey, as both a career blocker and enabler. Freda's story exemplifies the idea of other women playing for and performing for the boys. The "boys" that Freda refers to are made up of "one woman, four blokes".

> [She operated] as a bloke. She was three years trained, super belief in herself. Extreme belief in herself, the way she dresses, power dressing. Those fake boobs [LAUGH], maybe they made her feel better about herself, it just used to be endlessly fascinating … she didn't mind putting others down to make herself look and feel better.

Gender stereotypes not only essentialise how women become leaders in rural schools, but women make professional and personal sacrifices for the sake of others as they resist the "boys" in leadership and adopt playful strategies to work with other women to counter complex situations.

Being Off Balance

The word "balance" is commonly used when discussing women's career and family, as something that women struggle to achieve (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007 p. 74). Women in this study have experienced a nonlinear career trajectory as they have responded to the cultural and contextual demands of the rural and formed their identity (Mockler, 2011). The data describe women being thrown "off balance" mentally and emotionally, juggling doubt and imposter syndrome. The tension between professional ambition and the anchor of family and personal commitments in the rural thwarts women's attempts to step up into leadership. This discursive site of struggle epitomised being "off", of a tipping point or specific context and experience that led to losing balance, steadiness, or control. Ivy, the Director of an Early Learning Centre, represented herself as the wearer of multiple hats, caught in a professional performance of impossibility. Like J. Butler's (1990/2006) idea of performativity, Ivy, as a teacher and leader, is always "on" stage and in role.

Ivy says that in a rural community "you feel like you are never taking your hat off", and that you "can't be anonymous". Women in the study playfully experiment with new ways of understanding and enacting leadership, both with and without formal titles. This "play" allows some women to feel less of the rub of being "off balance". In sum, this discourse highlights creative and playful performative strategies women used to lead in rural schools and the lack of support and mentoring they received.

Implications for Leadership Practice

Feelings of disconnection, difference, and disorientation operate as a "triple threat" to women in leadership in rural schools (Bradbeer, 2023). The threat describes the cumulative impact of the discursive struggles and includes the hazards that characterise life in the "middle of nowhere", being geographically isolated and disconnected, and culturally detached from mainstream urban life. Firstly, the "middle of nowhere" concept is both a literal and metaphorical description of the experience of women in leadership but is not always unique to the rural. Feelings of disconnection are relevant to all women in all contexts (Porritt & Featherstone, 2019), but the research findings emphasise how a lack of connection, collaboration, and support hinder how

women become leaders in rural areas, as does the additional burden of sexism and racism. Secondly, the triple threat references the contested experiences of women forced to be "better than the boys" and to challenge and compete with them, as they lead. Women react to a singular model of leadership in education and feel disempowered because there is no contextualised support. To counter this difference, leadership as a social and relational practice must allow women to negotiate a role with more connection and collective efficacy (Cleveland & Cleveland, 2020). Thirdly, the threat articulates the unexpected confusion of being "off balance" and disorientated. The lack of confidence framing the ways women performed their leadership roles is juxtaposed with the self-assured "male leadership trope" that is present in the data.

The triple threat epitomises how women in rural schools create, perform, and embody their roles as leaders in schools. Leadership is articulated through chaotic, creative, and responsive ways that mask the ongoing unresolved tensions around power, language, and action as women become leaders. The FPDA method exposed the shifting power dynamics between men and women and the experiences of women in leadership in the rural, which might otherwise have been marginalised or silenced. This struggle to be seen and heard, to make the "feminist perspective *visible*, whilst simultaneously subjecting it to continuous scrutiny" renders gender an additional site of struggle in this study (Baxter, 2003, p. 12).

Consequently, women in the research led with and without a title. They recrafted job descriptions to manage the demands of the rural context and school structures and advocated for job sharing, further study, and simply "making a difference" as a teacher, and a role model for younger women. The unique challenges for women leading in rural schools have enabled them to employ creative models of leadership and language to enact their roles. It is evident in the ways women resist struggle, make sacrifices, both professional and personal, and adopt playful strategies to perform their role.

Contributions to the Field

Women became leaders in rural schools in organic and dynamic ways, consistent with the current research on professional identity formation (Day et al., 2006; Mockler, 2011). The literature around the importance of relationships in leadership (Blackmore, 2017; Eacott, 2015) informed this study, but the research took it a step further and delved into the intricate connections in context by examining the relationship women leaders have with other women and men in leadership, the broader community, and the "powers that be". This study found women who led in rural schools were ambitious, competitive, and confident, but they were constantly negotiating relationships. This research makes an important contribution to knowledge around how women discursively negotiate becoming a leader, specifically how they navigate the experiences of disconnection, disorientation, and difference in the rural. Innovative, arts-based methodologies in this study, such as drawing, images, music, media, and guided visualisation, provided a new way of looking at the rural context. Rurality has been an under-researched and undervalued space in the literature when it comes to school leadership, programs, and policy. Advocating for quality teacher instruction and leadership cannot be realised if professional development does not align

with the needs of rural schools and rural communities. This research confirms that context matters (Bradbeer, 2018, 2023).

Importantly, this study contributes a new research methodology that allowed both the participants and the researcher to engage in complex work whilst preserving anonymity. FPDA and arts-based methodologies and marginalia questioned the validity of a linear "career pathway" or "leadership trajectory" for women in the rural. The power of knowledge and language is evident in the vignettes, and these showcase the internal and external struggles and unresolved tensions in the ways women perform as leaders. This contribution to poststructural method expands the possibilities for future qualitative research to innovate and question, adding depth to Baxter's (2003) FPDA methodology.

Suggestions for Future Research

Explicit learning about the ways women become leaders in rural schools depicts women leading in the gaps and margins, often being excluded from the mainstream leadership discourse. This research recognises the impact that women have on the learning of rural communities and draws attention to the important contribution made by the women leading in rural schools. Future researchers can expand key findings in the following four ways.

Expand Future Leadership

The results of this study address part of a burgeoning anxiety in Australia around the future of schools—specifically, how we will recruit and retain enough teachers and leaders to meet the learning needs of students in Australia (Allen et al., 2019) and apprehension around what schools will look like if the recruitment crisis remains and VUCA persist (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). Innovative approaches to staffing rural schools and expanding leadership development are urgently needed. Schools cannot rely on shoulder tapping or serendipitous leadership development but need clear, strategic pathways to progress the leadership trajectories of women in rural schools. Leadership development must be co-created with schools and delivered to the specific needs of the school community, culture, and context. The value of this research is the new knowledge that would inform mentorship programs, leadership training, initial teacher education (Acquaro, 2019), and postgraduate studies in educational leadership and government policy.

Expand Leadership Networks for Women

Targeted support might involve creating dialogue online and establishing networks that connect rural women leaders locally and globally. Leveraging the grassroots feminist movement #WomenEd established by Vivienne Porritt and Keziah Featherstone (2019) from the UK, women and men would be able to amplify the voice of the rural. Building on #WomenEdAustralia, there might be an opportunity to promote #WomenEdRural to provide an equitable and powerful platform for rural women in educational leadership to share the unique experiences of leading in rural schools.

Expand FPDA

Researchers can adopt the new method based on a combination of FPDA, arts-based, and marginalia approaches as part of their research design to provide productive and transformative solutions to difficult situations. A new method and way of analysing qualitative data, one that prioritises the use of discourse, uncovers new knowledge and meaning using fictional vignettes. It should expand Baxter's (2003) FPDA by considering intersectional issues and aligning leadership, gender, race, and the rural with future scholarship (Fuller, 2021).

Expand Research Context

Future work focused on context and spatiality could expand knowledge about rural leadership and be attentive to the intersection of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and ableism in influencing teaching and learning in rural schools and the professional development of educators. Recruiting leaders, particularly principal roles in hard-to-staff rural areas, is exacerbated by the deficit discourses about teaching in non-urban schools (Blackmore et al., 2023). Broader programs that ensure leaders have experience and shadowing opportunities in a range of school contexts, including metropolitan, regional, and rural schools is non-negotiable. All leaders, especially women who remain underrepresented in school leadership must be the focus of future research. Leadership programs need to be practical, timely, accessible, and flexible. This would equip emerging women leaders to embed leadership learning in early career and middle career teachers' PD, provide online flexible learning for women on family leave, and build flexible options for future work, including job sharing, active career development, and skills building.

Conclusion

This study found that women became leaders in rural schools in innovative and disruptive ways. They were reflective and attentive to the needs of the rural community and employed creative ways to embody their role. Unlike other studies that examine the leadership development of principals in rural Australia (e.g., Hardwick-Franco, 2019) or the identities of school leaders (e.g., Crow et al., 2017), this study adds to the existing literature an example of women negotiating their identities as leaders in rural schools and incorporates the experiences of middle and senior leaders across all sectors and systems in one rural space (Bradbeer, 2023). The limitations of this research relate broadly to the participants (white women leaders) who have been agentic in the project. In this research, identity was found to be something fluid and responsive to the rural context, often entangling the expectations of both the professional and the personal, as evident in the literature on identity formation (Beijaard et al., 2004). Leadership was dependent on the ability of women to negotiate multiple subject positions in the rural, to forge relationships with self and others, and in addition, to disrupt and challenge relations of power that impact the professional and personal.

Women employ playful strategies that inform new ways of becoming and performing the role of leader in the rural. This research offers new ways of understanding the specific needs of these women. Professional development and leadership training opportunities for women need to

be seeded in the rural and reflect a balance between rural-only issues and a reciprocal partnership between rural and urban schools and educational systems to ensure all women have access. Finally, women in this study identified a lack of support for their role as leaders and a lack of mentoring and coaching. Celebrating, collaborating, and connecting women who lead in rural schools with like-minded educational leaders will give them the confidence to playfully embody their roles.

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Leading Schools Amid Political Polarisation and Crisis: Perspectives and Practices of Educational Leaders During the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT: Over the last four U.S. presidential election cycles, there was an increase in harassment and discrimination among students in K–12 schools across the country (Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2023; Nacos et al., 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2024). This qualitative study employs phenomenological methods to examine the experiences, perspectives, and challenges of aspiring school leaders before and immediately after the 2024 presidential election, particularly in the context of the political divisiveness and anti-inclusionary rhetoric that occurred in schools during this period. The theoretical framework draws on research in school crisis leadership (James & Wooten, 2011; Pepper et al., 2010; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022) as well as adaptive and flux leadership theories (Heifetz et al., 2009; Ravitch, 2020). The findings present authentic narratives from aspiring school leaders working in six different K–12 school settings in a northeastern urban region of the United States, illustrating leadership practices centred on: (1) creating intentionally inclusive spaces that foster belonging, connection, and community; (2) responding adaptively by using crisis as a catalyst for transformation; and (3) managing neutrality and its impact on leadership actions. The study concludes with implications for how school leaders can navigate political polarisation creatively by centring humanising and inquiry-based leadership approaches.

Key words: Political polarisation in K–12 schools, school leadership during 2024 election, crisis leadership, adaptive and flux leadership, equity-centred leadership, inclusive school climate

Overview and Purpose

There was an increase in harassment and discrimination among students in K–12 schools across the United States during and immediately after the 2024 presidential election (Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2023; Nacos et al., 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2024). Social media posts, newspaper articles, and television broadcasts frequently highlighted young people who experienced stress or trauma in school due to anti-inclusionary rhetoric prevalent throughout the presidential campaign. For instance, during election week, a parade of students at Beverly Hills High School marched through the hallways wearing Trump gear and calling out racial slurs to Black students during classroom instruction (Eisner, 2024), and the administration at Monte Vista High reported an increase in misogynistic, racist, anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-Semitic behaviours among students on campus (Strzemp, 2024). These accounts reflect the rise in fear and bullying among students following Trump's 2016 campaign and presidency as well (Bazelon, 2016; Nacos et al., 2020).

Research shows that bullies used "Trumpian hateful terminology and/or referred to his discriminatory policies", which contributed to increased fear and anxiety within marginalised communities (Nacos et al., 2020, p. 19). Following the 2016 election, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) conducted an online survey involving over 10,000 K–12 educators, including school leaders. The survey found that "nine out of 10 educators who responded have seen a negative impact on students' mood and behavior following the election" and "eight in 10 report heightened anxiety on the part of marginalized students, including immigrants, Muslims, African Americans and LGBT students" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016, n.p.). Notably, there were concerns raised about the ways school leaders neglected to address the political tension, bullying, and anxiety. The SPLC survey stated that "although two-thirds report that administrators have been 'responsive,' four out of 10 did not think their schools had action plans to respond to incidents of hate and bias" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016, n.p.). These results made the call to action clear: School leaders needed to reflect on the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election and its impact on their communities to proactively address the challenges of the 2024 campaign and election.

This qualitative study seeks to explore the following research questions: (1) What are the experiences and perspectives of aspiring school leaders in K–12 schools during the months leading up to and immediately after the 2024 presidential election? (2) What leadership practices and mindsets enable school leaders to navigate the complexities of leading schools amid a polarising presidential election? The significance of this study lies in the fact that school leaders were unprepared for the consequences of the 2016 presidential election on their communities, and it addresses a gap in existing research on this issue.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on research in school crisis leadership (James & Wooten, 2011; Pepper et al., 2010; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022) as well as adaptive and flux leadership theories (Heifetz et al., 2009; Ravitch, 2020).

Crisis Leadership

Due to the rise in harassment and discrimination, this study frames the 2024 presidential campaign and election as a catalyst for crisis within schools and their communities. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines *crisis* as "an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending" and "a situation that has reached a critical phase" (n.p.). Though crisis leadership has been studied in fields such as organisational psychology, business administration, communication studies, and emergency management (Riggio & Newstead, 2023), there is limited research on educational leadership and crisis (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022), specifically focusing on how school leaders address crisis related to political polarisation in K–12 schools and communities. James and Wooten (2011) assert that crisis events are inevitable, and they advocate for additional research on crisis leadership since leaders can "make a difference in the extent to which people are affected by a crisis" (p. 61). To that end, school leaders must address crises caused by political polarisation and hateful anti-inclusionary rhetoric to protect all members of the school community.

Pepper et al. (2010) present a three-part theory of crisis in education. The first part states that a school crisis "is an event or series of events that threaten a school's core values or foundational practices" (p. 20). Although core fundamental values may vary across schools in the United States, as each institution defines its principles, some common themes include respect, dignity, kindness, and the protection of all community members from discriminatory harassment, as established under federal civil rights laws (Decker et al., 2021). As the National Education Association (n.d.) posits, "Every student deserves a safe, welcoming, and affirming learning environment" (n.p.). During the 2024 campaign and election, school leaders were on the frontlines as students and staff faced an increase in hate speech, bullying, and harassment, which threatened not only their schools' core values, but in many cases, the civil rights of community members (Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2023; Nacos et al., 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019). This situation required school leaders to remain steadfast in their commitment to communicate and advocate for their school's vision and values (Klann, 2003) to ensure the protection of all community members.

The second part of Pepper et al.'s (2010) theory of crisis in schools is that "a school crisis is obvious in its manifestation but born from complex and often unclear or uncontainable circumstances" (p. 21). In the case of the 2024 presidential campaign and election, many complex factors interacted simultaneously to influence crises in K–12 schools. For example, Trump's public use of hateful, discriminatory language normalised anti-inclusionary rhetoric that further heightened racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and xenophobic behaviours among students (Nacos et al., 2020). This was also evident after Trump's 2016 election when teachers across the country reported that students in elementary, middle, and high school "used the terms 'deportation' and 'wall' more often than any other words when they taunted their Latino peers and other minority students", and heard "Muslim students … being called names such as 'terrorist', 'bomber', 'Osama', or 'ISIS'" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016, n.p.). The complexity of this crisis is deeply woven into the fabric of American culture as white supremacist hate, specifically white nationalists, play a role in the increase of hate incidents and violence that far extends beyond the schoolhouse walls (Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2023; Pascoe, 2023). As a result,

students from marginalised, vulnerable, and underrepresented communities often experienced far more fear and uncertainty about their fundamental rights when they entered school.

Lastly, the third part of Pepper et al.'s (2010) theory states that a school crisis "necessitates urgent decision-making" (p. 22). School leaders require crisis leadership competencies (Wooten & James, 2008) to respond swiftly and make critical decisions in their schools, especially when the physical and emotional wellbeing of students and staff is at risk. One competency Wooten and James (2008) posit is the leaders' ability to engage in "decision-making under pressure" (p. 367). Throughout the 2024 presidential campaign and election, school leaders faced constraints and pressures from various constituents, including district leaders, students, staff, families, and themselves, as well as conflicting values and beliefs about how to address political divisiveness in schools. Research suggests that school leaders' ability to make sound and urgent decisions during a crisis is further impacted by their emotional and cognitive restraints (Wooten & James, 2008). According to the American Psychological Association's Stress in America 2024 poll, 69% of adults in the United States reported that the 2024 U.S. presidential election was a significant source of stress in their lives, compared to 52% in 2016 (APA, 2024). When school leaders make urgent and pressured decisions during a crisis, it is paramount to not only centre the emotional dimensions of the crisis and maintain caring relationships (Klann, 2003), but also to remain adaptive, creative, and committed to inquiry and transformation as a result of the crisis (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Heifetz et al., 2009; James & Wooten, 2011; Ravitch, 2020).

Adaptive and Flux Leadership

Crisis leadership is often conceptualised in two phases, including first, "the emergency phase, when your task is to stabilize the situation and buy time", and second, "the adaptive phase, when you tackle the underlying causes of the crisis and build the capacity to thrive in a new reality" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 64). When school leaders encounter crises in their schools, their work must extend beyond addressing the crisis in the moment and learn from it to improve the school moving forward. Wooten and James (2008) highlight crises as "sources of opportunities rather than threats, when organizational decision makers adopt a learning orientation and use prior experience, or the experience of others, to develop new routines and behaviours that ultimately change the way the organization operates" (p. 371). The hateful incidents of bullying and harassment that occurred in schools during the 2016 presidential election prompted school leaders to intentionally reflect on what they learned during that time and leverage this knowledge to prepare for the 2024 presidential campaign and election.

Research also indicates that leaders who adopt a learning and reflective stance following a crisis are more likely to demonstrate an adaptive leadership approach, leading to increased innovation and creative problem solving (Cron et al., 2005; Wooten & James, 2008). Adaptive leadership, or embracing inevitable change and uncertainty, requires new and innovative leadership practices that Heifetz et al. (2009) suggest are essential for a leader's ability to foster adaptation, embrace disequilibrium, and generate effective leadership.

Crisis leadership emphasises the importance of adaptability, learning, and reflection, requiring leaders to embrace constant radical flux, or ongoing crisis and change, in schools and communities (Ravitch, 2020). Ravitch developed the *flux pedagogy* framework in response to the

COVID-19 pandemic, serving as the foundation for *flux leadership*—a mindset that includes principles for "being responsive to emergent school and community needs in inquiry-based, trauma-informed, racially literate, and compassionate ways" (p. 1). These interconnected theories provide leaders with critical lenses for reflecting on crises and their aftermath. Leading from an inquiry stance positions school leaders as reflective and curious learners, acknowledging the creation of shared knowledge within and among community members (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Furthermore, while maintaining an inquiry stance, trauma-informed leadership "involves becoming knowledgeable about, and building informed and compassionate attention towards, the range of traumas that students, teachers, and families face and the effects and possible impacts of these traumas on learning and behavior in school communities" (Ravitch, 2020, p. 6). As school leaders navigated the 2024 presidential election, like the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, they were called upon to address the heightened fear, anxiety, and hate in schools perpetuated by Trump's rhetoric (Nacos et al., 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019), particularly with underrepresented and marginalised students, staff, and families. At the heart of crisis leadership is a school leader's ability to develop "a mindset for reflecting, adapting and learning from the crisis situation and its aftermath" (James & Wooten, 2011, p. 61). The mindsets of flux leadership provide a critical framework for supporting leaders to ensure *all* school community members are compassionately cared for, valued, seen, and protected (Ravitch, 2020).

Research Design and Methodology

This qualitative research study employs phenomenological methods to examine the experiences, perspectives, and challenges of aspiring leaders before and immediately after the 2024 presidential election. The study participants included six K−12 aspiring school leaders who were graduate students in an educational leadership program at a public university in a northeastern urban region of the United States. The participants consisted of 80% females and 20% males, representing the overall gender distribution of students enrolled in the program. They self-identified as either Black or African American (33%), White (33%), Asian (17%), or Latino or Hispanic (17%), with a mean age of 37.2. Participants worked in either urban public schools (n = 4) or urban charter schools (n = 2), with a range of 8 to 21 years of professional experience in their respective schools (m = 14). The university's Institutional Review Board granted permission to conduct this research on October 1, 2024 (Study #2024-0706).

The participants were invited to participate in a series of semi-structured one-on-one interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) before and immediately after the 2024 presidential election. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, utilising the platform's audio transcription feature. The pre-election interview focused on participants' experiences and perspectives of their school leadership and school climate during the presidential campaign cycle and preparations for the presidential election results. The post-election interview provided an opportunity to follow up on participants' initial responses from their first interview and to explore how the school community and leadership responded to the presidential election outcome.

Another data collection method included narrative inquiry (Hickson, 2016; Seiki et al., 2018), where participants wrote narrative reflections during the week following the election.

Tucker (2024) suggests that narrative inquiry, as a qualitative research method, provides opportunities "to understand the stories of participants and find ways to allow those stories to emerge in more particular and contextually responsive ways" (p. 2). The participants responded to the following four questions: (1) How are you experiencing school and your role after the 2024 election results were announced? (2) What are some stories from the days after the election that illustrate how students and/or staff processed the results? (3) What leadership actions were taken to provide support, if needed, for students, staff, and/or families? and (4) What communications and/or documents, if any, were generated by school leaders after the election? In addition to the series of interviews and written narratives, participants collected and shared existing and relevant archival documents from their school contexts, including communications, curricular materials, and additional resources related to the research questions.

The sequencing of methods occurred concurrently during a three-month data collection period from October to December 2024. Considering qualitative analysis is an iterative process (Miles et al., 2013), data were consistently analysed throughout the collection period, and codes were developed and revised based on emerging themes and patterns from the interview transcriptions, written narratives, and archival documents. The complete data set was analysed upon completion of the data collection period, followed by the final writing of the study in January 2025. It is important to note that the data collected and analysed were from the months leading up to and immediately after the 2024 election and do not include Trump's actions following his second inauguration.

Findings

The findings from this study offer insights into how school leaders: (1) create intentionally inclusive spaces that foster belonging, connection, and community; (2) respond adaptively and understand crisis as a catalyst for critical transformation; and (3) manage neutrality and its impact on leadership actions.

Creating Intentionally Inclusive Spaces: Belonging, Connection, and Community

The findings revealed that many school leaders intentionally created inclusive spaces by utilising various approaches to support their school communities. Striepe and Cunningham's (2022) review of empirical research found that "crisis demands a certain type of pastoral care; one that includes providing empathy, love, support, and prioritizes the physical health and mental well-being of children, staff, and the wider community during and after the crisis" (p. 138). This section highlights the intentional ways school leaders demonstrated pastoral care and created inclusive spaces for students and staff during and immediately after the 2024 presidential election, ensuring that all members of the school community were included, regardless of their political affiliation. Additionally, the findings demonstrated how leaders moved beyond traditional approaches to developing inclusive spaces, harnessing creativity in their respective schools' preparation for the crisis (Wooten & James, 2008).

Inclusive Structures and Spaces for Students

Participants noted that "there were a lot of strong feelings" (Participant A) leading up to and immediately after the 2024 presidential election, and what "made the difference" to address these feelings was whether leaders established consistent school-wide structures for the community to process their experiences and engage with each other in open and respectful dialogue about what was happening. Participant D mentioned: "It's about the systems and structures that you [the school leader] have been building since the first day of school". At the same time, Participant C stated: "Our school has been engaged in creating brave and inclusive communities for a long time where social and emotional learning is a significant component of every school day". Many participants emphasised that cultivating a culture of inclusivity and belonging was already a priority and embedded within the school's established norms and practices prior to the 2024 presidential campaign and election cycle.

Participants most frequently reported that the schoolwide structures included classroom-based morning meetings (K−5), advisories (6−12), and "circles" (K−12), all of which were distinct times of the day occurring in addition to students' academic classes. Depending on the grade level and school, these expected structures remained consistent across classrooms. They provided students opportunities to gather during daily programmed times to "develop community", "share ideas", "explore each other's perspectives", and "build trust with one another" (Participants A, C, D, F). These structured times were intentionally designed with social and emotional learning at the core, rather than being used for teacher administrative tasks like "taking attendance" or providing students with "homework help" or "free periods", which could be the default in many schools. Participant B believed that "harassment and bullying decreased because of the school's focus on building community and supporting students in understanding the strengths in difference".

In addition to building community, participants expressed that creating inclusive spaces "supports students in repairing and restoring the community when conflicts arise and harm is done" (Participant E). These structures also included practices and protocols for teachers to lead students in challenging discussions that are divisive. As Participant D stated:

> The idea of having a circle had very much been integrated into our school culture. For example, passing around a talking piece, having one topic to focus on, everybody getting a chance to say something, and having the opportunity to pass if you didn't want to talk. All of those structures were already in place. So, even though there was the disruptive and surprising and shocking result of the election coming into school, it was a familiar space and structure.

The participants in the study stated that when inclusive structures are proactively established and integrated into the school culture, they provide students with familiarity and comfort, allowing them to navigate strong emotions without exacerbating conflict. Participant D provided further insight, stating that "when students are grouped with each other and have the same advisory teacher throughout their entire 6−12 experience, students build a deeper relationship and trust with each other over time". This finding is significant because many schools assign new advisory teachers to students each year, which could impact the ways students connect, engage, and trust one another, their teachers, and the larger school community.

In addition to implementing and programming these structures and practices into the daily schedule for students and teachers, school leaders provided professional learning opportunities for staff who lead these spaces and facilitate challenging conversations. Participant F shared her experience, stating: "There is a lot of trust in teachers to implement the curriculum in advisory". However, she also mentioned that there are inconsistencies from classroom to classroom based on teachers' comfort levels. She stated:

> There needs to be a lot of training on how to have the hard conversations, and then there needs to be follow-up or observations to ensure they are being implemented. During a recent welcome back to school day, teachers introduced the values of the school to students, and part of that presentation was to explain our value of "We all belong here", and teachers sometimes gloss over it. When I'm in the room, I'm like, "bring that slide back", and I go through it. But I'm not sure every teacher is willing to do that.

This participant acknowledged that while values and structures might exist, it is important to provide guidance and training for teachers to engage with students and one another on how to have "hard conversations". Many participants expressed that their colleagues felt "ambivalent" when discussing the 2024 presidential campaign and election because they lacked clear direction from their school's leadership. Conversely, participants noted instances where school leaders implemented dedicated resources by hiring "Restorative Practice Coordinators" and other inclusion coaches to support staff in growing their competencies in leading students with reflective, challenging conversations outside their academic discipline. This example demonstrates how leaders creatively consider the range and variation of human resources in their schools to support staff in addressing challenges and constraints as they arise.

Inclusive Structures and Spaces for Staff

Striepe and Cunningham's (2022) review of the literature illustrated that "numerous studies revealed caring for staff is an important aspect of leadership during times of crisis" (p. 139). Participants reported that when school leaders created opportunities for authentic connection and community among themselves, they felt more comfortable at work, which in turn impacted their ability to support their students effectively. Many participants shared that their school leaders often gathered staff to address technical topics or "complete administrative tasks" during staff meetings. However, it was rare—often nonexistent—for staff to participate in their own social and emotional development and personal reflection. Some participants reported that their school leaders held voluntary meetings for colleagues to gather the morning after the election before students arrived. However, in contrast to the consistent structures for students as described above, some participants expressed feeling that these meetings were "compliance-driven" and unproductive due to a "lack of experience and comfort interacting with each other on topics unrelated to work" (Participant A).

On the other hand, another participant discussed how the school leaders intentionally created inclusive spaces for the staff throughout the school year. In doing so, they supported the staff in building community and connection *and* modelled facilitation methods that could be used with their students. Participant E shared:

> Our school leaders will sometimes lead a staff advisory meeting where they model everybody sitting in a circle together, establishing norms and using a talking piece on topics relevant and important to them. Most of the attendees in the staff advisory are the teachers and the staff members themselves, and the person leading is the principal or assistant principal.

This suggests that school leaders must model inclusive spaces instead of solely mandating them for others to implement and "live and breathe what it looks and feels like with staff". This example also demonstrates another creative leadership approach for fostering inclusive spaces for staff by developing "staff advisories", where staff gather to focus on their personal growth and strengthen their connections with one another, separate from meetings as a full faculty or in grade and content-specific teams. Furthermore, Participant F stated that "leaders must lead by example and have challenging conversations by checking in with their staff because our identities are being attacked from both sides of the political debate". The extent to which school leaders engaged with and cared for their staff varied during this time. However, the findings illustrate the importance of school leaders moving beyond the typical "How are you?" in passing with a staff member or sending an email with a list of possible resources, and instead genuinely investing time to build relationships and provide spaces for staff to engage with each other and discuss their feelings and concerns.

Another participant described how their school leader publicly demonstrated vulnerability and humility throughout the school year by creatively using storytelling to foster community connection. They described:

> My principal leaned into stories of self by sharing who she is with the staff, which also trickled down to students. It created an openness about people's individual experiences and their stories. That was the bedrock for the staff, and she built a team that stuck with the school for multiple years. I think it also helped that we were used to sharing our stories, vulnerabilities, and experiences, which had been systematised in the lead-up to the election. So, we were more comfortable with one another and could be more comfortable in front of kids.

This school leader exemplifies compassionate leadership through collaboration, openness, and storytelling. As flux leadership theory suggests, "storytelling and re-storying are forms of critical pedagogy, intentional approaches to cultivating intra- and inter-personal awareness" (Ravitch, 2020, p. 14). When school leaders model critical awareness of self through storytelling, more inclusive spaces are created for staff, further deepening their compassion and care for students in the process.

Inclusive Spaces for All Students and Staff, Not Just for One Political Party

Throughout the data, participants addressed that the conditions for creating inclusive spaces for students and staff cannot be politically one-sided or just "safe" and inclusive for some but not for all. The findings suggest that school leaders must acknowledge the diverse political identities within the school community and recognise that students, staff, and families may hold opposing political views and support different presidential candidates. When describing her experience

facilitating a "circle" with students the day after the election, Participant C critically reflected on her intent versus potential impact on students:

> The circle is intended to make students feel that there is a safe, inclusive, and welcoming community they are a part of. But in the back of my head, as we went around, mainly because there was so much passion in students' thoughts and feelings, and worries and fears, I wondered what it would be like to be a student in that circle whose family did support Trump, or they themselves wanted Trump to win. That would not have necessarily felt like a safe space for that student.

While highlighting that "the school is a safe space for everyone", Participant D further articulated his perspective on addressing the challenges of hate speech and discrimination:

> If you support a candidate who uses racist rhetoric and then you use that rhetoric in school, you create an unsafe environment, and that will be dealt with in the moment with you and your family. Educators do not address someone's political leanings because you cannot do that. However, if students use divisive language or create an unsafe environment for certain students and identities, you address the action, not the belief.

Participants discussed the inherent tension between educators' roles in reaffirming all students' identities while standing up against bigotry and hatred. They acknowledged that all students must have their feelings understood in ways that do not reject the views expressed by their parents and other influential community members. Another significant aspect of establishing inclusive structures is ensuring that systems are developed and communicated when students use hateful language or actions in school and create a physically and/or psychologically unsafe environment.

As participants considered the student experience from differing political perspectives, Participant F reflected on how her school principal did not engage the staff in any conversations about the 2024 presidential election. She stated: "There is hesitancy in having conversations when you [the school leader] might politically, economically, or culturally align with President Trump, and not alienating staff might be why certain conversations aren't happening". As the evidence demonstrates, some school leaders leaned into challenging conversations with courage, while others dismissed the existence of divisiveness entirely. The findings in this section emphasise the importance of recognising diverse political identities within the school community while drawing a clear distinction between addressing harmful actions (such as hate speech or discriminatory behaviour) and policing political beliefs.

Responding Adaptively to Community and Context

In addition to the structures centring inclusivity established in many schools during the months and weeks leading up to the election, many participants expressed the ways school leaders were responsive and adaptive to the range of experiences and emotions felt the morning after the election and the days that followed. For instance, Participant C described a technical response (Heifetz, 1994) from her principal, who creatively adjusted the schedule for the day after the election:

> In the early morning hours after the election, our school leaders decided to change the schedule for the following day so that students would report directly to advisory when they arrived to school. Usually, it happens in the middle of the day, around lunchtime. They shared a plan that staff could use to help students process some of what they were thinking and feeling. So, there was definitely a sense that we were in crisis mode. We needed a chance to unpack these big feelings. We needed to make sure that students felt safe.

This school leader recognised the importance of creating spaces for students and staff in her community to connect and reflect before the start of the regular school day. This adaptive approach acknowledges that when a crisis occurs, it can be challenging for students and staff to proceed with "business as usual". On the other hand, Participant F shared the following experience:

> I work in an extremely racist neighbourhood, and the staff are from that neighbourhood because it is close to the school. Teachers who sided with Trump would make comments in the classroom, and then kids would come running to my office and say, "Miss, you know so and so is racist". They told me everything. And the teachers were saying this to our student population which is 10% white.

The leader at this school may have failed to establish and enforce clear equity-driven expectations with staff, particularly regarding political discourse in the classroom. One component of adaptive leadership is for school leaders to "get on the balcony" (Heifetz, 1994) and observe dynamics without bias, then intervene strategically. Although Participant F, a school counsellor, created spaces for students to share their challenges and experiences with racialised stress with her directly, the school leader did not demonstrate an adaptive approach whereby confronting the political tensions and shifting the school culture toward equity, inclusion, and racial justice.

Crisis as Catalyst for Critical Transformation

When leaders adopt an adaptive and inquiry-based stance, they recognise that crises can present opportunities to create more innovative, equitable, and transformative schools (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ravitch, 2020; Wooten & James, 2008). Participant A reflected on her experience and community during the 2024 presidential campaign:

> I feel that for people of colour and people with immigration issues, it's always a heightened time. This is not. This is no different. As a Black person, I'm Black every day. As a Black woman, I'm a Black woman every day. It doesn't matter whether we're in the elections or not—it's heightened all the time.

While Participant F stated:

> As a Black teacher working at a school with almost all Black staff and students, the climate of the school was normal [after the election] because of the experience of being Black in this country and constantly living under oppression. Knowing the history of America, whenever there's any sort of Black progress, there would be steps backward, and Trump is just a step backward. No one in my school seemed to be surprised or saddened by the outcome of the election. The next day was kind of like the Super Bowl, "Oh, the Giants didn't win, oh well!" And life carried on.

While some may argue that the 2024 presidential campaign and election triggered a school crisis, these data suggest that for people of colour, "it's always a heightened time" and that the anti-inclusionary and racist rhetoric used during the presidential campaign is "no different" for Black and Brown students and communities "because of the experience of being Black in this country and constantly living under oppression". Although beyond the scope of this study, these findings highlight how the 2024 presidential campaign and election underscored the critical need for leaders to address structural inequities in schools and confront systematic oppression and dehumanisation affecting already marginalised and vulnerable communities.

The Role of Neutrality and Perceptions of (In)Action: "My Actions Cannot Be Neutral"

During a staff meeting following the election, one participant reported that their school leader included the following message in their presentation: "Schools have an obligation to create a politically neutral learning environment", which she later shared was directed by the District Superintendent. After analysing data and triangulating information from all the interviews and written narratives collected, participants consistently reflected on their perspectives of *neutrality* regarding the role of school leadership and political polarisation.

Many participants discussed the connections between neutrality and actions, emphasising that the language and behaviours of school leaders reflect their values and beliefs. For example, Participant D stated:

> The idea of neutrality is often tied to a lack of action. However, I'm going to do what I need to do to protect the students in my school because, at the end of the day, their psychological and physical safety is my highest priority. Maybe I'm neutral in not outwardly expressing my political leanings, but my actions cannot be neutral.

Participant E further articulated the potential challenges inherent in school leaders remaining neutral amid political polarisation. She stated:

> It's really hard to be neutral. From some of my actions, how I live my life, what I choose to do, and who I am in the school building, I feel someone would know who I'm voting for by listening to my language, how I speak, or the programs I implement.

These data suggest that aspiring school leaders believe their words and actions may reveal their political position or belief; therefore, neutrality cannot exist. On the other hand, as Participant F highlighted, when school leaders do not act or speak out, they are not neutral either:

> Neutrality can be perceived as exclusionary. I don't think you can truly be neutral because not speaking out is like speaking up for the oppressor. So, you're picking a side by not speaking up for the ones who don't have a voice.

As the evidence consistently demonstrates, school leaders' primary role is to ensure the physical and psychological safety of all students and staff. While it might be expected that school leaders and staff do not publicly share their political beliefs, their actions must address the ongoing inequities that exist in classrooms and schools (Ravitch, 2020) and demonstrate the importance of

treating everyone with fairness, respect, generosity, and dignity (Nieto, 2006). Neutrality is not synonymous with inaction when harassment and discrimination exist.

Implications

The implications of this study include creative practices and mindsets for school leaders to consider before, during, and after crises, particularly in relation to divisive presidential campaign and election cycles that contribute to increased harassment and discrimination in K–12 schools. School leaders must consistently engage in critical inquiry and reflection on their school's existing values and practices that foster inclusion and belonging. This requires a steadfast commitment to adaptive and humanising leadership approaches that listen closely to the community's needs, centre equity and responsiveness, and establish a culture of accountability and respect. One practical approach is for school leaders to initiate equity audits that systematically examine whose voices are centred or marginalised within the school community. School leaders have a responsibility, now more than ever, to create safe and brave spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013) for *all* students and staff to process their experiences, perspectives, and emotions about divisive topics, while also fostering politically inclusive environments that do not tolerate bigotry under the guise of political beliefs.

Furthermore, school leaders must actively investigate their school's policies and practices for addressing prejudice, discrimination, and bullying, specifically by examining structural inequities and developing action plans to respond to hate and bias. Restorative practices, such as circles, mediated conversations, and collaborative problem solving, offer structured opportunities for community members involved in conflict to repair relationships by expressing their impact and rebuilding trust. Additionally, school leaders are encouraged to model courageous conversations (Singleton, 2015), engage in authentic storytelling that centres vulnerability and humility, and advocate for the rights of *all* students, staff, and families. As the findings suggested, school leaders must not only support students' social and emotional wellbeing but also dedicate and sustain intentional time to support staff's mental health and wellbeing. In some schools, staff might struggle due to political divisiveness, and they seek opportunities for connection, clarity, and community. One recommendation is for school leaders to establish staff advisories that provide ongoing professional learning on topics such as anti-racism, bias, trauma-informed practice, and inclusive pedagogy. Unlike one-off professional development workshops, staff advisories can embed these topics throughout the year as part of an ongoing, iterative professional learning plan that allows for sustained reflection and growth.

Another implication is the need for school leadership programs to prepare aspiring school leaders to navigate and respond effectively during and after crisis. This includes, but is not limited to, studying literature on crisis leadership in schools, providing opportunities for in-depth case study analysis, and role-playing practical scenarios that reflect both predictable and unpredictable crises. Additionally, aspiring leaders must learn to lead from an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), consistently examining their positionality and interrogating their own identities, values, and the systems in which they operate. This mindset not only fosters adaptive and flux leadership practices but also aligns with equity-driven school improvement.

Considering the findings are specific to a small participant pool of aspiring leaders in an urban, northeastern geographic area, the generalisability of these findings is limited. One possible consideration for future study is to expand the participant pool to include students and their families, thereby gaining a better understanding of their experiences and perspectives on how school leaders create inclusive spaces and address harassment and discrimination. By including these voices in the study, it would deepen insight into the lived experiences of those most directly affected by leadership decisions. In addition to broadening perspectives beyond school leaders, conducting a similar study in regions outside of the Northeastern United States could offer important comparative insights across different geographic and socio-political contexts. Lastly, future research is essential regarding how school leaders address the inherent tension between federal, state, and local policies, and Trump's recent executive orders, such as "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K–12 Schooling", and other orders targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools (United States White House, 2025).

Conclusion

This qualitative study examined the experiences, perspectives, and challenges of aspiring school leaders before and immediately after the 2024 presidential election, with a particular focus on the political divisiveness and anti-inclusionary rhetoric that occurred in schools during this period. The findings revealed themes related to how school leaders created inclusive spaces that fostered belonging, connection, and community; responded adaptively by using crisis as a catalyst for transformation; and navigated the tensions of neutrality and its impact on leadership actions. These themes collectively illuminate a range of creative and humanising leadership practices and mindsets that educational leaders can use when leading schools amid political polarisation and crisis. This study further contributes to the limited literature on school crisis leadership and adaptive leadership approaches, specifically related to leading schools during a critical socio-political period in U.S. history, when harassment and discrimination in K−12 schools have increased, and diversity, equity, and inclusion are threatened. Now more than ever, school leaders must build bridges, facilitate understanding, and lead with a steadfast compassion to inspire hope and affirm our shared humanity.

Declaration

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School Middle Leader Development: A Systematic Quantitative Literature Review

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ABSTRACT: This systematic qualitative literature review (SQLR) examines how middle leaders in secondary schools develop their leading practices. The middle leader is the frontline school leader best placed to assist teachers in their efforts to improve student learning. The modest number of studies published since 2000 is an indication there is an opportunity for exploration of middle leader development, especially given the responsibilities assigned to middle leaders. Findings highlight a persistent gap in professional development offerings which fail to address the complexities of middle leadership roles, emphasising the need for more agile, creative context-responsive approaches. Development is often facilitated informally, through collaboration and experience, with school principals playing a central role in enabling access to such opportunities. The literature reviewed suggests that development programs largely focus on personal attributes rather than leading practice and programs are frequently generic, lacking customisation to meet the diverse career stages, aspirations, and contextual needs of middle leaders. As academics and policy makers grapple with what middle leaders do, how they do it, and the impact of their leading

practice on student learning, it is apparent that understanding how to develop middle leaders is a high priority.

Key words: Middle leadership, professional development, leadership development, secondary school

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that quality leadership is essential for school success and positive learning outcomes for students, albeit that the research predominantly focuses the role and impact of principals (Leithwood et al., 2020). However, recently a synthesis of 42 studies revealed that middle leaders have a greater influence on student learning than other leadership factors, making it an important space for research (Leithwood, 2016). Indeed, "it is middle leaders who can have a significant and more direct impact on classroom practice" (Edwards-Groves et al., 2023, p. 76) consequently, understanding what middle leaders do, how they do it, and how they develop their leading practices has significance for the quality of teaching and learning in schools. This introduction will consider the case for examining middle leadership development, beginning with establishing the parameters of the role.

Defining Middle Leadership

The term "middle leadership" has been used increasingly in education since first emerging around 2005, and by 2016 it had become a common term used to describe a range of formal teacher leader roles (De Nobile, 2021). The term is used to identify those who hold middle-level positions in the hierarchy of the school (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019) and who are responsible for a wide range of school functions related to curriculum, pastoral, and pedagogical leadership. Middle leaders work directly with teams of teachers (Grootenboer et al., 2015) who, in turn, work closely with children in the classroom. Middle leaders make up a substantial proportion of the leadership structure in Australian schools, with approximately one-in-ten of Australia's teacher workforce holding middle leadership responsibilities (AITSL, 2023a).

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) recognises the impactful role middle leaders have on quality education provision, and recently they developed a set of professional standards that will support the development of middle leaders in schools. These professional standards are meant to support middle leaders to identify their development needs, and system and school leaders to design middle leader development programs. They "would provide a framework for career progression into senior leadership, as well as support ongoing development for career middle leaders with no aspirations for principalship" (Benson et al., 2024, pp. 174–175).

Middle Leadership Development

Professional learning is vital for sustaining an effective educational workforce (AITSL, 2012), and so given the impactful role secondary school middle leaders have on the quality of

teaching and learning, the lack of attention to understanding their development needs is an issue. The following section provides an overview of what is currently known about school middle leader development.

Recent insights indicate that middle leaders engage in fewer hours of professional learning than senior school leaders (AITSL, 2023b) and internationally there are more professional development programs available for principals than for middle leaders (Fluckiger et al., 2014). Bryant and Walker (2024) suggest that the bulk of the literature on professional learning in schools investigates capability building of teachers. Yet, the position of middle leaders in schools makes their role important in connecting school leadership with student learning. High quality leadership development for middle leaders is essential to ensure high quality leadership is present in each school to connect leadership, school improvement, and learning.

In reviewing an Australian middle leader development program, Fluckiger et al. (2015) highlighted that middle leaders require two types of development opportunities: firstly, programs that prepare middle leaders for senior school leadership roles (e.g. principalship); and secondly, programs that further develop knowledge and skills necessary for a career in middle leadership.

Since 2000, several significant literature reviews into middle leadership have been undertaken. However, few focused on how middle leaders develop their leading practice. One review comparing the expansion of empirical research between 2003 and 2017 found six studies related to middle leader professional development in that time (Harris et al., 2019). General reviews into middle leader development have attempted to explore the question: "What training and professional development do middle leaders need?" Bennett et al. (2007) found that middle leaders were appointed based on their subject matter knowledge and teaching expertise, but not how well they were prepared for that leadership position. Lipscombe et al.'s (2021) literature review found that contemporary professional development for middle leaders is focused on leading teaching, learning and curriculum; management; and capacity building. Additionally, they learned that middle leaders currently grow their practice through induction programs; coaching and mentoring; appraisal; and formal leadership courses (Lipscombe et al., 2021). Other academic literature recognises that onsite-job embedded development opportunities are important for effective middle leader development (Adams et al., 2024) and suggested that long-term, experience-based development practices can work well (De Nobile, 2018). Development opportunities that are bespoke to the diverse needs, roles, and contexts of middle leaders are an effective means of developing middle leaders' capability (Grootenboer et al., 2023; Lipscombe et al., 2021).

Middle leadership is more difficult without professional development, especially for those being promoted or changing organisations (De Nobile, 2018). De Nobile (2018) suggests that professional learning for middle leaders be conducted alongside succession planning. Gurr (2023) concurs that recruitment and professional development are both important in terms of enhancing the quality of middle leadership. Education systems need appropriate selection and induction processes that are systematic and involve on-going review and development of the middle leader (De Nobile, 2018). Professional development for teachers who aspire to be in middle leadership needs to be instituted prior to middle leader promotion and continue when these individuals are in their position (Highfield & Woods, 2024).

Overall, the themes emerging from the contemporary academic literature about school middle leadership suggests that there is a need for further research to understand how school middle leaders develop their leading practices. This study steps into that space, by conducting a systematic quantitative literature review (SQLR). The following section describes how the SQLR methodology was applied to identify and examine recent studies on middle leader development in secondary schools, the findings, and possible implications for future research. The guiding research question is: How do middle leaders in secondary schools develop their leading practices?

Methodology

Systematic Quantitative Literature Review

A SQLR was conducted to identify the nature of current published research (Pickering & Byrne, 2014), using systematic methods to explore and synthesise the findings of existing literature that address the question guiding this investigation (Page et al., 2021). An SQLR is an explicit, standard, systematic, and replicable methodology used to identify and assess the literature to highlight trends and gaps. This approach is transparent and is useful in education research to provide an overview of the existing research landscape (Pendergast et al., 2022)—in this case in educational leadership and leadership development. Pickering and Byrne (2014) state that an SQLR is also quantitative in that it quantifies where the research is located and who is undertaking the research, here about school middle leader development. Through a comprehensive and structured methodology, this SQLR allowed the chronological tracking of research into school middle development, which will establish a baseline for future research.

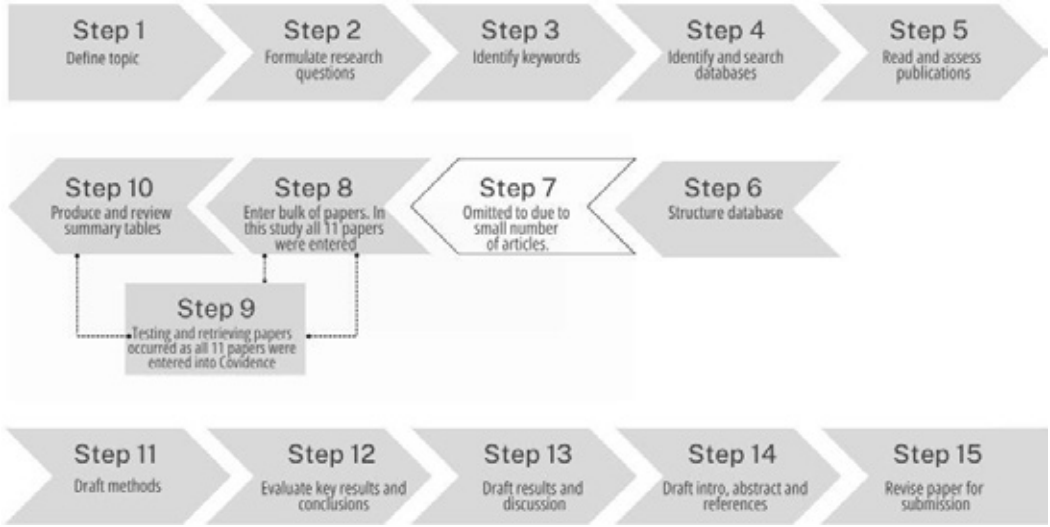
In this context, one limitation of the SQLR methodology is the identification of keywords and the application of search strings (Pickering & Byrne, 2014), as these can influence the number of journal articles retained. This was a consideration when interpreting and generalising the results of this review as there was no consistent definition of middle leadership in education literature or policy. To overcome this limitation, the researchers initially searched multiple databases using alternative keywords and phrases to "middle leadership", trialling terminology from different education jurisdictions across Australia and the world (see Table 1).

Screening and data extraction software, Covidence, was employed to manage data extraction, as the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria (Newman & Gough, 2020) could be considered a limitation in this review. To overcome this potential limitation, all three researchers reviewed the articles and then agreement was sought before the article was included or excluded. The decision was recorded using the Covidence software. Finally, limiting the search to papers only published in English may also limit the number of articles identified.

Figure 1 outlines the SQLR process employed in this research that followed the 15 steps outlined for an effective SQLR by Pickering and Byrne (2014). Importantly for this SQLR, the usual Step 7: Enter the first 10% of papers, was eliminated from the process. This was due to the small number of papers retrieved.

Figure 1

The SQLR Process Employed in the Study



*Note steps 7-10 were modified from Pickering and Byrne's 2014 15-Step Method due to the small number of articles identified for inclusion.

Note. Adapted from "The benefits of publishing systematic quantitative literature reviews for PhD candidates and early career researchers," by C. Pickering and J. Byrne, 2014, *Higher Education Research and Development*, *33*(3), p. 539 (https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.841651).

Middle Leader Development Search Terms

To be included in the review, the study had to have a clear intersection between educational context, middle leadership, and leadership development (Figure 2). These three components framed the three inclusion criteria of the final search string.

To identify the most fruitful search synonyms for "middle leader" and "professional development", the researchers firstly manually scanned the existing general middle leader research, as there is no clear definition of middle leader, and role titles vary depending on the middle leader's context (see Table 1). To determine the most beneficial search terms for leadership development, terms such as induction, training, leading practice, and leadership talent were trialled in a Scopus search but then excluded after being deemed too restrictive or not fruitful (refer to Table 1).

Figure 2

The Intersection of the Three Key Concepts in This Research

Table 1

Terms Considered as Alternatives for "Middle Leader"

Reasons for Excluding Middle Leader Terms		
Country	*Leadership Position*	*Exclusion Reason*
Australia	• LEAD and High Accomplished Teacher (HAT) • Teacher leader Teacher leadership • Deputy Principal (DP) Vice Principal (VP) • Co-ordinator e.g., subject coordinator	• Not considered formal middle leader position • Teacher leadership is considered a related but different concept from middle leadership in education literature • Depending on the jurisdiction, DP and VP can be considered a senior or middle leader. For clarity in this study, DP and VP were not included. • Not usually a formal school middle leadership position
USA	Department Chair	Department chair was trialled; however, it did not yield any further relevant studies.
United Kingdom	Deputy Head Teacher	Considered a senior leadership role.
World Wide	Aspiring Leader	Not a formal leader role. An educator can be aspiring to lead at any level of the school hierarchy.

After the search strings were confirmed (see Table 2), each search string was inputted into Google Scholar to cast a broad net of possible articles and the first 50 results returned were scanned for relevant articles. Then the search strings were entered into the databases Scopus, ProQuest (ERIC and Education Database), Web of Science and Informit (A+ Education). String one, two, and three were run independently and then the search results combined to one final search (refer to Figure 3: PRISMA Flow Chart).

Table 2

The Final Three Search Strings Used

String One	Middle Leader	"middle lead*" OR "head of department" OR "head of faculty" OR "middle management"
String Two	Educational Context	"secondary school*" OR "high school*"
String Three	Development	"develop*" OR "lead* develop*" OR "professional learn*" OR "professional develop*"

Overall, 167 articles were retrieved and entered into Covidence. Covidence removed 47 duplicates which left 120 articles for abstract and title screening. Full text article screening in Covidence was conducted by the three authors using a blind process to ensure interrater reliability. When there was disagreement about inclusion or exclusion, each author provided reasons and agreement was sought. The inclusion and exclusion criteria presented in Table 3 were applied to the selection of articles during Covidence screening. From abstract and title screening a further 89 articles were excluded, and 31 articles retrieved for full text assessment. Full text assessment excluded 19 studies leaving 12 articles for extraction from Covidence for literature review. During the article review phase, one further article was excluded as it was discovered to be a book chapter. The final number of articles secured for this review was 11 (see Table 4 for article details and Figure 3 for PRISMA flow chart).

Table 3

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

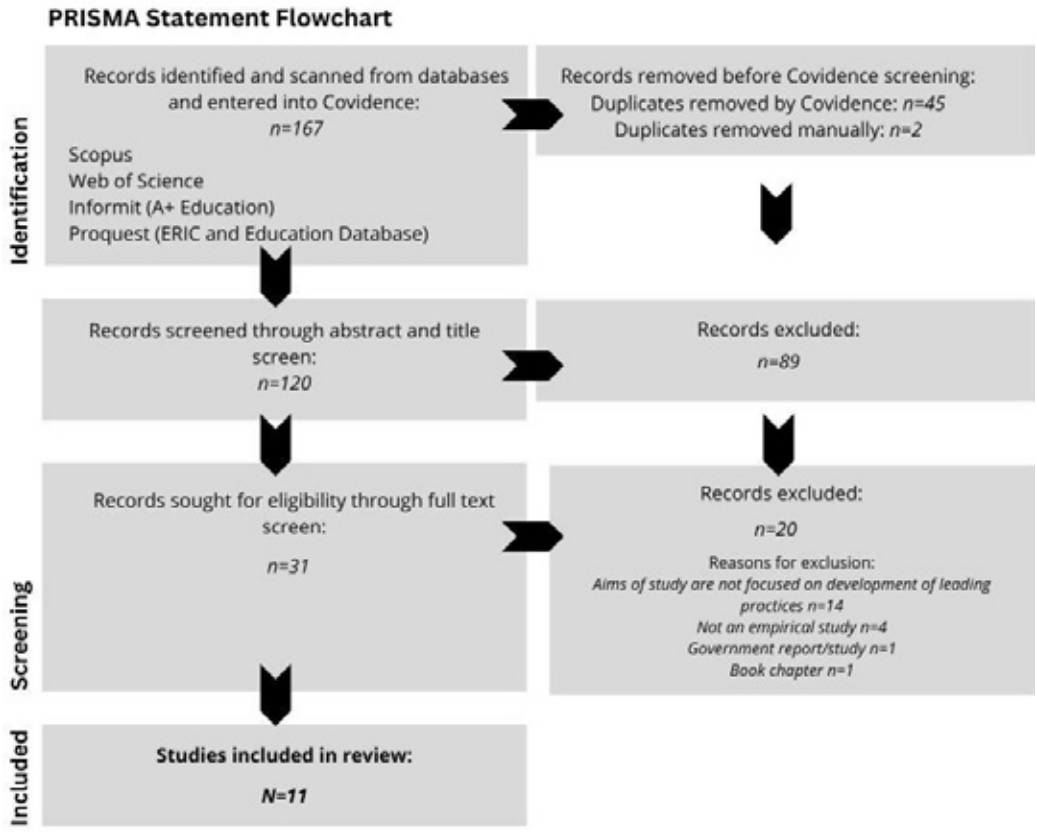
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Applied in This Study		
Search criteria	*Inclusion Criteria*	*Exclusion Criteria*
Document Type	Peer reviewed article	Grey literature, conference paper, book chapters, non-peer reviewed articles, government reports, literature review
Article Structure	Full text	Abstract
Location	World Wide	
Year of Publication	1 Jan 2000–2022	Prior to 2000
Publication Language	English language	Non-English languages

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Applied in This Study		
Education Context	Secondary School, High School	Primary school setting, other educational setting
Leadership Development	Professional learning Professional development	Middle leaders, leading professional learning of teachers, succession, induction, training

This SQLR set out to identify research on secondary school middle leader development conducted after 2000. However, as so few studies were identified, it was decided to retain some articles outside this criterion. Of the 11 articles included in this review, the school context of four articles included primary schools. One article was entirely set in a primary school (Bassett & Shaw, 2017). One article published in 2000 was an account of a study completed in 1997 (Turner, 2000). This article was retained due to the small number of articles retrieved. It is also worth noting that the three articles describe the one research study (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2008, 2009; Rhodes et al., 2008).

Figure 3

PRISMA Flow Chart



Data Collection

Data were extracted from the retrieved articles and inserted into a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet. This formed the research database. Each row in the database was allocated a paper and the columns assigned to various categories and subcategories reflecting the research questions (Pendergast et al., 2022). Data were recorded using a coding system of 1 or "blank". The "1s" were added up to identify the number of articles that referred to that category. During the process of data entry, categories were evaluated and revised. This process was repeated several times to make the categories as meaningful as possible to the research question. A second phase was employed where all pieces of data were recorded on sticky notes. These sticky notes were grouped into like categories and connected to each using a mind map approach. Seeing the data in a visual form allowed categories to be refined even further.

Findings

This section reports the findings of the SQLR. First the characteristics of the research are detailed and then findings into what the results tell us about the research question: How do middle leaders in secondary schools develop their leading practices?

The Characteristics of Research into Middle Leader Development

Overall, 11 articles met the inclusion criteria with a total of 14 authors (see Table 4 for list of articles and authors). Most of the research was conducted in the United Kingdom. Seven of the 11 research sites were situated in the United Kingdom and two in New Zealand. Significantly, no research was found in North America or the Middle East. These findings are consistent with (Harris et al. (2019) who found that most research into middle leadership has been conducted in the United Kingdom. Nine of the articles were set in a secondary school context and four included a primary school as well as a secondary school. It was more difficult to determine whether the school context was government or private. Only two studies clearly stated the middle leaders under investigation were in a government school and in another two studies, the middle leaders worked within the private school system of their jurisdiction.

Table 4

List of Articles Included in the SQLR

Title	Authors	Journal	Year Published
Learning About Leading a Subject Department in Secondary Schools: Some Empirical Evidence	Chris Turner	School Leadership and Management	2000

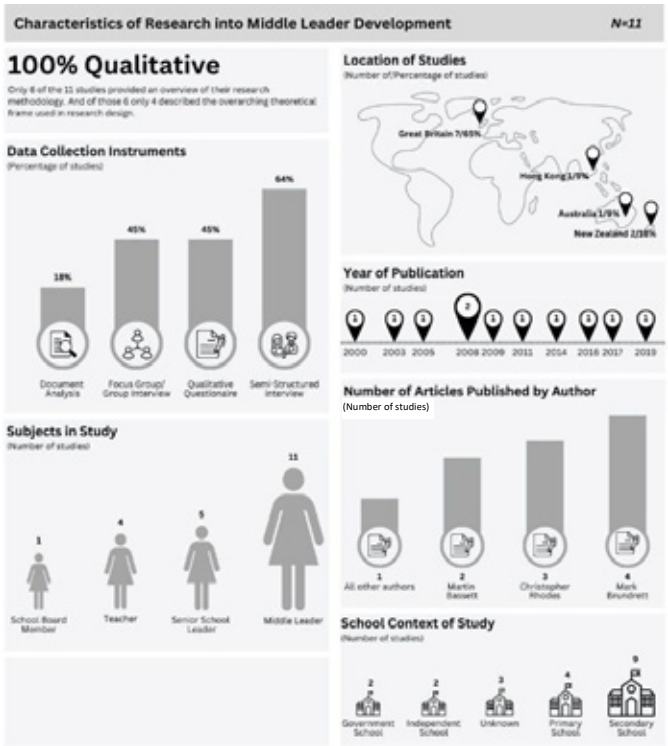
Title	Authors	Journal	Year Published
The Leadership Capabilities and Decision Making of the Secondary Head of Department	Alan Deece	Leading and Managing	2003
What We're Doing, We Do Musically. Leading And Managing Music in Secondary Schools	Janet Harvey Gary Beauchamp	Educational Management Administration and Leadership	2005
Leadership Talent Identification and Development Perceptions of Heads, Middle Leaders, and Classroom Teachers In 70 Contextually Different Primary and Secondary Schools in England	Christopher Rhodes Mark Brundrett Alan Nevill	Educational Management Administration and Leadership	2008
What Makes My School a Good Training Ground for Leadership Development. The Perceptions of Heads, Middle Leaders, and Classroom Teachers In 70 Contextually Different Primary and Secondary Schools in England	Christopher Rhodes Mark Brundrett	Management in Education	2008
Growing The Leadership Talent Pool: Perceptions of Heads, Middle Leaders and Classroom Teachers About the Professional Development and Leadership Success Planning Within Their Own Schools	Christopher Rhodes Mark Brundrett	Professional Development in Education	2009
Gender Identities and Career Aspirations of Middle Leaders Cases In Hong Kong Secondary Schools	Pik Lin Choi	International Journal of Educational Management	2013
The Perceptions of Secondary School Middle Leaders Regarding Their Needs Following a Middle Leadership Development Program	Anthony Thorpe Gay Bennett-Powell	Management in Education	2014
The Role of Middle Leaders In New Zealand Secondary Schools: Expectations and Challenges	Martin Bassett	Waikato Journal of Education	2016

Title	Authors	Journal	Year Published
Building The Confidence of First-time Middle Leaders In New Zealand Primary Schools	Martin Bassett Nicholas Shaw	International Journal of Educational Management	2017
Negotiating The Next Step: The Part Experience Plays with Middle Leaders Development as They Move into Their New Role	Paul Irvine Mark Brundrett	Educational Management Administration and Leadership	2019

Current research into the development of middle leaders leading practices is generally qualitative (Harris et al., 2019) and all studies in this SQLR adopted a qualitative methodological approach. The detail provided in each article about the research methodology varied. Only six of the 11 studies provided an overview of their research methodology and of those, only four described the overarching theoretical frame used in the research design. All the data collection methods used in reported studies were qualitative in nature. Interviews, case studies, qualitative questionnaires, and document analysis were employed to explore middle leader development. Semi-structured interviews were the most frequently adopted tool (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

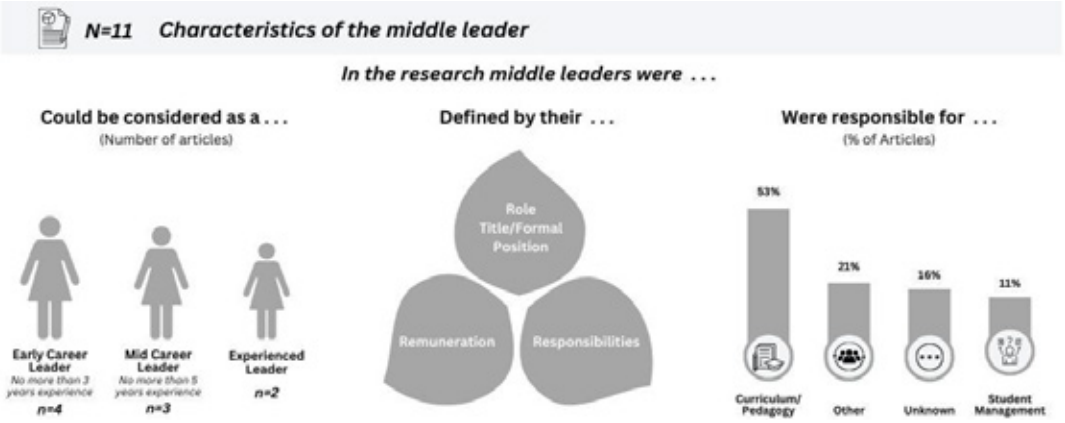
Characteristics of Research Into Middle Leader Development



Middle leaders are the most prominent subjects/respondents in the studies, however, in some, the views of teachers, senior school leaders and school board members were also sought. Figure 5 provides an overview of the characteristics of the educators involved in the research studies.

Figure 5

Characteristics of the Middle Leader



Defining Middle Leadership

The absence of a consistent definition of middle leading across the 11 studies was apparent. While most studies identified the position or area of responsibility of the participants in the studies, two did not provide this detail. The most prevalent terms used was Subject Head/Leader and Head of Department. In the five articles that provided a definition of middle leadership as part of their selection of participants, three key features were evident: role title/formal position, teaching responsibility, and remuneration. In all articles, a formal title/role was consistently used criteria for selecting middle leaders for the research.

While limited detail was provided about the tasks and responsibilities of middle leaders in all the reported studies, 53% of positions identified by title can be categorised into curriculum/pedagogical leadership, 11% in student management, 21% in other areas of education e.g., religion, and in 16% of studies it was unclear the area of leadership responsibility. One study by Harvey and Beauchamp (2005) focused solely on the impact of the curriculum area being lead on the middle leader's development.

Five of the studies defined the level of experience of the middle leader subjects in their study. Each of these studies applied unique criteria that can be placed on a continuum structured around career stages of early, mid, and experienced leader. Two studies included both early career and experienced middle leaders. Of the five studies, three focused on one stage of leadership experience.

What We Know About Middle Leader Development

Analysis identified three broad ideas about how middle leaders develop their leading practice. These ideas are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5

Key Ideas Identified in the Literature

Key Idea Identified	Sub Ideas Identified
Approaches to middle leader development	Current approaches to middle leader development. Features of a quality middle leader development program. Who is responsible for middle leader development. The effectiveness of middle leader development programs.
The development needs of middle leaders	The focus of the development e.g., attributes of the leader. Identifying leadership development needs.
The context of middle leader development	The development opportunities afforded middle leaders. Factors that impact middle leader development.

Approaches to Middle Leader Development

All articles presented findings on the type of professional development that middle leaders engaged in. These include coaching and mentoring; learning from others; collaborative school practices; experience in other roles; formal professional learning programs; research and experts; and lastly, external networks and professional associations.

Five of the 11 articles made recommendations related to the "how" of middle leader development. These suggestions include developing national programs; employing coaching and mentoring; reducing the isolation of middle leaders; providing opportunities to gain experience in a range of positions; and introducing connections to leaders and networks outside the school context. Two articles recommended that middle leaders be involved in the creation of their own professional development programs.

There was limited insight into what a quality middle leader development program looks like, although one study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a particular middle leader development program. Analysis of the 11 studies did not identify substantial information on program evaluation. Unpacking the literature found that providing time for middle leaders to engage in professional learning was important, as well as ensuring deliberate and planned development opportunities were constructed. The research suggests that professional development program designers consider: approaches for gaining leadership experience; differentiating the program to the various development needs of middle leaders; and managing the timing and length of the development program.

Six of the 11 articles stated that senior school leaders (e.g., school principal) are responsible for the development of middle leaders, indicating education systems and middle leaders themselves are less likely to be seen as responsible for the development of middle leaders' practice.

Middle Leader Development Needs

Very little insight into the development needs of middle leaders was found in the literature analysis. In the 11 articles, two reasons were provided for providing development opportunities: that teachers are not adequately prepared for middle leading; and for effective succession planning. Analysis did highlight the tension between individual development goals and development needed to achieve school goals. Two findings to highlight are: middle leader development should be differentiated for the stage of career; and that middle leaders feel that their development is focused on addressing school goals rather than their own perceived development needs.

All except one study stated the dimension(s) of leadership that was being developed and researched. There was one study where the language used to describe the target leadership dimension of development was unclear with five different terms being used in that article. Most prominent was a focus on the development of leadership characteristics, followed by leadership experience, dispositions, skills and styles. Four of the 11 studies focused leadership experience, confidence, and professional socialisation (identity). Ten studies used terms that describe attributes of a leader such as characteristics, dispositions, skills, styles, traits, and one study examined the tensions between managing and leading in middle leadership. Only one article made a recommendation about "what" middle leadership development should focus on, suggesting that development of both masculine and feminine leadership traits [sic] and the relationship between leader and follower should be core content in middle leader development programs.

The Context of Middle Leader Development

Unsurprisingly, analysis of the literature identified school conditions/factors; and broader education factors, as impacting middle leader development. School size, budget, culture of professional learning, and performance were all identified as impacting middle leader development, with principal knowledge and actions, and role clarity, noted as key factors in the provision of middle leader development opportunities. In the broader education context, the education sector's limited understanding of the need and nature of leader development for successful school leadership was also noted as limiting support. Finally, a tension between perceived and actual access to professional learning and the time to engage in professional learning was identified as impacting middle leader development.

Each article provided some recommendations for future middle leader development, and these could be grouped into three broad areas: considerations for creating middle leader development programs (59%); considerations for identifying middle leader development needs (17%); and recommendations for future research (24%).

This SQLR found that there is a gap in the current literature as to how best to identify the development needs of middle leaders. Figure 6 provides a summary of the key findings of this

SQLR. The next section provides a discussion on key findings and proposes future directions for middle leader development research.

Figure 6

Middle Leader Development Findings Summary

Discussion

The discussion here is structured around three core issues from the SQLR: clarity about school middle leader development needs; identification of who is responsible for the development

of middle leaders; and the approaches used to develop middle leaders. Each of these ideas will be discussed in turn.

Clarity About Middle Leadership Development Needs

Findings from this review confirm that existing professional development offerings and research in middle leadership professional development are not yet adequate to equip school middle leaders for their complex roles. This was also noted by Leithwood (2016) who asserted that adequate leadership development and training opportunities for middle leaders is one of the conditions that supports their effective leading practices.

Schools and education systems need to consider the development needs of their middle leaders because they are not a homogenous group, nor do they have the same development needs (Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014). This SQLR highlighted that when designing middle leader development programs, schools and systems must consider the career stage and aspirations of the individual, the tension between meeting the personal and school development needs, and the development of leaders' practices rather than their personal attributes per se.

This SQLR found two key reasons for developing middle leaders: to prepare teachers for middle leading and, for effective school succession planning (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2008, 2009; Rhodes et al., 2008). Many middle leaders are inexperienced educators (Grootenboer et al., 2023) and Bassett's (2016) research found that one third of middle leaders feel they are not adequately trained for their role. Highlighting the need for schools and education systems to design development opportunities that are responsive to the needs and context of middle leaders (Grootenboer et al., 2023; Harvey & Beauchamp, 2005). Coupled with the knowledge that not all middle leaders desire to move into senior school leadership positions (Fluckiger et al., 2015), the findings of this SQLR reinforce the notion that school middle leadership development must evolve to be more agile and responsive to the needs of the middle leaders. Such an approach will guarantee middle leaders have access to professional development that prepares them for current and potential future leadership roles.

The SQLR analysis highlighted a clear tension between individual middle leader development goals and leadership development needed to achieve school and system goals (Bassett & Shaw, 2017; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009). However, effective educational leadership development requires consideration of prior learning and the individual's development needs (Bassett & Shaw, 2017; Daniels et al., 2019). This SQLR highlighted that performance management processes might be one way to balance both the middle leader's self-identified development needs and the needs of the school. Rhodes and Brundrett (2008) found that middle leaders and teachers see reliable performance management processes as aiding leadership development and succession, because it can align both organisation and personal professional development goals. Thus, performance management process, may, if implemented with fidelity, have the potential to enable development to be designed with attention to both the individual middle leader needs and the school context.

The SQLR also revealed that middle leader professional development currently focuses on maturing the personal attributes of the middle leader (skills, qualities, dispositions) rather than their leading practices. Edwardes-Groves et al. (2022) advocate for middle leader development to

move from a focus on leaders' personal qualities or attributes to attention on their practices. Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014) identified a list of immediate development needs for middle leaders such as curriculum and content knowledge; team leadership skills; leading training sessions; time management and prioritisation; how to be accountable; engaging and motivating others; and monitoring and ensuring the accountability of others. For professional learning programs to be effective, understanding the diverse range of practices that comprise the day-to-day work of school middle leaders is necessary for supporting them (Edwards-Groves et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important that middle leader development must support middle leaders to develop their leading practices.

Who Is Responsible for Middle Leader Development

Current literature suggests that the responsibility for developing middle leaders lies with the school and the school principal, but it also identified that middle leaders see most of their development coming through learning from others by engaging in their work (e.g., watching others work, collaborating with other leaders).

School factors were identified as playing a significant role in a middle leader's access to professional development, with many managed or influenced by the school principal. This SQLR found that principal's practices significantly influenced middle leader professional development (Bassett, 2016; Bassett & Shaw, 2017; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009). Most importantly, the principals' skills and knowledge about how to develop leading practices influenced middle leaders' access to professional development (what is offered and the time/resources to access it). Therefore, it would seem important that, as key facilitators of professional development for middle leaders, senior leaders develop a robust understanding of leadership development (Bassett & Shaw, 2017). Complicating a school principal's ability to provide leadership development that is bespoke to the needs of middle leaders is the notion that, to date, training provided to middle leaders has predominantly been grounded in leadership models originally designed for school principals (Grootenboer et al., 2023). If school principals are responsible for the design and implementation of professional development for middle leaders, then it flows that the focus of, and approach to, development would reflect what the principal perceives as quality professional development.

The findings of this SQLR indicate a need for education systems to consider modes of leadership development that develop both the principals' and middle leaders' leading practices concurrently. Interestingly, Deece (2003) suggested that involving middle leaders in whole school strategic planning and monitoring and evaluation activities is one way to improve their leadership. Collaboration and collective efficacy are powerful approaches to development (Donohoo et al., 2018) and such an approach may strengthen a school leadership team's ability to achieve school goals and develop middle leaders leading practice concurrently.

Approaches to Middle Leader Development

Central to answering the research question of this SQLR: How do middle leaders in secondary schools develop their leading practices? is exploring what is currently known about the

means of development. This SQLR found a wide variety of professional learning approaches for middle leaders, however, worryingly it also found a lack of insight about what constitutes effective middle leader development.

An extensive list of development approaches was identified through this SQLR. The common theme was professional development that could be characterised as learning with and alongside others (e.g., coaching, mentoring, collaborating). Suggesting that middle leaders develop their practices through their daily work (Bassett, 2016) rather than formal programs. This is consistent with insights from general middle leadership literature that middle leader development is often left to chance (Lipscombe et al., 2021). Formal development programs were highlighted in the literature as a less effective means of development for impacting teaching and learning, but more impactful for understanding the middle leader role (Turner, 2000). The perceived inflexibility of formal, generic leadership development programs by middle leaders may exacerbate the perception that middle leader development opportunities do not cater for the individual development needs of each leader.

Importantly, this SQLR has highlighted the benefit of reflection on experience as a valued means of development for middle leaders (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). Coaching and mentoring were noted as effective means of providing time and space for a middle leader to reflect on their experiences and to support the leader to incorporate those reflections into future leading practice, however, the nature of the coaching and mentoring was vague. Performance and development processes are also formal structures within a school that provide a point in time for reflection on experience and then identification of future development needs, and this SQLR has highlighted that these processes are valued by school leaders and teachers and seen as effective (Rhodes & Brundrett 2009; Turner 2000). Coaching, mentoring, and performance development can be tailored to the stage and career aspirations of the middle leader, and when implemented with fidelity can effectively incorporate middle leader voice, thus, enabling development programs to be tailored to both the middle leader and the school's leadership needs.

Overall, this SQLR did not find any insights into what makes an effective middle leader development program. This is perhaps not surprising considering that schools, leaders, and policy makers have seemingly little insight into effective educational leadership development.

Implications for Future Research and Conclusions

This SQLR set out to explore the existing academic literature to identify what we know about school middle leader development. This review has uncovered significant limitations in the current understanding of how school middle leaders develop their leading practices. The modest number of studies published since 2000 is an indication that there is a need for greater exploration of middle leader development, especially given the responsibilities assigned to the role and the recognition it plays in improving teacher practice and therefore, student outcomes (Day et al., 2016; Grootenboer et al., 2023).

As academics and policy makers grapple with what middle leaders do, how they do it, and the impact of their leading practice on student learning, it is increasingly apparent that understanding how to develop middle leaders is a high priority. Specifically, this SQLR has four

overarching findings. Firstly, there is extraordinarily little evidence about how to effectively develop middle leaders that has been published in the literature. Secondly, the body of academic research suggests that middle leader development is located at the school site and embedded in their everyday work—with and alongside others. Thirdly, since middle leader development mainly occurs within the school site, the school principal is seen as the main facilitator of middle leader development. Finally, this study reveals that current middle leader development primarily focuses on the personal attributes and qualities of the middle leader, and not specifically their leading practices.

Taken together, the findings reveal that research into the characteristics of effective middle leader development is urgently needed. Each middle leader is unique and depending on their career stage and aspirations, their development needs will differ; hence evidence-based practices to understand how best to identify the development needs of middle leaders and how to effectively develop their leading practice in a strategic, rather than in an ad hoc manner, is a priority. Determining what makes an effective middle leader development approach is also pressing work. It makes sense to enhance current knowledge through further exploration of the people and educational structures/processes that support and inhibit middle leader development. Greater understanding of how to develop middle leaders will go some way to support school principals in their role of facilitator of middle leader development.

Ultimately, the middle leader is the best placed school leader to assist teachers in their efforts to improve student learning. This SQLR concludes that for middle leader practice to continue to improve student learning, researchers and policy makers have a duty to deepen the education sector's understanding of how to best develop them.

Epilogue

Recently (July 2025) a scan of the research was undertaken to identify new research studies in school middle leader development. Significantly two studies that meet the criteria of this SQLR were identified. Chung et al., (2024) explored the use of a situated development program for novice middle leaders and Bryant and Walker (2024) investigated structures school principals use to provide development opportunities for middle leaders. Chung et al.'s (2024) findings support the conclusions in this SQLR that in-context professional development is an effective means of developing middle leader capability. They also highlight the role of reflection as an important mode of learning and that middle leader development needs for differ depending on the leader's career stage. Both Chung et al (2024) and Bryant and Walker (2024) explore the pivotal role school principals have in providing development opportunities for middle leaders. Bryant and Walker (2024) found that school principals invest time in designing and implementing models of middle leader development that utilise both formal and informal development approaches. This is consistent with the findings of this SQLR. Both Chung et al (2024) and Bryant Walker's (2024) research studies support the findings of this SQLR that 'more research into how principals and schools build middle leadership capacity is needed' (Bryant &Walker 2024, p. 452).

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Beyond the Myth of the Resilient Faculty: Rethinking Support in a Time of Constant Change

ANDI CLEMONS [1]

When a faculty member nervously asked me if they would lose their job, it was not the first time I had been asked that question this semester. Several faculty shared concerns about how they would meet financial responsibilities and whether they would be forced to relocate if their position were to be eliminated. The stressors are not tied to institutional actions; rather, they reflect a broader climate of uncertainty in higher education that has left many faculty feeling vulnerable, even in the absence of specific threats on our campus. These conversations, unfortunately, reflect a growing unease among academics that transcends boundaries in rank or discipline. Faculty are navigating institutional uncertainty, shifting public perceptions, and policy changes that challenge the very nature of academic work and the careers to which they have dedicated their lives. This climate of disruption is not unique to any one institution or country. Faculty worldwide are navigating an increasingly complex academic landscape marked by heightened workloads, shifting expectations, and structural changes, conditions often compounded by external disruptions such as pandemics and natural disasters, which intensify the need for resilience (de los Reyes et al., 2022; Goel et al., 2024).

The reality is that the environment in higher education is rapidly changing, and regardless of whether or not you agree with the current changes, the swift, sweeping changes are creating an environment of distress. Amid this uncertainty, institutions often overlook the toll on faculty, assuming they can weather it without meaningful support. This expectation rests on a pervasive but flawed assumption that faculty possess an endless reservoir of resilience, regardless of the pressures they face. Resilience is romanticised in the academy as an inherent personal trait, predicated on the assumption that faculty, by virtue of their training and vocation, can simply

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endure successive challenges without consequence (de los Reyes et al., 2022). However, this perspective obscures institutional responsibility to foster resilience and overlooks the structural and relational support necessary to sustain it. Contemporary research suggests that resilience extends beyond reactive recovery post-adversity; it encompasses the everyday magic of proactively fostering supportive environments that enable growth and development (Kuntz et al., 2016; Malik & Garg, 2020; Masten, 2014, 2024).

Faculty resilience is a ductile capacity that can be developed, supported, and strategically cultivated through intentional strategies and institutional support (Clemons, 2024, 2025). This perspective frames resilience not as an inherent trait but as shaped by the broader organisational context; as such, fostering resilience becomes a shared responsibility. Cultivating resilience in this context requires a collective institutional commitment grounded in intentional leadership, supportive policies, and cultures that enable faculty to adapt and thrive amid persistent change and adversity. The constant churn of stressors in academia is not merely an abstract backdrop; it is reshaping the lived experience of faculty. As academic leaders, we cannot afford to remain neutral observers or stand idly by while we wait for things to sort themselves out. We must intentionally cultivate a deeper awareness of the toll these changes are taking, not just on productivity and morale, but on the overall wellbeing of faculty members. The prevailing discourse often centres on how institutions must evolve to remain competitive, efficient, and compliant, with a focus on student success. While student success will always remain core to the academic mission, if we fail to address the human cost of these transformations on our faculty, we risk eroding our academic communities. As such, faculty success must be understood as a core responsibility of academic leadership, extending beyond traditional metrics of scholarly productivity to encompass wellbeing, work–life balance, and a sustained sense of professional purpose.

Resilience cannot be expected in the absence of intentionality. It is cultivated through leadership practices that are attuned to faculty needs and grounded in transparency, empathy, trust, and a sense of community. This means checking in more often and reevaluating policies and practices that assume limitless adaptability while promoting collaboration, mentorship, and meaningful recognition. Academic leaders must shift from simply managing change to actively fostering the conditions that support resilience and wellbeing; however, doing so requires intentional training and development to equip them with the necessary skills, frameworks, and mindsets to lead effectively. Leadership development must reflect this reality, preparing academic leaders not simply to manage academic operations but to intentionally cultivate the conditions in which a resilient academic community can thrive.

One way to begin is by creating structured and sustained opportunities for faculty voice and input on the strategic planning associated with navigating change. Mechanisms for gathering systematic feedback from faculty, such as climate or job satisfaction surveys, play a crucial role in academic institutions by providing robust, comparative data on faculty experiences. This enables academic leadership to identify strengths and weaknesses, design targeted interventions, and ultimately enhance faculty retention, effectiveness, and wellbeing. One example of this in practice is the Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) implementation of the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey, a research-practice partnership designed by Harvard University. The survey acted as a foundational tool for engaging

faculty in meaningful dialogue, informing strategic priorities, and shaping initiatives that reflect faculty-identified strengths and weaknesses on campus (FGCU COACHE Strategy Setting Taskforce, 2024). Processes and tools that provide data-informed insight into faculty experiences and needs are essential, but their impact depends on whether institutional leaders meaningfully engage with the results.

At the same time, less formal methods, such as open forums, facilitated dialogues, department listening sessions, or advisory councils, can foster trust and create open pathways for continuous improvement. Cultivating genuine dialogue within academic communities requires a willingness to "relax into receptivity", an intentional posture of openness that invites shared understanding and reflection (Reynolds, 2024, p. 5). At FGCU, initiatives like The Lucas Center for Faculty Development's *Dialogues on Culture & Community* exemplify inclusive spaces where faculty, staff, and students come together to reflect on their individual and collective roles in shaping institutional culture, fostering a sense of belonging that strengthens the foundation for resilience.

Regular, transparent communication from senior leadership about institutional change, including not just the decisions made but also the reasoning behind them, along with an invitation for input, plays a vital role in maintaining credibility and reducing anxiety among faculty. These actions demonstrate an institutional commitment to shared governance and the cultivation of trust, affirming that faculty perspectives are not only valued but essential to shaping a responsive and sustainable academic environment where all across campus feel engaged in the university's vision and mission. Faculty success is not a byproduct of resilience; it is its precondition for fostering a positive academic climate. That success requires us to lead not only with strategic clarity but with compassion and intention.

If faculty resilience is to be cultivated, it must be supported by leadership development that prioritises human-centred practices, focusing on faculty voice, connection, and psychological safety, and enhances the overall sense of community within the academic unit. Academic leaders often ascend to their roles based on scholarly distinction rather than training in organisational leadership; however, they are on the front lines of faculty experience. As front-line academic leaders, department chairs play an essential role in shaping the day-to-day experiences of faculty, serving in a role marked by perpetual paradox as both institutional mediators and culture builders, acting simultaneously as colleagues and supervisors and advocates and implementers (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017; Crossland, 2023; Freeman et al., 2020). The fundamentally dualistic role of the department chair positions them to exert a more immediate and enduring influence on morale, development, and departmental climate, which is often more immediate and sustained than that of senior leadership. Institutions must invest in leadership development programs that equip these individuals with the skills to foster inclusive, resilient departmental cultures, including training in active listening, conflict resolution, trauma-informed practices, and strategies to build community and foster a sense of belonging.

A resilient academic community is not innately born of individual faculty traits or disciplinary commitment; instead, it is cultivated through intentional leadership, trust, and institutional structures that prioritise collective wellbeing and adaptability. Faculty resilience is intentionally shaped by leaders who understand that trust, connection, and support are preconditions for scholarly productivity and institutional stability, not the other way around.

Faculty resilience and faculty success are inextricably linked; when institutions invest in conditions that foster adaptability, connection, and wellbeing, they lay the foundation for sustained scholarly, pedagogical, and institutional vitality, creating a thriving academic environment. In an era defined by relentless change and uncertainty, academic leaders must recognise that resilience does not emerge in isolation. The future of higher education will not be secured by faculty's capacity to endure successive challenges, but by our collective commitment to creating the conditions where they are never left to shoulder the strain alone.

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Comprehensive History of ACEL

Written by Dr Marie Jansen (FACEL)

https://www.acel.org.au/ACELWEB/About/Comprehensive_History_of_ACEL.aspx

How It All Started: The History of ACEL

In the literature of professionalism, there is general agreement that the establishment of a professional association represents an important early step in the evolution of an occupation into a full profession. The founding of the Australian Council for Educational Administration in 1973 is linked to this concept of an "emerging" profession. By the 1950's the study of educational administration as a discipline, still in its infancy in Australia, was already well established in the USA. Goldhammer recalled the excitement of those early years: "It was great to be an administrator and scholar of educational administration in the decade of the 1950's, but to be young and have a part in the rebuilding of a professional orientation was heaven".

The field was permeated with a new enthusiasm and hope that out of the new research and analysis would come the true foundation for a sound professional approach to educational administration. The efforts of these "administrators and scholars" had led to the formation of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), an organisation representing major universities in the United States and Canada, established with the aim of advancing research and development in educational administration.

In the mid 1960's, an enthusiastic Australian, William Walker, was a Visiting Professor at the University of California at Berkley. He was asked to organise a conference for educational administrators "in his spare time", with a grant from the Kellogg Foundation. This 1966 conference became known as the First International Intervisitation Program – participants held a residential seminar in Michigan during week 1, visited U.S. universities in weeks 2 and 3, before assembling in Alberta to report their findings. Enthusiasm ran high. A Second International Intervisitation Program was held in Australia in 1970, at the University of New England in Armidale. Already Walker had observed:

> Educational administrators had virtually no tradition of working together or of a professional association; unlike doctors and psychiatrists, they had not formed any such significant professional group.

Walker's vision for a Commonwealth-wide association for educational administrators had begun to set root. By the time the IIP delegates had completed their orientation session in Sydney, dispersed throughout Australian universities for 2 weeks, and reassembled at the University of New England, Walker was ready to propose the establishment of the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration.

One observer noted:

> In the initial discussions it was evident that there were misgivings as to the viability of such an organisation. The clouds of doubt were dispelled by a masterly exposition from Bill Walker. I can recall most vividly the feeling of excitement, exhilaration and exuberance when the roll was called of representatives of 14 Commonwealth countries and it was resolved that a (British) Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration should be established.

An offer to house the CCEA Secretariat at the University of Calgary in Canada was rejected when the University of New England, offered its support. Bill Walker became the first President, and Ross Thomas was elected Secretary. In June 1971, the Commonwealth Foundation in the United Kingdom agreed to support the establishment of CCEA financially. Walker commented: "Thus was the infant equipped for the first time with real teeth!"

The CCEA Executive in Armidale then commenced one of its primary tasks – encouraging the establishment of national, regional and local professional bodies in educational administration.

Walker recalled:

> The first thing we did was to use the Old Girls and Old Boys network. The people who had done the Ed. Admin course, or people we knew from other contacts – quite often a Director or a Director-General – we wrote to them and said: "Look we'd like to have a meeting in Melbourne or Sydney or Brisbane or wherever. I'll come along with Ross Thomas. Can we get together and look at the desirability of establishing an institute?"

From 1972, groups began to form in capital cities and provincial centres around Australia.

1973: ACEA is founded

In 1973, ACEA become only the second national body to be established under the auspices of the then (British) Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration (the first being the British Educational Administration Society.) Walker observed:

> This provides an interesting contrast with other professional groups, whose national bodies are usually in existence before any international organisation is set up.

Representatives from each state or regional association in Australia, already members of CCEA, were invited by the CCEA Executive to attend a meeting in Canberra in November 1972, where general support for the formation of a national council was expressed. These representatives assembled again in Sydney for 2 days in May 1973 to found the Australian Council for Educational Administration.

The question of how ACEA would differ from the Australian College of Education became a major point of discussion among participants on Day 1. The majority were of the opinion that the proposed new body would allow for a broader membership than the College and would also provide a concentration on educational administration which was not evident in the ACE.

On Day 2, 18 May 1973, delegates resolved unanimously that a national body of educational administrators be established. Constituent groups were Queensland, Sydney, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, the ACT, Riverina and Darling Downs. Harry Harris (Sydney)

was elected Foundation President and Bob Pearson (Queensland) Vice-President. Among those who attended the inaugural meeting of the new ACEA Board, which met in Canberra on 19 November 1973, was the driving force behind ACEA'S establishment, Bill Walker. He later recalled that he came away from that meeting, humming to himself... "The country's in the best hands".

2002 A New Chapter Begins: The Name Change to ACEL

For several years, the Board of Directors discussed the possibility of a change of name for the Council to better reflect modern conceptions of the nature of educational administration. As scholarly thinking of the nature and distribution of leadership in organisations developed, it was felt that the inclusion of the term leaders in the name of the Council more accurately reflected the current and future aims of the organisation.

In 2002, the Board of Directors recommended that the name of the organisation be changed to Australian Council for Educational Leaders. This was passed at the 2002 Annual General Meeting of the Council.

2008: ACEL Begins a New Chapter

In 2008 the members of ACEL approved the transition from an incorporated association to a Company Limited by Guarantee. The Australian Council for Educational Leaders Ltd came into being on the 11th August, 2008. This governance change has enabled ACEL to take its place both nationally and globally in offering strategic direction and professional learning programs for those committed to improving outcomes for schools and their students.

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A Statement of Commitment to the Profession of Teaching was developed by the Queensland Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL).
https://media.acel.org.au/Branch/QLD/Statement%20of%20Commitment%20[v.3].pdf

A STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT TO THE PROFESSION OF TEACHING

I acknowledge that I am a member of a profession that extends to me the opportunity and the privilege to make a positive difference in the lives of young people.

I bring to the profession my unique talents to teach and to lead, which I commit to nurturing and developing throughout my career.

I understand that teaching is a deeply human endeavour. While I teach subjects, ideas and skills, above all I teach young people, who are our future.

I recognise and respect the body of distinct theory and knowledge which is gifted to me by those who have come before. I draw from it and strive to contribute further to it.

I recognise that young people learn in different ways and at different rates. I believe that given appropriate support and resourcing, all young people can learn, and I strive to nurture a love of learning that will help every young person to succeed.

I make judgements to evaluate student achievement through assessment that is valid, reliable and fair, and I give value to those learnings that cannot be measured.

I recognise that teaching is a collaborative profession and I am not the only teacher in a young person's life. My work is enriched through working with my colleagues, learning from them and contributing to their practice.

I acknowledge the contribution of the many parents, caregivers, and teachers past, present and future who contribute to a young person's education. I work with them wherever possible to enrich the learning of young people.

I offer a spirit of optimism, resilience and hope as I support young people to develop and act on the values, beliefs and capabilities that guide them throughout their lives.

I recognise the changing nature of knowledge, and I commit to continuous learning throughout my professional career.

In committing to this statement I accept the responsibilities of being a teacher, and acknowledge the deep trust placed in me by young people, parents, caregivers and society.

The consultation, development and production of the statement were facilitated by the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (Queensland), April 2017

Context of the Statement

What is the Statement of Commitment?

The statement is a voluntary declaration of commitment to a set of values and beliefs for the teaching profession in Australia.

Why was the Statement of Commitment developed?

In 2015 the Queensland Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) researched the criteria of established professions, with a view to ascertaining whether there exists a common set of criteria that comprise a profession. It was agreed that teaching clearly meets all but one of the criteria evident in the research. What is missing is a deep statement of ethically based values and beliefs that complements existing legislative and regulatory instruments.

The Executive resolved to lead the development of a professional statement that captures the spirit of the former Charter for the Australian Teaching Profession (Teaching Australia) and that of similar documents from other professions, and which speaks to all teachers.

Who has contributed to the development of the Statement?

The development of the statement was made possible through consultation with, and invaluable contributions from the following professional groups and their representatives:

Association of Special Education Administrators Queensland, Australian College of Educators, Early Childhood Teachers' Association, Independent Schools Parents' Network, Independent Schools Queensland, Isolated Children's Parents' Association, Joint Council of Queensland Teachers' Associations, Parents and Citizens Queensland, Queensland Association of State School Principals, Queensland Catholic Education Commission, Queensland College of Teachers, Queensland Department of Education and Training, Queensland Independent Education Union, Queensland Secondary Principals' Association, Queensland Teachers' Union, Queensland University of Technology, University of Queensland, University of Southern Queensland, and University of the Sunshine Coast.

How might the Statement of Commitment be used?

It is hoped that the statement will inspire and engage teachers to take pride in being members of the teaching profession. The statement can be used formally or informally, at graduation ceremonies, induction ceremonies, celebrations of transitional moments in the careers of early childhood, primary and secondary teachers, or for recommitment to the profession for long-serving teachers. It can be used by teacher educators in their work with pre-service students, at the beginning and end of their courses. When using the statement, systems, schools, universities and professional associations may wish to brand the statement with their own identification.

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Journal of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders

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Leading & Managing, the academic journal of the Australian Council of Educational Leadership, accepts Commentaries for publication.

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Commentaries are expected to be highly readable, factual expositions of an informed, highly developed perspective presented in a concise, straight forward manner.

Commentaries are not peer reviewed nor are they reviews of the literature. Rather they are selected by the Editors as a perspective worth consideration in a larger context surrounding an important issue, event, or topic. They are welcome to be submitted at any time.

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Editorial

Special Edition: Proactively Responding to Leadership Challenges and Constraints

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University of Southern Queensland, Australia

Editor:
FENWICK ENGLISH & DOROTHY ANDREWS

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ANDI CLEMONS

ACEL
Inspiring Educational Leaders