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## Pathways to School Leadership: Perceptions of Australian Faith-based Education System Employees

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### Abstract

**This article discusses school leadership pathways and recognises the important role that clearly communicated pathways can have on school leader development. It adopts an Australian faith-based education system case study to explore classroom teacher and school-based administrator perceptions of current pathways to school leadership positions. This research utilised a qualitative research design, adopting semi-structured interviews to collect employee perceptions. The paper concludes with a discussion about the need for pathways to provide multiple routes into school leadership roles, the importance of leadership opportunities for teachers at all stages of their career, the need for pathways to allow teachers to transition back into the classroom where desired, as well as context specific pathway elements for this faith-based education system to broadly consider.**

### Introduction

Pathways to school leadership play an important role in both school leader development and employee retention. It has been a long-held view that years of experience are required of teacher leaders before formal leadership opportunities are presented, even though it is recognised that the job of a first-year teacher is largely the same as that of a vastly more experienced classroom teacher (Danielson, 2007; Goodwin, et al., 2015). However, emerging trends are demonstrating that a growing number of younger school leaders are exhibiting interest in school leadership. As a result, providing pathways to leadership opportunities for teachers can become a mechanism for changing the typically flat career trajectories that many classroom teachers face (Goodlad & McMannon, 2004; Goodwin et al., 2015). Additionally, the current generation of teachers are

not likely to stay in any one position for too long, even if they express an intention to stay in the profession for the long-term (Johnson & Kardos, 2008), as they typically aspire to seek out roles that allow them to exert leadership and influence change. Consequently, providing teachers both pathways to leadership and the requisite leadership opportunities can be crucial not only in terms of teacher retention, but also in teacher recruitment.

### Literature review

The literature related to school leadership pathways is something of a nebulous space. While an extensive literature relates to leadership preparation programs, leadership attributes and identification, the experiences and socialisation of novice principals, the broader context of leadership in educational settings, and school leadership aspiration; literature relating to actual pathways to school leadership appears to be something that appears bound within contextual factors. Niche spaces, but well reported, such as the under representation of women and ethnic minorities, has also emerged in the literature relating to school leadership pathways. The concept of 'pathways' has at times been described in the school leadership literature as progression through a series of career stages, "with each stage being characterised by differences in work attitudes and behaviours, types of relationships, employees' needs and aspects of work valued by the employee" (Oplatka, 2012, p. 130). However, it may be more appropriate to describe a career pathway as "a sequence of positions ordered so that each provides experiences considered necessary to perform in subsequent positions" (Montecinos, et al., 2022, p. 287, adapted from Adkison, 1981). Goldring, et al. (2021) suggest in some countries this may take the form of a well-established leadership continuum, starting as a classroom teacher, becoming a teacher leader, then moving up into an assistant principalship role, and finally to a principalship position. In other countries such a sequence of pathway steps may simply not exist.

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What is clear in the leadership pathways literature, is that better understanding school leaders' career pathways can both assist and supplement an understanding of leadership preparation (Davis, et al., 2017; Murphy, 2020). Even one of the most commonly explored areas associated with school leader pathways, that being preparedness to transition into the role of school principal, appears understudied globally (Farley-Ripple, et al., 2012; Murphy, 2020; Stevenson, 2006). In 2003, Gates, et al. reported that while 99% of school principals in the US had been teachers, and that while transitioning from teacher to school administrator was a common step, "very little is known about how, when, and why the transition occurs" (p. 25). Sugrue (2015) explored experienced school leaders' pathways into, through and out of the principalship, and concluded that more leadership preparation needed to be "embedded in a larger systemic effort to increase the leadership talent pool by creating appropriate career pathways and structures" (p. 277).

There is some consensus that multilevel or wider distribution of leadership practices in educational settings enhances instructional quality, builds leadership capacity, improves instructional practices and benefits student learning (Harris & Muijs, 2004; Laleka, 2019; Spillane, 2005; Vennebo & Ottesen, 2012). The theory of distributed leadership suggests that "the authority to lead is not exclusively located in formal positions, but is dispersed throughout the organisation" (Rutherford, 2009, p. 50). However, it has been proposed that distributed leadership may contribute to turning teachers away from school leadership roles, as they find themselves in roles that have expectations beyond their classroom teaching duties, and for which they are often unprepared and insufficiently supported (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). It has been suggested that distributed leadership needs to be thought of more as behaviour rather than a role definition (Harris & Muijs, 2004). Fitzgerald, et al. (2006) note the challenge in schools with distributed leadership of identifying who leaders are, as leaders can include teacher leaders who have no formal leadership position as well as those who do have a formal leadership designation.

Middle leaders have been identified in the school leadership literature as operating "at the interface between different sources of influence and change within the school" (Lipscombe, et al., 2021). Often defined as 'a teacher with formal leadership responsibilities', middle leaders are seen as fundamentally different to school principals, as the positioning of their leadership is seen to remain closer to the classroom, leaving them well placed to lead teaching and learning practices (Lipscombe et al., 2021). While not responsible for the overall

organisation of the school setting, they are generally seen as key players in any distributed leadership approach and act as influential players working between the senior leadership of the school and their teacher colleagues (Earley & Bubb, 2004; Edwards-Groves, et al., 2016; Grootenboer, et al., 2015; Larusdottir & O'Connor, 2017; Lipscombe et al., 2021). These middle leaders often directly impact and enable teacher leadership to flourish. This group is also important because they are often considered to be a key group in the school leadership talent pool, often marking middle leadership as a key 'stepping stone' along the pathway towards the principalship.

Despite the importance of middle leaders in the literature, there have been research studies undertaken that identify the difficulty of attracting middle leadership roles, such as Heads of Department, Heads of Curriculum, and Deputy/Assistant Principals, to higher-level leadership roles (Fluckiger, et al., 2015; Harris, 2007). In fact, this has at times been referred to as a 'crisis'. Goodwin et al. (2015) note that many middle school leaders who play key managing roles in their schools do so without having to leave the classroom. Sugrue (2015) laments that in the Republic of Ireland where middle school leadership recruitment is limited to internal candidates instead of being made publicly available, the potential for aspiring school leaders to develop their "leadership professional portfolio" (p. 283) is limited, restricting the mobility of school leadership development, and thus pathways.

Interestingly, the literature identifies that while in recent years we have seen an exodus of baby boomer principals and middle school leaders, the logical replacements were the Generation X cohort who "would be seen by many as the natural law of succession" (Lambert, et al., 2016, p. 115). However, Lambert et al. (2016, p. 115) note that Generation Y represents another fast-rising group of employees who "appear equally eager to advance to the same levels of leadership". This situation leads to a consensus among younger schoolteachers that "leadership is there for the taking by the most able" (Lambert et al., 2016, p. 115). It would appear that the days where senior teachers lead and junior teachers followed are being left behind, increasing the importance of embedding pathways to school leadership that are available to younger staff.

Singapore's education system provides an interesting case study. In 1997, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced the Thinking Schools, Learning Nation initiative, which saw Singapore place increased efforts on the recruitment and preparation of quality teachers. In the years since, Singapore's international reputation for educational excellence has highlighted the success of these efforts, with a myriad of citing's in the literature emphasising their consistent

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performance at or near the top of international assessments (Luke, et al., 2005; Ministry of Education, 2020; National Centre for Educational Statistics, n.d; Stewart, 2011, 2012). Fitting with the distributed leadership concept, this has allowed an intentional upskilling of teachers in the Singapore education system, involving them in leadership and management roles. It did this, while factoring that of the target of 33,000 teachers, reached earlier than expected, one-quarter of these teachers were below the age of 30 and had less than 5 years of teaching experience (Heng, 2012). It is notable that the mentoring of younger teachers is strongly encouraged within the Singapore system.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative orientation implementing semi-structured interviews to collect data and grounded theory methodology for the analysis of these interviews. The study is directed by the following research question: “What are the perceptions of teachers working within a private faith-based education system of current pathways to school leadership?”

The data for this study was collected as part of a larger research project exploring the perceptions of elements of school leadership development held by those working within classroom teacher and school-based administrator positions within this faith-based education system. Approval to approach employees within this education system was requested and granted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting at a number of school locations, with the interviews lasting approximately 30 – 40 minutes in duration. Okeke and van Wyk (2015) note that semi-structured interviews allow the participants to fully express and communicate responses while covering subject areas of interest to the researcher. Twelve employees were invited to participate in the interview process, all of whom agreed to be involved in this research study. The interviewees provided written consent for the interviews to be audio-recorded.

The interview data was first transcribed from the audio recordings, and then subjected to grounded theory processes. Grounded theory is an inductive process, “based on concepts that are generated directly from the data” (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 411). This allowed the textual data to initially be broadly coded, then refined into a smaller number of categories, and finally, these categories were mapped into substantive themes (Byrne, 2022).

## Findings

### Employee perceptions of current pathways to school leadership

When asked to identify any existing pathways to school leadership in this faith-based education

system, a number of perceived pathway elements were mentioned.

Firstly, respondents identified that an annual staffing form exists which enquired whether respondents would be interested in school leadership positions. It was identified that the time of completing this staffing form is towards the end of the school year in a period of time that is often quite busy for teaching staff. For a number of respondents, this staffing form was perceived to constitute a pathway element to leadership positions by self-identifying a desire to pursue school leadership positions. Other respondents were adamant this staffing form does not constitute a pathway, as they raised scepticism about who at system level notes these responses and what follow up takes place with those who have indicated they would have interest in school leadership positions. One respondent stated that “I’ve ticked the box for years straight and never even had so much as a conversation about (school leadership) roles” (R5).

Secondly, some confusion surrounded an identified aspiring leaders’ program being run nationally within this faith-based education system. While some interviewees considered this to be a pathway to school leadership in this education system, other respondents were uncertain how this program was linked to job opportunities in leadership positions. Respondents raised three differing concerns regarding this program as a perceived pathway to school leadership positions. The first concern raised was in regard to the timing of this program, which was believed to take place during school holiday periods. Secondly, who and how individuals are chosen to attend this program was raised, with a perception being gatekeepers – specifically the school principal - played a role in offering or withholding opportunities to be a part of this education system-run program. Thirdly, the level of commitment that is required to be involved with this program was raised, which linked back to the first, as respondents raised some reticence to give up their holiday and family time to be involved, even if they had aspirations to pursue school leadership roles.

Thirdly, the undertaking of a Master’s degree program partially sponsored within this faith-based education system was noted as a potential pathway. Two elements of this were raised. Firstly, it was identified that those who were invited to take part in the aspiring leader program may already have had the opportunity to do a unit of study that contributed to this study program as course credit. Secondly, it was noted by several respondents that they see people in leadership roles who do not have this qualification. For these interviewees, this appeared to detract from the significance of the Master’s degree as a pathway, as they perceived that having this qualification was

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not necessary to be considered for school leadership positions. Regarding the possibility of making this qualification more accessible to teaching staff one respondent shared that:

*I think that there'll be a portion of teachers out there who would very much consider picking up part-time or online study if it was made a little bit more accessible. And from that, I guess once you up-skill a teacher, their horizon starts to pan out a little bit different and they start to feel a little bit more empowered. So that's probably another thing, the post-graduate element of creating a pathway.*  
(R11)

Issues relating to school size were also raised by respondents around current pathways to school leadership. It was noted that pathways are clearer in bigger schools where their structure provides for individuals to progress their development through a series of small leadership opportunities that act as “stepping stones” (R9). This was not seen to be the case for smaller schools where these opportunities are perceived not to exist. One smaller school interviewee stated simply “There’s really only one leadership position. I think we’re too small a school to have like stage one, stage two, stage three leadership” (R3). Contrasting this, however, was a perception that being in a smaller school allowed more opportunity for hands on experience, with one respondent stating,

*I think there’s a difference between understanding the pathways and having the opportunities. So, a bigger school can provide the opportunities, whereas a smaller school may not be able to provide those opportunities. Having said that, in a smaller school, and having worked in a small school and been a leader in a small school, the limited group of staff get opportunities to do a lot more potentially in leadership and middle management than you do in a bigger school. So, there is, I think, advantages you can see in a smaller school as well as in the bigger school.*  
(R10)

It was interesting also to note that a number of respondents took the perspective that a natural pathway exists for potential school leaders with 5-7 years of teaching experience. It was perceived that in this time a pool of talented employees will have developed good organisational skills, relational skills, and their teaching experience and personality trait characteristics will have likely identified them to their education system peers as future potential leaders. It was seen that by this stage in their careers the inevitable conversations would likely have taken place at a system level around ‘Do you have any aspirations to consider school leadership?’. From here, it was perceived that pathways via school-based leadership opportunities or possibly intentional or individualised mentoring and further skill development emerge. It was acknowledged that given this faith-based school

system is relatively small, personalised conversations can take place that would further this natural pathway to leadership.

There is a perception that pathways to leadership is, to a degree, dependent on what school the respondent is employed at. This is because these employees consider that possible pathways to school leadership roles depend on the current leadership of the school; their view of the employee, the potential they see in the individual, and whether the current school leadership encourage, foster, and communicate that potential to the relevant personnel at conference or system level. As such, employees see several variables impacting progression to leadership, none of which are documented or clearly communicated to them, yet each of which has the potential to act as a gatekeeper in the pathways process.

Other employee perceptions relating to school pathways

It was seen that while communicating pathways to school leadership roles is considered important by these faith-based education system employees, it is recognized this will not be a “one size fits all” solution. However, given that pathways identify the types of things which aspiring leaders should be doing in order to move towards school leadership, there was value identified in articulating pathways to school leadership. It was recognised that not every leadership candidate will move in the same direction along any communicated pathway, as factors such as school contexts, individual attributes, leadership level, and educational experience will vary between individuals. Respondents perceived that there needs to be flexibility in any pathway, allowing the employees’ individual circumstances to be addressed. As one respondent noted,

*I think it’s hard to formalise it when you’ve got so many variables and such a small pool that you’re drawing from. So, having flexible pathways, flexible alternative ways to identify and provide people with opportunities and experience I think is a critical element moving forward. We are too small to just rely on a standardised system.”*  
(R10)

One concern relating to establishing pathways to leadership positions that was identified by these faith-based education system employees involves the context of someone who is considered to be moving along a pathway to leadership but who is identified not to be a suitable school leadership candidate. The interview respondents in this study appeared to have some reservations about the ability of key decision-makers to have these conversations, given the close-knit social structure that exists within this educational context. Clear communication is needed in this

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instance as to why the individual is not suitable, and what skills/experience/personal attributes need to be addressed for the candidate to be considered eligible.

The large school pathway of classroom teachers gradually taking on increased responsibility, and transitioning into higher levels of responsibility is without doubt seen by these respondents as the preferred pathway to school leadership positions. This is seen to allow rapport with staff, respect, skills, and credibility to grow over time with relevant experience. It should be noted, however, that one idea raised for the small school context involves staff in these smaller schools having the opportunity to take on projects of interest to the school community, and evidence growth and leadership through the successful project management of these tasks. Recognition being given on a personal service record for these value-adding projects and the skills utilised would provide an opportunity for small school employees to evidence upskilling and leadership in these respective spaces.

There appeared to be some preference amongst staff from smaller schools that current employees be more strongly considered for school leadership roles in these schools. A view was presented that:

*It can be quite a risk when job applications are taken for principal and things like that and people from all across Australia apply for these jobs and come into communities that they're completely unfamiliar with, unaware of, have no relationship with, and pretty much try and impose their way of doing things, and I think it backfires. I think it's backfired here.... I think there is an implied undercurrent that says, 'We didn't think there was anyone competent within the current staff'... I don't know that there's a lot of solid awareness of staff ability in a lot of the little schools. (R2)*

Small school respondents implied on numerous occasions that they had little confidence in the education systems' awareness of leadership capability in small school contexts.

It is interesting to note two repeated observations from respondents concerning newly appointed school leaders. The first relates to large schools, where there was a definite expectation that school principals would have previous school principal experience. Secondly, there was a consensus that small schools are much more likely to be getting first time principals. As one respondent stated,

*more often than not, my observation is the people that we get in our small schools are simply just the ones who are willing to do it... we seem to be desperate to fill those positions and often have no other choices. (R5)*

Respondents were of the view that any implemented pathways towards school leadership that were actively communicated would increase

the engagement of potential school leaders. As one respondent stated when asked whether clear pathways to school leadership being provided would increase engagement,

*I believe that it would. I think that letting people know of what it takes to attain or to reach a certain position would energise a portion of our teachers to seek more study, possibly up-skill within their job and familiarise themselves with what that would entail... I think it would certainly energise and motivate some teachers to want to move and build their careers and try to move into that because, at the moment, there are no clear pathways. (R11)*

It was evident from these faith-based education system employees that pathways to school leadership positions need to be more formalised. Providing a 'stepping stone' approach was seen to be good practice and a worthwhile exercise to be developing the next tier of school leaders. While the idea of allowing potential leaders to learn through experience is not a new concept, it is one that is still seen as important to help enact leadership development. It should be noted that a view was presented that this faith-based education system could more proactively plan ahead for its future leadership needs, evidenced by comments such as: "I feel like we chase our tails a lot. We don't look forward to what we need in two years, three years, five years' time" (R9).

Lastly, when interviewing these respondents, it was evident that the perceived lack of clearly articulated pathways to school leadership is causing some frustration amongst these employees, who are unclear on what is expected of them should they wish to progress towards school leadership positions within this faith-based education system. As one respondent simply stated, "If I wanted to pursue leadership, I wouldn't know where to start" (R6).

## Discussion

The traditional concept of pathways does not have to result in traditionally seen leadership positions – while traditional pathways to school leadership culminated in position titles such as 'Head of School', it may well be that leadership positions can be acknowledged in areas not traditionally considered school leadership. For example, allowing the use of titles for teachers, such as 'Pedagogical Leader/ Specialist' to distinguish leadership roles may be one option. There has historically been an egalitarian ethic among teachers, a long-standing norm among teachers that suggests all teachers should be seen to be equal and deserving of the same rewards, recognition and standing (Childs-Bowen, et al., 2000; Garchinsky, 2008; Lacey, 2003; Lortie, 2009; Myung, et al., 2011). However, anecdotal

evidence suggests there is a shift towards the use of leadership titles amongst school teaching staff where classroom teachers have taken on leadership roles. Recognising master teachers who provide pedagogical leadership can play an important role in acknowledging leadership and keep these individuals on the radar for more traditionally recognised school leadership positions, while acknowledging their leadership within the school.

Transparency of process was seen as a crucial element in any articulated school leadership pathway for these faith-based employees, as they recognised the prevalence of gate keepers given the nature of this small, socially connected education system. Heads of school, assistant principals, principals, and system-based administrators were all mentioned as potential gate keepers by these respondents. This is a thread often noted within the literature; even where highly formalised policy may exist, in practice school leadership candidates often report a lack of transparency in the pathway which has led to the appointment of many unqualified school leaders (Goldring et al, 2021; Lumban Gaol, 2021; Montecinos et al, 2022; Sumintono, et al., 2015).

Pathways should be articulated both in policy and in practice, and these should acknowledge the possibility of providing multiple routes into school leadership roles. Goodwin et al (2015) note that “There needs to be differentiation within pathways as well as between pathways” (p. 116). When individual pathways represent graduated continua that allow teachers to build leadership skills and develop capacity as well as experience, teachers are more likely (a) to be willing to take the initial step into leadership and (b) to be inspired to move to the next level given a pathway clearly marked by forward—and concrete—steps.”

Teachers at all stages of their career should have access to school leadership opportunities. While senior teachers may be considered to bring deeper knowledge and experiences to leadership roles, early career teachers should also be encouraged towards teacher leadership. This can recognise the enormous potential of younger generation teachers and facilitate both school and school systems in building on the strengths and talents of these teachers. Likewise, teacher leaders need to be given the space to exercise leadership, and professional development in areas related to the leadership they provide. As Sinha and Hanuscin (2017) noted when exploring the development of teacher leadership identity, “there is no single ‘panacea’ or a pre-fixed pathway for leadership development” (p. 369).

In the context of this study, four themes emerged which could be given consideration by this faith-based education system as it relates to leadership

and leadership pathways. Firstly, it was identified that mid-year Primary and Secondary meetings take place biennially. Such meetings might include a short segment being added to the program outlining pathways or communicating to staff information that may be helpful in terms of considering and applying for future leadership positions. Secondly, it is recommended to create differing pathways for differing leadership purposes: firstly, one that focuses on the preparations required for future school leadership positions, and secondly, one that focuses on the development of skills and knowledge that would allow enhanced teacher leadership while remaining in the classroom setting. Thirdly, the idea of two-year stints in school-based leadership roles was presented by interviewees, with a relevant and transparent application process made a part of this. Lastly, where teachers decide against these pathways having tested them, they need to be able to transition back to the classroom. School leadership is not for everyone, and where individuals have determined this, there should be pathways for them to remain as classroom teachers, perhaps with the less traditionally recognised leadership roles commonly identified in the distributed leadership literature. Oplatka (2012) recognises that some school leaders may move backwards and forwards between career stages and leadership levels for a variety of reasons, including personal, psychological, or social factors.

Finally, the importance of communicating pathways and the associated policy direction and evident administrative interest may stimulate employees to consider leadership, an important point in this study context. With previous research in this faith-based education system noting that only 1.8% of system-wide staff indicated they were actively seeking school leadership positions (Williams & Morey, 2018; Williams, 2021), articulating such pathways may generate increased interest that may prove critical to the future sustainability of leadership within this education system. Leadership needs to be encouraged, supported, and developed - it cannot be left to chance - and pathways to leadership positions should recognise this and provide the requisite supportive structures. **TEACH**

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