A Content Analysis of Secondary School Department Leader Position Descriptions:
Implications for Teacher Leadership

Adam I. Attwood, Austin Peay State University, USA*

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4718-9272

ABSTRACT

This study examines a sample of secondary school department leader position descriptions in the United States to compare understanding of the change and continuity in the role of the secondary school department chair as a curriculum leader and manager of learning. Position descriptions include general descriptions for all content areas as well as a specific position description for K-12 computer science, art, and social studies. These are compared for their thematic similarities and differences with implications for how the role of secondary school department leader has been officially envisioned and what these data suggest in comparison to the literature. As such, this study addresses a gap in the literature on department leader roles in reference to their official job descriptions. Implications for teacher leadership are discussed for instructional leadership and the department chair's role in learning measurement.

KEYWORDS

Collaborative Leadership, Content Area Specialists, Distributed Leadership, High School, Instructional Leadership, Instructional Measurement, Middle School, Role Ambiguity, School Administration

INTRODUCTION

Teacher leaders may have the title of department chair, department head, lead teacher, department coordinator, or similar title. This study addresses a gap in the research literature on department leader roles in reference to their official job descriptions. This content analysis features a sample (n = 8) of secondary school department leader job descriptions to compare understanding of the change and continuity in the role of the secondary school department chair. The guiding research questions examined in this study are: (1) What are the common themes across secondary school department leader position descriptions? (2) Are there apparent differences in position descriptions depending on the department leader's content area? After the findings to the guiding research questions based on the content analysis in this study, are two questions addressed in the literature review and discussion: (1) What are department leaders' management role? (2) Where are department leaders situated for collaborating between teacher colleagues and school-level administrators?

This content analysis suggests that department chairs often share in administrative responsibilities that make department leaders mid-level managers and, as such, department chairs are teacher leaders who are equivalent to assistant principals in their influence on curriculum development and learning measurement (Bartanen et al., 2021; Ghamrawi, 2013). Generally, instructional leadership is a primary role for the department chair (Peacock, 2014). Instructional leadership includes managing their department's curriculum within and across grade levels, coordinating curriculum assessment in their content area, and maintaining communication with school administrators as a representative for both their department teacher colleagues and for the principal simultaneously. For some department chairs, they also have the responsibility to evaluate their teacher colleagues on an annual basis, and their evaluations go in teacher colleagues' personnel file, which suggests a mid-level managerial role.

Additionally, the concept of role ambiguity is reevaluated in this study because this concept was historically a topic in the literature on secondary school department leaders (Bliss et al., 1996; Mayers & Zepeda, 2002). Role ambiguity means that the department leader may have substantially different roles depending on the school and so there can be a lack of clarity for this type of leadership position. Role ambiguity can be mitigated when the principal delegates authority to the department leaders (Ghamrawi, 2013; Lee & Nie, 2014), but this suggested a question about official responsibilities of department leaders as delegation of authority tends to depend on the principal. In this study, it is posited that role ambiguity is not as relevant anymore because of recent emphasis on job description standardization trends for department chairs. Findings in this study suggest that the concept of role ambiguity is either not relevant in most cases or less relevant now. It now seems to be more a question of role expansion rather than role ambiguity. As such, the concept of distributed leadership is central to this discussion. Findings are explored for how distributed leadership applies across school types.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is consistently part of the department chair's function and responsibility (DeAngelis, 2013; Klar, 2012, 2013; Kelley & Salisbury, 2013; Peacock, 2014; Zepeda & Kruskamp, 2007). How instructional leadership is implemented depends on how the principal delegates of authority (Lee & Nie, 2014). Department chairs are "uniquely positioned to play an important role in instructional effectiveness" (Kelley & Salisbury, 2013, p. 287). According to a study analyzing the science department chair's role and department leadership generally in secondary schools: "Across more than a century of scholarship, there is apparent consensus among administrators, chairs, and teachers that instructional leadership and school improvement should be the chair's primary role" (Peacock, 2014, p. 41). When K-12 department chairs/leaders have evaluation authority over their departmental colleagues, the department chair is essentially in the mid-level manager role above their colleagues. However, how this authoritative role is presented by the department chair to their colleagues is important for maintaining collegiality so that their department maintains morale and, by extension, effectiveness.

Evaluative authority can situate department chairs as mid-level managers. Semantically, the term manager is used instead of administrator because a manager tends to oversee a department while an administrator oversees a larger unit such as an entire school. Nevertheless, the semantic line can be blurry depending on local context (Ghamrawi, 2013). The complexity of the secondary school department leader's role, then, can tend to coalesce in their need to be consistently collaborative. To be collaborative, however, is not necessarily synonymous with "buy-in" but, instead, fostering "psychological ownership" from teacher colleagues for the department's initiatives (Feirsen, 2022). The nuanced discussion of "buy-in," according to Feirsen (2022), may go beyond "negotiated agreement" to psychological ownership in that teachers engage with department initiatives from the perspective that those initiatives or achievement targets are theirs rather than a strictly hierarchical requirement

(Pierce et al., 2003). The department chair, who usually still has full-time teaching responsibilities in their mid-level management role, is uniquely positioned to accomplish what Feirsen (2022) outlined as "psychological ownership by supporting the three drivers of growth: deep knowledge, control, and a sense of place or home" (para. 17). The department chair is a content area specialist (for deep knowledge), the manager of the department (for control), and teacher just like their colleagues in the department (for sense of place), so that the department chair is positioned as a colleague to foster psychological ownership of department-level and school-level goals.

Inquiry Skills Essential in Collaboration

Collaboration skills are necessary for department chairs to maintain effectiveness, especially those with evaluative authority with their colleagues. Achieving collaborative leadership is a complex process in which the concept of "relatedness" is an important factor (Schoch et al., 2021). Relatedness means that teachers view each other as colleagues on the same team working toward common goals where one team member's success is everyone's success. The department leader has as one of their goals to foster relatedness among their department colleagues so that morale can be maintained or increased. When a department chair fosters relatedness among the teachers in their content area department, this is promoting cooperation to increase students' academic achievement in keeping with the department chair's primary role as instructional leader (Feeney, 2009). In a comparative study of teacher leadership among science teachers, Blank (2021) observed:

Only 30 percent of science teachers had co-taught a course with another teacher or observed another teacher and provided feedback. For the Kenan Fellows sample, the data showed that a majority served as mentors for new teachers, co-taught with others, and provided feedback to fellow teachers from observing instruction. The Kenan Fellows program selected teachers to participate through an application and review process. Thus, it is not surprising that many of these teachers had experience in positions of leadership in their schools. (p. 16)

While not specifically discussing the role of a specific department leader, Blank's (2021) study suggested the importance of collaboration in improving departmental morale and cohesion. Another study of teacher leadership evaluating the role of National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) within the Teacher Leader Model Standards (TLMS) framework found similar themes in the central importance of teacher leaders fostering collaborative culture to boost teacher morale (Dagen et al., 2017). The department chair/leader is central to that process of fostering departmental cohesion, much as the principal is the central figure of that process at the school level. According to a review of the literature by Schoch et al. (2021) as part of their study of transformational school leadership process, "transformational leadership might satisfy the need for social relatedness by taking the individuality of their followers into consideration, and simultaneously strengthening team spirit by communicating common visions" (p. 3). The department chair is the instructional leader positioned to accomplish this most effectively, and it is a substantial reason why the role of department chair is essential to the effective operation of secondary schools.

Collaboration skills for a teacher leader must include valuing individual teachers' experiences and regularly discussing department functions and curriculum with the teachers in their department to support individual morale and overall effectiveness of the department. This means that teacher leaders should be proficient in the anecdotal method of inquiry to support their department's mission. Anecdotes matter to the function of schools, in part, because teachers know their students' strengths and challenges on a weekly basis throughout the school year. The department leader is closer to the teachers than the principal in daily operations and interaction with students. As such, several studies have established the essential importance of teachers' individual experiences in both professional knowledge of what strategies work best for their students and that their anecdotal evidence is valid

and necessary to consult for instructional effectiveness (Attwood, 2021; Doecke et al., 2000; Stock, 1993; Weber, 1993). A first-year teacher, for example, will benefit from a department leader who makes a concentrated effort to include new and recently hired colleagues in the department as a way of fostering a sense of belonging, also known as relatedness. Likewise, the department leader will benefit from a principal who supports their departmental leadership (Wynn et al., 2007).

Domains of Distributed Leadership

As instructional leaders, according to Peacock (2014, p. 36), department chairs need to be highly proficient in four capabilities: (1) content knowledge, "(2) negotiating context and solving problems, (3) building a collegial learning environment," and (4) advocating for their content area and, by extension, their department. Leading instructional improvement, while being motivational, is a complicated process of negotiating various stakeholders' expectations. The department chair needs the support of both the principal and most of their departmental colleagues to be effective (Kelley & Salisbury, 2013). This is similar to the department chair's role in colleges and universities who likewise need the support of their dean and most of their departmental colleagues to be effective (see Caron, 2019).

Characteristics of effective department chairs often include many factors that may be summarized as a combination of having a collaborative team approach, being a problem-solver, and having diplomatic skill (DeAngelis, 2013). These are important for fulfilling each of the responsibilities placed upon department chairs such as maintaining or increasing standardized test scores, evaluating teacher colleagues, ensuring understanding and implementation of the principal's goals within and across the department at each grade level, and supporting teacher colleagues in their work (Turner, 2019). Studies in the United Kingdom and Hong Kong made similar observations of secondary school department leaders' position and importance in their schools as instructional leaders and managers (see Brown & Rutherford, 1999; Chow, 2013; Tam, 2010). A study in South Africa also noted similar role expansion—to what Mayers and Zepeda (2002) observed in the United States—between the multiple responsibilities of curriculum management, instructional leadership, and a perception of insufficient time in some schools to lead in all areas of their official responsibilities (see Malinga et al., 2021).

The department chair as instructional leader can infer a values personification ethos in which the department leader is the representative of their departmental colleagues both within the school and outside of the school. In a narrative case study, Melville et al. (2016) posited that department leaders must exhibit the "leadership virtues of the hope, trust, piety and civility" (p. 109), and that this was especially important when they are trying to implement reforms. It may be noted that the use of the word piety could also mean humility. In an earlier study of teacher leadership practices, Melville et al. (2014) observed of their interview data from a secondary school mathematics department chair: "This broader ethos was construed as in keeping with the chair's own habitus. This habitus was forged from a moral concern for both the students and the teachers in the department that she had chaired for six years, including her experiences of students' struggles to appreciate mathematics in the transition from primary to secondary school" (p. 12). This suggests the idea that the department chair is both instructional leader and psychological leader of the department, representing its values. Melville et al. (2014) further observed in relation to the school principal: "From a normative perspective, not all chairs will be effective instructional leaders capable of promoting more educative logics, for example. And, the principal is ultimately responsible to the wider community for the conduct of the school, potentially challenging the autonomy that a department could be granted" (p. 17). Principals are the crucial component of the leadership framework that defines what a department chair can and cannot do within their roles (Klar, 2012, 2013).

Department chairs tend to be far more effective when they are actively supported by their principal (Klar, 2012, 2013). Part of this support is to give department leaders enough autonomy. The principal defines the role of department chairs in practice; therefore, the role of department chair can vary widely from school to school (Brent et al., 2014; Klar, 2013). The principal's decisions about delegating authority affect the ways in which the department leader applies their official position

description in practice. This is part of what is called distributed leadership theory (Flessa, 2009; Klar, 2012; García-Martínez et al., 2020).

Distributed leadership tends to depend on the central authority figure—the principal in schools in this case—delegating authority to other administrators and to department leaders. How that delegation occurs and to what extent may depend on the individual principal, though district or other organizational guidelines or rules will influence the distribution of leadership authority. This is a skill that should be included in principals' professional development (Meyer & Patuawa, 2022). As principals leave one school for another, this can tend to mean a potential redefining of the role of department chair when the new principal starts at the school (Bartanen et al., 2021). According to Schoch et al. (2021): "The greater an interest the school principal takes with a teacher as an individual (by empowering individual teachers to develop their full potential, enhance their abilities and skills, acts as a coach or a mentor, or shows personal recognition), the more likely the teacher is to experience satisfaction of their need for relatedness" (p. 7). The department chair usually interacts with their teacher colleagues more daily than the principal, so this finding in the Schoch et al. (2021) study is especially applicable to the mid-level leadership role of the department chair. Since the department chair in secondary schools usually teach a full-time course load—or perhaps has one course release— they remain as close to the daily realities of teaching as their teacher colleagues; thus, the department chair is uniquely positioned to foster relatedness.

The changes to the delegation of authority from one principal to another can cause substantial shifts in role expansion that can take a year or two to clarify. Principals who see the department chairs as partners in instructional leadership and acknowledge their content area expertise as well as their position as teacher leaders are more likely to foster a collaborative approach (Brent et al., 2014). Principals who structure leadership as rigidly hierarchical with little input from teachers tend to have department chairs who mirror this approach, though this is context-dependent on the dynamics of the department and school culture (Bartanen et al., 2021; DeAngelis, 2013; Ghamrawi, 2013). Leadership coaching communities have a record of successfully supporting principals in their work (Klar et al., 2020). This model, as explained by Klar et al. (2020) in the context of rural schools, could be adapted for supporting department chairs. While contextually dependent, it is the principal who sets the tone and determines delegation of responsibilities from the vantage point of seeing the complexities for the whole school. In doing so, it is important for principals to grant a certain level of autonomy—delegation of authority—to department leaders. Autonomy-relevant practices are important for principals toward department leaders in that delegation of authority can result greater job satisfaction and morale (Knight, 2019).

Data analysis is an increasingly important skill for teacher leaders, especially with the computerization and digitalization of the classroom. Part of the characteristics of effective department leadership in data-related skills is rooted in a pattern of behaviors that support goal-oriented teamwork. This is outlined in detail by Schildkamp et al. (2019) in their study of data-informed decision-making process in educational leadership. They explained that fostering "sustainable data use and data team practices" is essential to school program maintenance and enhancement (p. 321). There are about five key leadership behaviors such as developing their department's goals, encouraging intellectual vision, providing individual support to their teacher colleagues, fostering professional networking as a professional learning community, and cultivating a "climate for data use" (Schildkamp et al., 2019, p. 321). Data analysis skills are important for department leaders because they may be tasked with leading their departments in maintaining or improving students' standardized test performance or other assessments internal to the school or district.

Standards for Teacher Leadership

The National Education Association (2020) has listed standards for teacher leadership from the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium's Teacher Leader Model Standards (TLMS). There are seven domains of teacher leadership according to this model:

Domain I: Fostering a collaborative culture to support educator development and student learning.
Domain II: Accessing and using research to improve practice and student learning.
Domain III: Promoting professional learning for continuous improvement.
Domain IV: Facilitating improvements in instruction and student learning.
Domain V: Promoting the use of assessments and data for school and district improvement.
Domain VI: Improving outreach and collaboration with families and community.
Domain VII: Advocating for student learning and the profession (Qtd. in National Education Association, 2020).

Of thematic note, is that these domains for the teacher leadership standards supported by the National Education Association (2020) emphasize using assessments as part of data collection and analysis for school improvement and the facilitation of instruction and student learning. One of the themes that emerges from these domains is the concept of teacher leaders having the responsibility to facilitate improvement—improvement of teaching among their department colleagues, improvement of student learning, and improvement of data collection and analysis to achieve those goals in alignment with school administration. Reinforcing the theme of improvement in school leaders' role, the Gates Foundation (2017) has noted that school leadership teams' use of data-driven decision-making processes can be an integral component of what researchers in several studies have called a distributed leadership model (Flessa, 2009; Klar, 2012; García-Martínez et al., 2020). These emphasize how the collection and analysis of data by school leadership teams, of which department leaders are an important part, is part of organizational improvement processes that can be facilitated in a distributed leadership model of school administration.

While the concept of role ambiguity has historically been a theme in some of the literature on secondary school department chairs (Bliss et al., 1996; Mayers & Zepeda, 2002; Weller, 2001; Zepeda & Kruskamp, 2007), more recent discussion has suggested role ambiguity is not nearly as relevant anymore because it has been addressed in part through standardizing role descriptions. It is not an issue at the present time because of the established guidelines that emphasize role standardization (see NAIS Guidelines of Professional Practice for Department Chairs, 2011; National Education Association, 2020). Although independent private schools may be assumed to have more variation than public schools in department leader descriptions, that was not necessarily the case in this sample though it should be noted that guidelines from a professional accrediting association (e.g., the National Association of Independent Schools) may differ from official job descriptions posted by each school even if the guidelines consistently influence those job descriptions. While public secondary school department chair descriptions may be standardized at the district level, they are generally not at the federal or state level. This might be changing in that there is discussion of standards from the public teachers' union, the National Education Association (2020).

The National Education Association (2020) has supported standardization of leadership standards by emphasizing the Teacher Leader Model Standards. This moves a step closer to the idea of standardization at the national level for members of the National Education Association. In comparison, NAIS-member schools do also have a standard set of guidelines for department chairs established for all member schools. The NAIS position description for department chairs suggested that NAIS-member schools should standardize their job description of the department chair's primary role in the school while still allowing for subject-specific or school-specific variation when applicable (see NAIS Guidelines of Professional Practice for Department Chairs, 2011). This is in keeping with the context of the former Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) that some independent private schools formed to promote common standards across private college-preparatory schools (Spencer, 2021). The CES ceased operations at the end of 2016. The NAIS—founded in 1962—was and is *the* independent school accrediting organization in the United States with regional member associations that accredit its member schools similar to the ways that the Council for the Accreditation of Educator

Preparation (CAEP) accredits its member teacher-education programs at the college level. The job guidelines issued by the NAIS for department chairs, then, serve as a standardized guideline for all member schools.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Questions

Guiding research questions for the content analysis of job descriptions and policy documents were (1) What are the common themes across secondary school department leader position descriptions? (2) Are there any apparent differences in position descriptions depending on the department leader's content area? Findings for those questions support findings from the literature review that addressed: (1) What are department leaders' management role? (2) Where are department leaders situated for collaborating between teacher colleagues and school-level administrators?

Materials and Method

The theoretical framework for this qualitative study is a case study inquiry framework that reveals, highlights, and deepens understanding of educational theory and practitioner experience (Doecke et al., 2000; Stock, 1993; Weber, 1993). A multiple case approach is used by presenting eight cases of secondary school department leader position descriptions. A content analysis (Weber, 1990) of these secondary school department leader position description documents was conducted. Documents were selected using keyword online search (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The methodology used to select the samples was online search using keywords such as "high school department chair," "K-12 department chair," "secondary school department head," and "high school department head." Screening documents for relevance was conducted to include those that were in alignment to the concept of department leader from districts and schools from across the United States with a sample spanning geographical regions and content areas.

Ultimately, eight publicly available official documents were analyzed for this study from schools or school districts in California, Florida, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Mexico. This sample comprised job descriptions and a handbook from public schools that are identified by state but otherwise are anonymized for the purposes of this study. Also included in this analysis is the "NAIS Guidelines of Professional Practice for Department Chairs" (2011) from the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), published by the NAIS in 2011 and current as of 2022. Of the position descriptions for secondary school department chairs, seven are from public school districts and one is from an independent private school. These were selected to highlight school department leader job descriptions across public and private schools. Schools in this sample are referred to pseudonymously in this analysis.

The "NAIS Guidelines of Professional Practice for Department Chairs" is considered representative of independent private schools across the United States as it is the accrediting organization for NAIS member schools; therefore, only one independent private school's job description for a secondary school department leader was selected for analysis. It is an example of what the NAIS document declares for independent private schools' job descriptions for K-12 content area department leaders. For public secondary schools, a selection of seven department leader job descriptions or handbooks were selected to represent several geographic areas of the United States. Furthermore, for public schools, the Teacher Leader Model Standards (see National Education Association, 2020) is used in this study as the representative equivalent to the National Association of Independent Schools' "NAIS Guidelines of Professional Practice for Department Chairs" (2011). These highlight attempts to standardize department leader positions in public school and private independent schools, respectively, having consistent thematic alignment with the purpose of mitigating role ambiguity.

FINDINGS

Common Themes, Consistencies, and Differences

Of the eight secondary school department leader position descriptions analyzed in this study, five were general position descriptions for department leaders of any content area, while three were job descriptions for specific content areas. The five general position descriptions for department levels of any content area are from public school districts in California, Florida, Kentucky, Michigan, and New Mexico. The three content areas represented in this sample are art, computer science, and social studies. The department leader position descriptions for art and social studies are from public school districts in Massachusetts and Florida respectively, while the department leader position description for computer science is from a K-12 independent private school in Minnesota. An overview of themes is listed in Table 1.

The content analysis reveals several findings for department chair/leader roles. Most notable among the findings is the substantially similar and mostly consistent position descriptions regardless of the content area (e.g., art, science, or social studies) and regardless of whether the school was private or public. All position descriptions indicated that the department chair/leader was under the direction of the principal or equivalent leader of the school; they were not under the direction of an assistant principal which is important as it indicates the relative importance of the department chair/leader as practically co-equal to assistant principal. As seen in Table 2, instructional leadership is a primary responsibility across content area department leader position descriptions. The top two responsibilities listed are listed here to indicate what was most emphasized across content areas, but each position description had more than ten core responsibilities listed. They each closely aligned with the other position descriptions in thematic and specific responsibilities regardless of content area.

There were a couple of differences in emphasis but not in substance. For example, the independent private school added an emphasis that the department chair is a representative of their department to stakeholders and constituencies outside the school—in addition to internal stakeholders—in ways that overlap substantially with roles typically listed in position descriptions for principals and assistant principals (for assistant principal role discussion, see Bartanen et al., 2021). For example, the K-12 independent private school computer science department chair had a specific responsibility—in addition to the standard instructional leadership responsibilities—to "oversee and communicate about

Table 1. Department leader overview theme comparison (Note: state abbreviations in top row)

	CA, Dist. A	CA, Dist. B	FL	KY	MA	MI	MN	NM
General or Content Area-specific	General	General	Social Studies	General	Art	General	Computer Science	General
Number of responsibilities listed	15	16	13	46	14	13	15	28
Budget management responsibility listed	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Evaluate teacher colleagues and/or lead professional development	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 2. Top two responsibilities listed on a selection of position descriptions

Top two responsibilities/position description for art department chair (Source: public school district in Massachusetts)	Top two responsibilities/position description for social studies department chair (Source: public school district in Florida)	Top two responsibilities/positions description for computer science department chair (Source: independent private school in Minnesota)
1. "Provide leadership through instructional support to all art teachers." 2. "Act as resource for visual arts curriculum and instruction with regard to individual and team goal setting, curriculum mapping and standards-based pedagogy; Maintain relevant and up-to-date curriculum and instructional procedures."	1. "Ability to Manage: Exhibits competence in planning, organizing, and follow-through. Prepares well prior to giving instructions. Does not waste subordinates' time with unnecessary or duplicate tasks. Maintains control or organization." 2. "Ability to Lead: Establishes clear expectations. Maintains adequate contact with subordinates. Assumes initiative in identifying and solving problems. Involves faculty, staff, and students in decision-making process while maintaining responsibility for final decisions. Ability to delegate responsibility."	1. "Curricular and Programmatic Leadership: Develop a thorough understanding of the curriculum through one-on-one conversations, classroom observations, department meetings and a careful review of current courses; Identify opportunities to expand or enhance the computer science curriculum within and across divisions; Make computer science visible within the school community; Teach . . . ; Design . . .; Partner with other department chairs . . . to coordinate and integrate course content; . . . Represent the department's program . . .; Oversee and communicate about the department budget." 2. "Faculty Support and Evaluation."

department budget . . . Collaborate with admissions and communications departments to share with constituents and prospective families the department's philosophy, vision and offerings. Develop and maintain connections with relevant programs, institutions and thought leaders in the [City]." This position description situates the department leader as having responsibility not only for instructional leadership and teacher colleague evaluation but also for their departmental budget, representing the department to prospective students and their families, and even for outreach to local industries and organizations that align with their department's content area.

Management Roles

Evaluative Authority

When evaluation of their departmental colleagues is part of their responsibility, department leaders are in a position as both peer and supervisor. This situation is particular to the school environment. When situated as a peer evaluation rather than as an administrative evaluation, Visone (2022) found that teachers' perception of these "collegial visits" to their classroom were favorably received. Although the study by Visone (2022) was focused on teacher-to-teacher peer-evaluation—not department leader evaluation of teachers—this can be considered a close parallel or overlap with how department leaders' evaluations of teachers can be perceived if the department leader fosters a collegial peer to peer culture rather than a strictly hierarchical one. By fostering a "collegial visit" approach (Visone, 2022), department leaders might emphasize themselves as a type of "servant leader" to their department colleagues (Crippen & Willows, 2019; Dami et al., 2022). This perspective is especially relevant to department chairs in the K-12 school context, because in many cases, according to Mayers and Zepeda (2002), the department chair has the same or similar course load as their colleagues in the department. As such, K-12 department chairs/leaders are uniquely situated to understanding the perspectives and daily realities of teachers and supporting them in both instructional leadership and how they integrate socio-emotional contexts relevant to their students (Attwood et al., 2022).

Some of the position descriptions analyzed in this study seem to have language that supports this approach and is seen especially highlighted in the Minnesota independent school analyzed in this study where the second responsibility listed is "faculty support and evaluation." Emphasizing the expectation of fostering a supportive environment is an important signal that department chairs at that school are expected to lead through a form of what could be called the "collegial visits" approach discussed by Visone (2022). Having the same or similar number of courses to teach as their colleagues—with perhaps a one course re-assignment for the department chair role—can ensure that department chairs remain peer-leaders. This also increases workload on the department chair that further situates this role as unique in its in-between status between teacher and administrator. They remain peers with their colleagues with the same or similar level of courses to teach while also being in a managerial position leading the department. This is almost unique to the K-12 department chair/leader role.

Responsibility for the departmental budget was also a common theme among most of the position descriptions, which further suggests the department chair/leader as a mid-level manager who could be considered an administrator. Of the eight position descriptions in this sample, six included responsibilities specific to managing the departmental budget. For the secondary school department chairperson position description in a public school district in New Mexico, their fifteenth responsibility is to "Administer the budget and resources if allocated to the department." For the department chair/leader position in a public school district in Florida, part of their listed responsibilities is to "Plan the budget carefully. Controls budget, maximizing the use of resources available [and] Coordinates objectives and priorities with resource allocation [as well as] Understands fiscal situations generally." In the position description from a public school district in California, department chairs/leaders' tenth responsibility listed is "Submits any department budget requests [and] Facilitates the department discussions regarding the allocation of resources when assigned to the department." Another public school district in California gives even more authority to department chairs/leaders in which their first responsibility listed under "Additional Responsibilities" is to "Oversee the department budget and order instructional supplies and equipment." As seen in this sample, the relative importance of managing the departmental budget varies from district to district, but the majority include a budget management responsibility at some level.

The authority of the department chair/leader was broad and yet also specific in several areas related to the theme of instructional leadership. In each case in this sample, the department leader was under the supervision of the principal or similar senior administrator rather than an assistant principal, suggesting their relative position. Interestingly, the social studies department chairperson handbook from a public school district in Florida notes on page 11—of a 52-page handbook—that department chairs/leaders "Don't worry about authority. The more you want authority, the more you seek security, not progress." This curiously philosophical statement was among several unusual suggestions in the handbook—the official handbook publicly accessible on the school district's website. This is noted in this content analysis because the tone of the department chairperson's handbook—but not the list of responsibilities—from the sample public school district in Florida is notably different from the tone of all the other position descriptions in this sample. This may be because it is a handbook rather than a job announcement.

Overall Similarities With Different Emphasis

In terms of the overall position description for department chairs/leaders among this sample, they are very similar but differ in emphasis. For example, one of the two California public school districts in this sample states in its position description for department chairperson:

Under the direction of the school principal, the department chairperson's primary role is to provide instructional leadership, support, and assistance to all teachers in the department. The chairperson serves as a resource to support a standards-based curriculum, effective instructional strategies,

classroom management, and instructional materials. The chairperson visits classrooms to ensure the integrity of curriculum and the delivery of instruction. The department chairperson serves as a liaison to site and district administration. As an instructional leader, the chairperson remains current with educational literature, practices, issues, and shares important information with department members. (California public school district "B")

The other California public school district in this sample (California public school district "A") states in its position description for department chairperson:

The department chair provides instructional leadership and enhances articulation regarding curriculum alignment with standards. He or she facilitates the development and use of common assessments in order to determine instructional strategies that will most effectively meet the needs of students. The duties of the department chair are critical to the overall educational program and require effective and ongoing communication and collaboration with staff and administration. During department chair meetings, administration will incorporate regular discussions about the prioritization of department chair efforts in alignment with the needs of the school. (California public school district "A")

The position descriptions both emphasize the department chair's primary responsibility in instructional leadership. This confirms Peacock's (2014) study of secondary school science department chairs in which instructional leadership had been the primary role of the department chair for a century. This has not changed. And, content area does not affect the primary role of the department chair, either.

There were some variations in emphasis, however, for some school districts. The public school district in Kentucky, for example, had only a one-sentence summary of the department chair's position: "To use leadership, supervisory, and administrative skills so as to promote the educational development of each student." It then follows with a list of more than forty responsibilities—the largest number of any of the other department chair/leader position descriptions in this sample. While the emphasis may have some variability among the position descriptions' overviews, the responsibilities substantially overlap and have the same themes of instructional leadership and mid-level manager.

The "NAIS Guidelines of Professional Practice for Department Chairs" (2011) specifically emphasizes that the department chair is a "key leadership role" and fulfills the "role of teacher and administrator simultaneously" (para. 2). This emphasizes to all NAIS-member schools that the department chair is an administrator, hence they report to the principal and are, in theory, at the same level as an assistant principal. The NAIS states in its overview of the role of the department chair:

Academic department chairs play a key role in stewarding instruction and learning in their respective departments. At the same time, they work collaboratively with the other department chairs to ensure the academic program aligns with the mission of the school. Department chairs play a key leadership role in independent schools as they often fulfill the role of teacher and administrator simultaneously. This valuable, middle-level leadership is crucial in establishing open communication between and among departments and between administration and faculty. ("NAIS Guidelines of Professional Practice for Department Chairs," 2011, para. 2)

This official statement from the NAIS serves as a guide for all NAIS-member schools. When comparing this with the overviews of the department chair in the public school position descriptions, they emphasize almost exactly the same roles and responsibilities. Thus, the department chair position tends to be seen as a mid-level management position in which individual schools may give emphasis to the department leader's larger administrative status.

DISCUSSION

Department leadership in secondary schools seems to be consistently focused on instructional leadership first and foremost but this covers more than what it may at first appear to require at first. As the sample in this study suggests, department chair/leader position descriptions feature a wide range of responsibilities from curriculum development and implementation to evaluation of teacher colleagues, and to budget management in some schools. While most of the literature seems to not make a distinction between department-level leadership in schools in city environments from those in rural environments, some studies (e.g., Bredeson, 2013; Klar et al., 2020) do focus on rural schools when discussing department leadership. Most studies that discuss leadership in rural schools do so in the context of overall school leadership (i.e., principals and assistant principals) rather than department-level leadership (i.e., department chairs/lead teachers). When considering the context of schools, local community culture has been noted to be of distinct importance (Bredeson, 2013; Reagan et al., 2019). Discussing the importance of belonging is important for effective leaders across schools in various contexts (Brooks et al., 2007).

Some studies have noted the importance of including *belonging* as a variable or point of interest when studying school communities. For example, Gallo (2020) observed: "In comparison to the dominant narrative that rural places are closely-knit, this sense of belonging and general friendliness might be attributed to the fact that so many of the people in these two small communities have lived near one another for their entire lives, sometimes going back generations" (p. 5). This observation suggests how a school organization may align with collaborative leadership formats between the school and the local families. While the concept of distributed leadership has usually been in reference to school administrators' approach to teachers, it can also apply to the approach of school administrators and teachers with local families (Flessa, 2009; Seelig & McCabe, 2021). The department-level leader, then, could be a further communications liaison with all stakeholder groups, especially when considering the department chair/leader's role in representing their department and content area to the community at back-to-school events and similar community-facing events.

The *concept* of belonging is similar yet seems to differ based on place. For example, a sense of belonging may be from the dynamics of the school in comparison to other schools in the area who compete in sports or are being compared based on standardized test scores, or in celebrating distinct cultures represented in their school (Brooks et al. 2007; Cothran & Ennis, 1999; Klar, 2013). A sense of belonging is important for the context of distributed leadership. In a study of rural schools in Wisconsin, a teacher participant stated:

Our numbers are small, but yet if you step up and are serving on those committees, you help with the decision making and your opinion counts and you're on interview teams and deciding who's going to be part of your staff, who's going to be a good fit. Yes, they're asking a lot of us in a small district... but yet my opinion counts, and it's valued and I'm making a difference, not just for my kids but for the whole teaching community. (As quoted in Seelig & McCabe, 2021, p. 9)

This suggests that leadership at schools in a similar context might be more likely to support community-driven distributed leadership practice. That teacher's response also suggests why rural schools—at least in that case study—promote the impression of what some scholars have referred to as displaying closely-knit place-based partnership dynamics in which the school and community substantially overlap (Bauch, 2001; Gallo, 2020). Regardless of place-based context, department leaders are part of a distributed leadership model who can affect social and instructional change when delegated sufficient authority by their principal (Brooks et al., 2007; Lee & Nie, 2014).

It seems that whether discussing a public school or private independent school that department leadership is very similar. A trend toward standardizing job descriptions in principle, if not in policy, seems to be apparent in the documents examined in this study. The department leader is part of the

distributed leadership model. While instructional leadership is central to the role of a department leader in K-12 schools, the teacher leader role is one of various responsibilities in a middle management context that serves as an essential liaison between teachers and the school's administrators. The department leader is a representative of their content area to both school administrators and to students' families. As such, the department leader is in a position of being a content area specialist and by fact of holding the position of department leader infers having the confidence of the principal. This lends authority to the department leader specifically as a teacher leader who is in a unique position to confer with all stakeholders.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Though qualitatively representative of position descriptions of secondary school department chairs across the continental United States, this content analysis focuses on the official responsibilities of department leaders as defined by the school, district, or professional accreditation organization (e.g., the National Association of Independent Schools). While the official list of responsibilities and the overview in the position descriptions are likely the experience of department chairs in practice, some scholars such as Gaubatz and Ensminger (2015) noted that there can be substantial variation from school to school. This content analysis has qualitatively substantial findings in that secondary school department leaders are consistently situated as mid-management and, in several position descriptions, seem to be de facto equivalent to assistant principals in that they report to the principal rather than to an assistant principal. Nevertheless, this finding is not generalizable from a quantitative perspective.

Future research could include a quantitatively systematic approach and could potentially include a survey instrument such as the one presented in a previous study of science teacher leadership (Blank, 2021). While this current study does include some international studies (e.g., Brown & Rutherford, 1999; Chow, 2013; Lee & Nie, 2014; Tam, 2010) for thematic comparison to this study focused on a sample of materials from the United States, a future study using a content analysis method could be conducted on department leader position descriptions using a qualitatively representative international sample. This study provides an example of how additional comparative content analyses could be conducted on this topic. This study also provides a qualitatively substantial sample from the United States that an additional study focused internationally could cite for summarizing American public- and private-secondary school department chair position descriptions.

CONCLUSION

The role of the department chair/leader is important as a mid-level manager who supports the principal as a content area specialist in curriculum development and learning measurement for both annual curriculum development, instructional leadership, and in supporting teacher evaluation, as well as leading the assessment of learning across their department. The role of an assistant principal is usually clear, while the department chair/leader is in an in-between managerial role in schools with unique nuance in ambiguous authority. But when the department chair reports to the principal, rather than to an assistant principal, this suggests the department chair's elevated relative importance in the management hierarchy of the school. This is part of a distributed leadership model that can be especially effective for complex organizations such as schools.

It is usually important for the department chair to cultivate support from colleagues from both their department and from the school principal. Effectiveness in their role may also depends on their willingness to be a "servant leader" to the department (Crippen & Willows, 2019); while at the same time, the department chair reports to the principal and must manage the department to meet the principal's agenda for it and the school. The effective department leader navigates this potential tension successfully by aligning department-level and school-level goals and simultaneously managing the department to align to the principal's vision for the school. In either point of view, the department

leader who perceives their role as a servant leader will likely foster greater trust from their colleagues at the departmental level and the school administration level in addition to increasing the likelihood of improving their job satisfaction (Crippen & Willows, 2019; Dami et al., 2022). The department chair is a content area specialist whose authority is derived from their department as much as from their principal. As such, the department chair can be an administrator-track position in which it can lead later to applying for an assistant principal position and then to being a school principal. There were no notable differences in responsibilities based on content area in this sample. In part, this is because the department chair's responsibilities are generally consistent across public schools and NAIS-member private schools, even if their emphasis varies from school to school.

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Adam I. Attwood, PhD, is a faculty member in the Eriksson College of Education at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, Tennessee, USA.