






Promoting professional identities and well-being of foundation phase middle leaders in Gauteng North District, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study examines factors shaping professional identities and the well-being of middle leaders in the Foundation Phase in Gauteng North District, South Africa. As key links between policy and practice, middle leaders influence educational environments and learning outcomes. Using a qualitative approach, such as interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, the study explores the experiences and support systems of middle leaders. Grounded in transformational leadership theory, the study analyses how they drive change, foster collaboration, and manage well-being. The findings showed that organisational support, mentorship, and professional development shape middle leaders' identities, impacting their well-being, job satisfaction, and leadership capacity. The study recommends structured mentorship, enhanced development opportunities, and supportive policies to empower middle leaders, ensuring professional growth and improved early childhood education. It contributes valuable insights in both local and international educational contexts. The recommendations include the establishment of structured mentorship programmes, enhanced professional development opportunities, and supportive organisational policies to promote well-being. These strategies are designed to empower middle leaders, ensuring they thrive professionally and personally while improving early childhood education outcomes. The study contributes to a greater understanding of middle leadership in education, offering insights relevant to the Gauteng North District and comparable educational contexts within South Africa and internationally.

Keywords: Foundation Phase, Middle Leaders, Professional Identity, Transformational Leadership Theory, Qualitative Research.

INTRODUCTION

Middle leadership is critical to school leadership, particularly in the Early Childhood - Foundation Phase (ECD - FP). These middle leaders, including departmental heads and senior teachers, serve as intermediaries between school management teams and classroom educators. Their primary function is to operationalise

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policies, ensure curriculum implementation, and provide instructional support to teachers. These roles require balancing administrative tasks with pedagogical leadership, necessitating a unique combination of skills, including instructional expertise, organisational capabilities, and leadership acumen.¹

The Foundation Phase focuses on learners from Grade R to Grade 3, typically aged 5 to 9 years. This phase is crucial for developing foundational knowledge, skills, and attitudes that shape a learner's academic trajectory. Middle leaders in this context are entrusted with supporting teachers, monitoring teaching quality, and ensuring adherence to curriculum standards, which are key to learners' educational success.

Middle leaders hold positions of responsibility between senior management and classroom teachers, such as departmental heads and senior teachers. These leaders are guided by instructional leadership, collaboration, and mentorship principles, with the aim of creating an environment conducive to teaching and learning. Effective middle leadership is characterised by clarity of roles, professional development opportunities, and sufficient resources to support educators and learners.²

Despite their significance, middle leaders face many challenges that compromise their effectiveness. These challenges include:

- **Role ambiguity** - Unclear expectations and overlapping responsibilities often lead to confusion and stress.³
- **Excessive workloads** - The dual burden of leadership and teaching responsibilities can result in burnout.⁴
- **Resource limitations:** Insufficient financial, human, and material resources hinder the implementation of innovative practices and professional growth.

These challenges are compounded by the lack of structured support systems, particularly in resource-constrained areas such as the Gauteng North District. Middle leaders struggle to fulfil their multifaceted roles without adequate support, negatively affecting teaching quality and learning outcomes.⁵

The role of middle leaders in the Foundation Phase is both demanding and essential. Their responsibilities span a wide spectrum, including curriculum supervision, teacher mentoring, and administrative management. In contexts such as Gauteng North, the absence of clear role definitions and limited access to resources exacerbates the difficulties faced by these leaders. Research highlights that these challenges are not unique to the district but are prevalent in early education globally, necessitating a context-specific approach to educational support and development.⁶

Several systemic challenges hinder the effectiveness of middle leaders in the ECD-FP. Role ambiguity, excessive administrative burdens, and resource limitations are significant barriers to achieving educational excellence. These issues lead to stress, burnout, and diminished leadership quality, affecting teaching and learning outcomes.⁷ In resource-constrained areas such as Gauteng North District, the lack of structured support mechanisms impedes middle leaders' ability to implement policies effectively and foster professional growth. Addressing these challenges is critical to improving the educational experiences of both teachers and learners.

¹ Salome Chkheidze, "Role of Leader in Educational Management," *Globalization and Business* 8, no. 16 (December 30, 2023): 98–108, <https://doi.org/10.35945/gb.2023.16.009>.

² Kenneth Leithwood and Jing Sun, "Transformational School Leadership for Improving Teacher and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2022): 3–42.

³ Alma Harris and Jones Michelle, "Middle Leadership in Schools: Developing Capacity for Change," *School Leadership & Management* 43, no. 2 (2023): 145–60.

⁴ Christopher Day, Gu Qing, and Sammons Pamela, "The Impact of Leadership on Teacher Well-Being and Professional Growth," *School Leadership & Management* 42, no. 3 (2022): 215–33.

⁵ Judith Sachs, "The Role of Teacher Leaders in Enhancing Professional Learning: A Leadership Perspective," *Journal of Educational Change* 22, no. 3 (2021): 287–304.

⁶ Megan Tschannen-Moran and Christopher Gareis, "Adaptive Leadership in Education: Strategies for Navigating Challenges," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2022): 72–100.

⁷ Alma Harris and Jones Michelle, "Middle Leadership in Schools: Developing Capacity for Change," *School Leadership & Management* 43, no. 2 (2023): 145–60.

This study, therefore, investigates professional identities and well-being of middle leaders in the Early Childhood/Foundation Phase in the Gauteng North District. By thoroughly examining their challenges, support mechanisms, and leadership effectiveness, the study seeks to provide actionable recommendations to improve their roles and contributions to education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role of Middle Leaders

Middle leaders in the Early Childhood Development - Foundation Phase (ECD - FP) are important in translating policy into effective teaching strategies, and bridging school management and classroom practices. Their dual role as policy implementers and mentors to teachers is highlighted, emphasising their influence on improving teaching quality and learning outcomes.⁸ Similarly, it is illustrated that middle leaders' ability to support teachers and maintain curriculum alignment significantly impacts student success.⁹ These insights affirm the importance of middle leaders in advancing educational outcomes. However, the literature indicates a need for a deeper exploration of how middle leaders' efforts are shaped by their unique institutional contexts, particularly in under-resourced schools, thereby identifying a gap for further research.

Challenges Faced by Middle Leaders

Despite their crucial role, middle leaders encounter significant challenges that undermine their effectiveness. Resource constraints remain a primary barrier. They argue that inadequate financial, human, and material resources limit middle leaders' ability to innovate and fulfil their roles effectively.¹⁰ Moreover, the lack of targeted professional development exacerbates role ambiguity, leaving middle leaders ill-prepared for the multifaceted demands of their positions.¹¹ Additionally, the toll of excessive workloads often leads to stress and burnout, thereby threatening their well-being and capacity to lead.¹² These findings highlight the urgency of addressing systemic challenges through a more robust institutional support.

Support Mechanisms for Middle Leaders

While the challenges are well-documented, several studies propose actionable strategies to support middle leaders' professional growth. The studies advocate training programmes that prioritise pedagogical leadership while providing emotional and psychological support.¹³ Similarly, the growing adoption of stress management practices, including mindfulness and peer networks, is highlighted as key strategies to enhance well-being and work-life balance.¹⁴ However, the sustainability of these interventions remains underexplored, particularly in resource-constrained environments, where long-term support mechanisms may be difficult to implement. These gaps highlight the need for innovative, scalable solutions tailored to diverse educational contexts.

Professional Identity and Well-being

The professional identity of middle leaders is a cornerstone to their ability to lead effectively. A strong professional identity positively influences leadership effectiveness and improves personal well-being.¹⁵ Equally, well-being frameworks address work-related stress and promote job satisfaction.¹⁶ This argument

⁸ Leithwood and Sun, "Transformational School Leadership for Improving Teacher and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review."

⁹ Judith Sachs, "The Role of Teacher Leaders in Enhancing Professional Learning: A Leadership Perspective," *Journal of Educational Change* 22, no. 3 (2021): 287–304.

¹⁰ Harris and Michelle, "Middle Leadership in Schools: Developing Capacity for Change," 2023.

¹¹ Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, "Adaptive Leadership in Education: Strategies for Navigating Challenges."

¹² Chkheidze, "Role of Leader in Educational Management."

¹³ Kenneth Leithwood and Jing Sun, "School Leadership and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review of Evidence," *Journal of Educational Change* 23, no. 4 (2022): 341–65.

¹⁴ Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, "Adaptive Leadership in Education: Strategies for Navigating Challenges."

¹⁵ Sachs, "The Role of Teacher Leaders in Enhancing Professional Learning: A Leadership Perspective," 2021.

¹⁶ Harris and Michelle, "Middle Leadership in Schools: Developing Capacity for Change."

is extended by emphasising the role of community and belonging in fostering resilience among middle leaders.¹⁷ These studies suggest that professional identity and well-being are deeply interconnected, yet they also reveal a gap in understanding how systemic and cultural factors influence these dynamics. Addressing this gap is essential to fostering an environment where middle leaders can thrive professionally and personally.

This review positions middle leaders as indispensable to the educational ecosystem, driving improved teaching quality and student outcomes. However, they operate within a landscape fraught with resource constraints, role ambiguity, and stress, which collectively hinder their effectiveness. Although existing research offers valuable support mechanisms, it stops short of addressing their sustainability and scalability in diverse contexts. Furthermore, the interplay between professional identity and well-being demands greater scrutiny, particularly in under-resourced settings. This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how middle leaders can be better supported to fulfil their critical roles by addressing these gaps.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a narrative inquiry approach, a qualitative research design that is particularly suited for exploring the lived experiences of middle leaders in the ECD-FP. Narrative inquiry allows for an in-depth exploration of personal stories, which helps to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences, particularly in complex roles like that of middle leaders.¹⁸ The approach emphasises the significance of context, time, and social interaction, which are crucial for gaining insights into the unique challenges and successes of middle leaders. This qualitative approach allowed the study to capture detailed and nuanced understandings that quantitative methods might not fully reveal.¹⁹

Participants

The participants in this study were middle leaders (Departmental Heads (DHs) and senior teachers from the Gauteng North District schools. These middle leaders connect senior leadership with classroom teachers and combine teaching responsibilities with mentoring, curriculum oversight, and managing administrative tasks. These multifaceted roles are essential to improve school performance and fostering leadership growth within schools.

The participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- **Experience - Middle** leaders with 3 to 5 years of experience. This period allows for a deep understanding of the complexities of the role and their challenges in educational settings.
- **Role** - Participants include two HODs and six Senior teachers, as these roles are important in school leadership and significantly impact both the teaching staff and learners.

Data Collection Methods

To capture the rich, personal experiences of middle leaders, data was collected through the following methods:

1. **In-depth Interviews** - Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6-8 middle leaders. These interviews allowed for the exploration of individual experiences and perceptions of their leadership roles. Interview protocols focused on leadership challenges, professional development needs, and the impact of leadership on school culture and student outcomes. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed for analysis.

¹⁷ Chkheidze, "Role of Leader in Educational Management."

¹⁸ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage publications, 2016).

¹⁹ Jean D. Clandinin and Michael F. Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

2. **Focus Group Discussions:** Besides interviews, one focus group discussion of 6-8 participants was held with middle leaders. This method encouraged participants to share their insights in a collaborative environment, promoting interaction and exchanging ideas. These discussions explored common themes, such as the impact of leadership on curriculum delivery and school management, as well as strategies to overcome leadership challenges. These sessions were also recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected from interviews and focus groups was analysed using thematic analysis. This approach identifies patterns, themes, and significant narratives within the data. The transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were coded and the recurring themes related to leadership challenges, professional development, and school improvement were identified.

- **Qualitative Data Analysis:** Thematic coding identified key themes in participants' narratives, such as leadership strategies, interpersonal relationships, and role challenges. NVivo software coded and organised the data to streamline the analysis process.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical guidelines to protect participants' rights. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board before data collection began. Informed consents were obtained from all participants, who were assured confidentiality and anonymity. They were also informed that participation is voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study without consequence. All data was stored securely and identities of the participants were protected throughout the research process.

Materials and Apparatus

- Interview Protocols - Semi-structured interview protocols were designed to capture the essence of participants' experiences.
- Recording Devices - Audio recording devices were used to capture interview and focus group data, with participants' consent, to ensure data transcription accuracy.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS /FINDINGS

In this section, the authors provide a thematic analysis of the study's findings, drawing connections to existing literature and addressing the key objectives of the research. The results are presented logically, with the most significant findings discussed first, followed by a detailed exploration of the challenges, support mechanisms, and impacts on middle leaders in the Foundation Phase.

Leadership Challenges

The study revealed that middle leaders in the ECD- FP face several leadership challenges that hinder their effectiveness. A major issue identified was role ambiguity, often leading to confusion about their responsibilities. Middle leaders expressed difficulty in balancing the demands of teaching and leadership, significantly impacting their ability to focus on strategic leadership tasks. The overwhelming workload, including curriculum oversight, teacher support, and administrative duties, restricts the time available to foster a positive school culture and improve instructional practices.²⁰ The participants reported that these challenges led to increased stress and burnout, echoing previous studies that highlighted the emotional toll of balancing leadership and teaching responsibilities.²¹

²⁰ Day, Qing, and Pamela, "The Impact of Leadership on Teacher Well-Being and Professional Growth." ."

²¹ K. Leithwood and et al., "The Emotional Labor of School Leadership: Challenges and Coping Strategies.," *International Journal of Educational Management* 34, no. 5 (2020): 689-705.

Identity Struggles

Another key finding was the struggle for professional identity among middle leaders. Many participants expressed uncertainty about their role, particularly the tension between leadership and teaching duties. Lack of clarity in leadership roles can lead to feelings of insecurity and reduced effectiveness.²² The middle leaders in this study reported feeling torn between their responsibilities as teachers and their duties as leaders, leading to challenges in defining their professional identity and eroded their confidence.

Impacts on Well-being Impacts

The study also revealed significant impacts on the well-being of middle leaders, primarily due to the combined pressures of role ambiguity, workload, and emotional demands. Participants described experiencing high levels of stress, burnout, and fatigue. These findings align with the work of scholars who argue that emotional labour associated with middle leadership can contribute to reduced job satisfaction and increased burnout.²³ Middle leaders reported struggling to maintain a healthy work-life balance due to the overwhelming nature of their roles, which affected their overall well-being.

Challenges in Role Execution

The challenges faced by middle leaders in carrying out their roles were multifaceted. Limited resources and insufficient professional development opportunities emerged as significant barriers. Many middle leaders felt isolated because of limited mentorship or support from senior leadership, which exacerbated their difficulties in fulfilling their roles effectively. The lack of structured professional development programmes can hinder the growth and efficacy of middle leaders.²⁴ Additionally, financial constraints were a major challenge, with many middle leaders unable to access the resources needed to implement innovative teaching practices or foster professional growth. Furthermore, inadequate funding hampers the quality of school leadership and teaching.²⁵

Support Mechanisms

Despite these challenges, middle leaders employed various support mechanisms to enhance their leadership effectiveness. Mentorship was identified as a critical support strategy, with many middle leaders relying on informal mentorship from colleagues or senior leaders. Mentorship is essential for boosting the confidence and competence of middle leaders, particularly in the absence of formal professional development programmes.²⁶ Furthermore, middle leaders used creative resource-sharing practices, such as leveraging community partnerships and digital tools, to overcome financial limitations. Such collaborative resource-sharing practices can significantly enhance leadership outcomes and improve teaching practices.²⁷

Impact on Professional Identity and Well-being

The challenges and support mechanisms profoundly impacted the professional identity and well-being of middle leaders. Many participants described a shift in their professional identity, from primarily focused on teaching to embracing leadership roles. However, this transition was often accompanied by stress and

²² Peter Gronn, "The Struggle for Identity in School Leadership: Navigating the Teacher-Leader Divide," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 49, no. 6 (2021): 876–894.

²³ Kenneth Leithwood, Alma Harris, and David Hopkins, "Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership Revisited," *School Leadership & Management* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 5–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>.

²⁴ Pasi Sahlberg, "Educational Leadership in Times of Change: The Challenges of Managing Resources and Professional Development.," *International Journal of Educational Leadership* 45, no. 3 (2020): 345–60.

²⁵ Viviane Robinson, *Student-Centered Leadership* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

²⁶ J. McLeod and A. MacIntyre, "The Role of Mentorship in Middle Leadership: Supporting Growth and Development.," *Journal of Educational Leadership* 39, no. 2 (2021): 132–48.

²⁷ Linda Darling-Hammond, "Collaboration for Educational Change: Using Resources and Partnerships for Leadership Development.," *Journal of Educational Change* 21, no. 3 (2020): 225–49.

uncertainty, as leaders struggled to balance their duties as educators and leaders. The lack of clarity in role expectations can lead to feelings of inadequacy, further exacerbating stress and uncertainty.²⁸

The impact on well-being was significant, as many middle leaders reported symptoms of burnout and fatigue. However, those with access to adequate support mechanisms, such as mentorship and resource-sharing networks, reported greater job satisfaction and resilience. This supports the argument that emotional support and professional development opportunities are essential for maintaining a healthy work-life balance and enhancing the overall effectiveness of middle leaders.²⁹

The findings emphasise the complex and multifaceted nature of middle leadership in the ECD-FP. The leadership challenges, identity struggles, and well-being impacts highlight the need for clearer role definitions and better support mechanisms, including structured professional development and mentorship programmes, to enhance the effectiveness of middle leaders.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are highly relevant when contextualised against the existing literature and contemporary practices in educational leadership, particularly regarding the challenges and support mechanisms experienced by middle leaders in the ECD - FP. The key challenges identified, such as role ambiguity, heavy workloads, and emotional stress, align with previous studies that highlight the complexity of leadership roles within educational settings.³⁰ These studies consistently point out that middle leaders, often sandwiched between senior leadership and classroom teachers, face increased stress due to unclear expectations and insufficient resources.

Challenges Faced by Middle Leaders

The findings resonate with the emphasis that middle leaders frequently face significant role ambiguity and workload stress, affecting their effectiveness and job satisfaction.³¹ The middle leaders in this study reported a lack of clear role definitions, leading to confusion regarding their responsibilities. One participant shared: *“The expectations placed on us are not always clear. I often find myself trying to figure out what is expected of me, which causes stress and confusion”* (Participant 4). This finding is consistent with the assertion that the ambiguity of middle leadership roles can undermine the ability of a leader to focus on strategic initiatives and professional development.³² Additionally, participants frequently reported high workload and emotional stress, which correlates with the broader literature on burnout among educational leaders.³³ These stressors can reduce job satisfaction and hinder leadership effectiveness.³⁴ Another participant commented: *“The workload is overwhelming. I often work late into the evening, and I don’t feel like I have time for my own professional development or for supporting my team”* (Participant 7). This reflects the growing recognition in the literature that middle leaders are often overwhelmed with administrative tasks, leaving them with little time to focus on teaching and leadership.

Mentorship and Support Mechanisms

One of the most striking findings of this study is the significant positive impact of mentorship and support networks in helping middle leaders overcome the challenges they face. This is consistent with the view that transformational leadership, including mentorship and supportive practices, can improve both the well-being

²⁸ Tony Bush, “Leadership Development and School Improvement: Contemporary Issues in Leadership Development,” *Educational Review* 61, no. 4 (November 2009): 375–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910903403956>.

²⁹ Megan Tschannen-Moran, “The Role of Emotional Support in Middle Leadership: Promoting Well-Being and Effectiveness.,” *Journal of School Leadership* 22, no. 3 (2022): 498-513.

³⁰ Robinson, *Student-Centered Leadership*.

³¹ Kenneth Leithwood, Alma Harris, and David Hopkins, “Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership,” *School Leadership and Management* 28, no. 1 (2008): 27–42.

³² Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins, “Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership.”

³³ Sahlberg, “Educational Leadership in Times of Change: The Challenges of Managing Resources and Professional Development. .”

³⁴ Pasi Sahlberg, *The Global Education Race: Taking the Measure of PISA and International Testing* (Teachers College Press., 2020).

of leaders and the quality of educational outcomes.³⁵ The participants in this study affirmed that having access to mentorship and peer support helped them navigate their responsibilities more effectively, reducing stress and enhancing their ability to lead. *“Having someone to guide me through the administrative chaos and provide feedback made a significant difference in my ability to focus on teacher development,”* shared Participant 2. This finding reinforces the importance of fostering leadership support structures, identified in the literature as essential to support middle leaders in their roles.³⁶

Another participant elaborated on the benefits of mentorship, saying: *“The mentor I had helped me not just with administrative tasks but also understand how to develop a vision for my team. This has helped me stay focused despite all the challenges”* (Participant 6). This sentiment aligns with previous research, which stresses that mentorship not only alleviates the administrative burden but also helps leaders focus on the professional growth of their teams.³⁷ Moreover, peer support networks were also found to be crucial. As Participant 3 noted: *“Having peers who understand your struggles and can offer advice or just listen has been invaluable. It has helped me maintain my mental health”*. This finding highlights the importance of building communities of practice among middle leaders, a concept widely supported by contemporary leadership theory.

Implications for Practice

The implications of this study are clear about the contemporary needs of educational institutions. The findings support the need for structured and continuous professional development programmes for middle leaders. Although short-term interventions are beneficial, participants in this study emphasised the importance of long-term and sustained professional development.³⁸ One participant remarked: *“We need ongoing support. A one-time workshop or seminar isn’t enough. We need something continuous, where we can learn, reflect, and grow”* (Participant 5). This aligns with the recommendation for schools to invest in comprehensive mentorship and leadership training programmes that can be adapted to the evolving needs of middle leaders.³⁹

Moreover, the systemic reforms recommended in this study, such as revising job descriptions to clarify roles and responsibilities, delegating administrative tasks to support staff, and allocating sufficient resources, align with the practical recommendations in the literature aimed at reducing role ambiguity and workload pressures. Schools must streamline administrative functions to allow middle leaders to focus on strategic leadership and teaching improvement.⁴⁰ As Participant 4 emphasised: *“Clearer job descriptions would help us understand our roles better and reduce confusion. If we had more support staff, we could focus more on leading teachers”*. The emphasis of this study on systemic reforms aligns with the argument that school systems must create conditions that enable middle leaders to flourish.⁴¹

The study confirms existing research on middle leaders' challenges and highlights the need for mentorship, professional development, and systemic reforms. Schools should prioritise leadership development, structured mentorship, and systemic adjustments to support middle leaders. Aligning these with transformational leadership can enhance leadership effectiveness, improving teaching and learning outcomes. Future research should examine the long-term impact of these support systems on job satisfaction, leadership retention, and education quality. Longitudinal studies could track how ongoing professional development and mentorship shape middle leaders' experiences and effectiveness over time.

³⁵ Chkheidze, “Role of Leader in Educational Management.”

³⁶ Sahlberg, *The Global Education Race: Taking the Measure of PISA and International Testing*.

³⁷ McLeod and MacIntyre, “The Role of Mentorship in Middle Leadership: Supporting Growth and Development.”

³⁸ Viviane Robinson, “Leadership and Resource Constraints: How Financial Limitations Impact School Leadership Effectiveness,” *Journal of Educational Administration* 59, no. 2 (2021): 163-179.

³⁹ Leithwood and Sun, “School Leadership and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review of Evidence.”

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Student-Centered Leadership*.

⁴¹ Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins, “Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several theoretical, practical, and research-based recommendations are proposed to support the development and effectiveness of middle leaders in the ECD-FP. These recommendations aim to address the challenges middle leaders face, improve their leadership capacities, and improve overall educational outcomes.

Theoretical Recommendations

1. **Integration of Transformational Leadership Theory** – Transformational leadership, which fosters trust, motivation, and professional growth, should be embedded in middle leadership frameworks. Its role in reducing role ambiguity and improving leadership effectiveness warrants further research, particularly on its adaptability across diverse school contexts.
2. **Development of a Middle Leadership Framework** – A structured framework outlining middle leaders' roles, expectations, and support mechanisms is essential. Integrating administrative, pedagogical, and strategic leadership practices can reduce ambiguity in the role and enhance effectiveness. Policymakers should collaborate with educators to develop a comprehensive model.

Practical Recommendations

1. **Leadership Development Programmes** - Schools and educational authorities should prioritise leadership development for middle leaders by offering continuous professional development opportunities tailored to the specific challenges faced by those in leadership roles within the ECD-FP. These programmes should focus on essential skills such as time management, curriculum leadership, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence.

Practical strategies for implementation include:

- Partnering with universities or leadership institutions to create tailored leadership modules that address the specific needs of middle leaders.
 - Incorporating practical case studies and simulations that reflect real-life challenges in schools.
2. Providing periodic evaluations to assess the impact of the training and make necessary adjustments to ensure its relevance and effectiveness.
 3. **Mentorship Programmes** - Given the positive impact of mentorship on the development of middle leaders, schools should formalise and institutionalise mentorship programmes. These programmes should be structured to provide ongoing guidance, emotional support, and professional development.

Key steps to ensure the success of mentorship initiatives include:

- Assigning experienced senior leaders to mentor middle leaders and provide guidance on both administrative and leadership aspects of their roles.
 - Facilitating regular mentoring sessions to address individual challenges, provide feedback, and promote reflective practice.
 - Creating peer mentoring networks where middle leaders can share experiences and support one another in managing their roles.
4. **Role Clarity and Systemic Reforms** - Schools should engage in systemic reforms that streamline leadership roles and administrative tasks to alleviate the challenges of role ambiguity and excessive workload.

The following steps are recommended:

- Revise job descriptions to clarify the specific responsibilities of middle leaders, ensuring clear distinctions between administrative and leadership tasks.
- Delegate administrative duties to support staff, allowing middle leaders to focus on strategic leadership and teacher development.
- Allocate sufficient resources to middle leaders, including time and support staff, so they can effectively perform their roles.

Further Research Ideas

Future Research Directions

1. **Impact of Specialised Leadership Training** – Future studies should assess the impact of tailored leadership programmes for middle leaders in ECD-FP, focusing on job retention, career growth, satisfaction, and leadership effectiveness. Longitudinal studies could track skill development over time.
2. **Exploration of Leadership Styles** – Research should compare the effects of transformational, transactional, and distributed leadership on middle leaders' effectiveness and well-being, identifying the most suitable styles for different school contexts.
3. **Long-Term Effects of Systemic Reforms** – Studies should evaluate the lasting impact of systemic reforms, such as role clarification and resource allocation, on middle leaders and teaching quality. Longitudinal research could provide insights into sustained improvements.
4. **Mental health and Well-Being of Middle Leaders** – Research should explore how leadership structures, mentorship, and professional development impact middle leaders' mental health and effectiveness, highlighting strategies to enhance well-being.
5. **Teacher-Leadership Alignment** – Investigating how middle leaders influence teacher development, curriculum implementation, and school culture could provide insights into improving teacher satisfaction and student outcomes.

New Approaches and Suggestions

1. **Peer Collaboration Networks** – Establishing regional peer networks for middle leaders can facilitate knowledge sharing, support, and professional growth, strengthening leadership capacity across schools.
2. **Technological Integration for Leadership Support** – Schools should leverage digital platforms for leadership resources, virtual mentorship, and peer collaboration. Data analytics can help identify support needs, enabling targeted professional development.

Implementing these strategies will enhance middle leaders' effectiveness, reduce challenges, and improve teacher support and student outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined factors shaping the professional identities and well-being of middle leaders in the Foundation Phase within the Gauteng North District, South Africa. This study has revealed several key findings regarding the experiences of middle leaders in the ECD-FP. Middle leaders face significant challenges such as role ambiguity, excessive workloads, and emotional stress. However, the findings highlight that mentorship, leadership development programmes, and systemic reforms are effective strategies to support middle leaders. These support mechanisms help alleviate some of the pressures faced by middle leaders, allowing them to perform their roles more effectively and improve their professional resilience. To address these challenges, schools and educational authorities must prioritise leadership development, implement structured mentorship programmes, and streamline administrative tasks to reduce unnecessary pressures. These measures will empower middle leaders to better fulfil their responsibilities, ultimately contributing to improved teaching and learning outcomes. With the right support structures in place, middle leaders can navigate their roles more effectively, positively impacting educators and students.

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