



EXPLORING THE ROLE OF MIDDLE LEADERS IN MANAGING EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH IN GAUTENG PROVINCE: A CASE OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This case study explores the role of middle leaders in managing their emotional and physical health in middle schools of Gauteng Province, South Africa. Schools from grades 3 to 6 were purposively selected, and 13 middle managers, including 11 females and 2 males, were interviewed. The study highlights the challenges middle leaders face, such as increased workloads, stress, and maintaining work-life balance, and how these factors impact their overall health. Findings suggest that effective emotional and physical health, increased workload, lack of recognition and support, resources constraints and overcrowded classrooms as well as lack of emotional support affect the well-being of middle managers in schools. The study also provides insights into strategies middle leaders adopt to cope with these challenges, emphasizing the need for institutional support in promoting well-being among school leaders.

Keywords: *Middle leaders, Emotional health, Physical health, Work-life balance, School Management.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this case study is to explore how middle leaders in middle schools of Gauteng Province manage their emotional and physical health while balancing their leadership responsibilities. The research question that was asked is "How do middle leaders in middle schools of Gauteng Province manage their emotional and physical health, and what challenges do they face in balancing their well-being with their leadership responsibilities?" In this article, the words "teacher", "instructor" and "educator" are used interchangeably. Tiffany et al. (2024) discovered that work motivation significantly contributes to improving employee job satisfaction. Motivated individuals are consequently more inclined to exhibit productivity, commitment, and job satisfaction. The South African government made significant progress in enhancing accountability among school middle administrators. Three significant high-level policies addressed the accountability of middle leaders and principals about the learning results of schools: parts 16A and 58B of the South African Schools Act; the Whole School Evaluation; and the school principal parts of the Quality Management System (DBE, 2015; DBE, 2020; RSA DoE, 2003; RSA NPC, 2011).

The objective of middle leaders in South African public schools is to support principals in school management, enhance student education, and remain cognisant of administrative procedures encompassing all school activities (Republic of South Africa, 1998). Middle leaders are characterised as educators that possess formal leadership positions inside their schools, directly supervising teachers in specific domains, often serving as heads of subject areas or grade level leaders (Bryant & Walker, 2024). Middle leaders are predominantly situated in schools, instruct in classrooms, and oversee both curricular and non-curriculum domains, including student welfare (De Nobile et al. 2024). De Nobile (2018) proposed a model for middle leadership in schools that encompasses the methodologies employed to fulfil their roles ("How?"), the recommended strategies for middle leaders to accomplish their responsibilities, and the various roles involving team leadership, relationship management, time management, effective communication, and self-management (Shaked, 2024). This article examined

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the management of self as a function of middle leaders in South African schools, against the backdrop of the established significance of middle leadership in educational institutions, as articulated by Gurr (2019). Middle leadership cannot be easily distilled into a concise list of desirable traits; instead, it is cultivated through a context-dependent, intricate process of professional development that is 'context-specific, time-consuming, messy, and fluid' (Stephenson, 2010:155). During the COVID-19 pandemic, middle leaders in educational institutions assumed crucial responsibilities, highlighting their essential roles in tackling the diverse challenges confronting global education systems, from alleviating learning loss to promoting their own physical health and emotional well-being (Abella, et al., 2024). Middle leaders faced significant expectations during a phase of "crisis leadership," a period characterised by elevated work-related stress and a substantial exodus from the profession prior to COVID-19 (Marchant et al. 2024).

The notions of stress and work-related stress require examination since they offer a more profound understanding of work-related stress. Kahn (1990) observes that there is minimal consensus on a scientific meaning of the term. Stress refers to a good or negative reaction to a stimulus, which may be physical or psychological, occurring within a certain setting, such as the job (Lambert, 2024). An understanding of stress facilitates comprehension of work-related stress, as it is typically regarded as a negative emotion for middle leaders. Work-related stress is not merely a correlational link between a stimulus (stressor) and its corresponding response; rather, it should be perceived as a transactional, continuous interaction between the individual and their environment (Cooper et al. 2001). Occupational stress diminishes the quality of life and overall mental and physical well-being of middle leaders, as it induces adverse feelings such as depression and anxiety, which impair their work performance and daily coping abilities (Yazid et al. 2024). This study addresses work-related stress concerning the mental health of middle leaders with increased urgency. The remote work paradigm, exacerbated by COVID-19 confinement, has been identified as a primary contributor to the increase in occupational musculoskeletal disorders among working populations, including middle managers in educational institutions.

This phenomenon is linked to the emergence of musculoskeletal pain and a decline in quality of life, subsequently affecting individual physical health (Vega-Fernández, 2024). Musculoskeletal Disorder (MSD) arises when the body's muscles, ligaments, and tendons are subjected to strain during activities, frequently including uncomfortable postures or repetitive movements, resulting in discomfort and incapacity over time (Jeffree et al. 2024). Musculoskeletal diseases (MSDs) are frequently linked to physical ailments of the musculoskeletal system. Middle managers were often found to suffer from musculoskeletal disorders, wherein muscles, ligaments, tendons, and other soft tissues are impacted by various inflammatory and degenerative conditions, manifesting severe symptoms such as recurrent pain and swollen, stiff joints due to extended working hours, pressure, tension, and anxiety (Pashtana et al. 2024). Middle leaders in schools must routinely engage in hazardous activities such as lifting heavy objects, prolonged sitting or standing, awkward postures, and twisting movements, all of which are linked to an elevated risk of musculoskeletal disorders (Turvill et al. 2024).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW**2.1 Mental Health**

A study by Balyer and Özcan (2023) on middle leaders indicated that work-related demands resulted in fatigue, leading to diminished motivation, reduced performance, low professional enthusiasm, heightened fatigue, feelings of hopelessness, compliance issues, and a decline in institutional synergy. Simultaneously, weariness and psychosomatic symptoms were reported by middle executives who demonstrated significant fatigue and consistently experienced mental depletion along with psychosomatic issues. Marchant et al. (2024). A separate study revealed elevated levels of perceived stress among a significant number of middle leaders, with work-related stress



stemming from the volume and intensity of tasks, a deficiency of control, and heightened stress levels, further intensified by an inability to fulfil role expectations (Scott et al., 2024). There was additional support of the aforementioned studies.

The conclusion of a study by Hanju and Shiquan (2024) indicated that middle leaders faced significant occupational stress and diminished teaching efficacy, which exacerbated feelings of emotional weariness, while job stress also contributed to the development of personal burnout. Further findings were acquired regarding work-related stress among middle managers. A study revealed that middle leaders expressed symptoms of exhaustion characterised by profound fatigue that could not be mitigated by sleep. Xiao et al. (2024). In a study focussing on distinct clusters, respondents from cluster 3, comprising middle leaders, had the lowest levels of joy and self-efficacy, along with the highest levels of tiredness over their emotional reactions to daily work obligations. Pan et al. (2024). Iftikhar and Nasreen (2024) reported findings indicating that middle leaders who suppressed their emotions and exhibited feigned feelings experienced low work engagement and faced various compounding pressures while managing educational and administrative activities.

Certain study results contradicted the studies referenced in the preceding paragraphs. A study by Yazid et al. (2024) found that middle managers exhibited greater satisfaction when experiencing work-related stress from job components, and upon successfully overcoming challenges and meeting job requirements, they were likely to experience reduced work-related stress. Further study findings revealed that middle leaders had reduced occupational ill-being characterised by emotional tiredness, negative affect, and turnover intentions, while demonstrating enhanced occupational well-being, personal accomplishment, job satisfaction, and positive affect (Floman et al., 2024). Comparable findings were seen in a research conducted by Liang (2024). A robust correlation was identified between leaders' empowering behaviour and teachers' self-efficacy, burnout, and positive behaviour. Furthermore, there were reported findings about the mental well-being of the middle leaders. The findings indicated that middle leaders were often able to identify significant issues related to their work-related stress and exhibited greater concern for their mental health (Bradshaw et al., 2024).

2.2 Physical Health

A higher percentage of middle leaders reported neck discomfort, along with notable pain in numerous areas, including the upper and lower back, wrists, knees, and ankles. Zohair et al. (2024). Additional findings regarding physical health issues were derived from the literature. The study by Almansour et al. (2024) revealed that physical stress, arising from the professional demands of middle leadership, may be a risk factor for lower back pain. Abdulmonem's (2024) study findings substantiate the research of Almansour et al. (2024) and Zohair et al. (2024). The findings of the Abdulmonem (2024) study suggested that a small fraction of middle leaders experienced musculoskeletal pain, including low back pain, as well as knee pain, heel pain, shoulder pain, upper back pain, hip joint pain, ankle pain, neck pain, and severe pain in the elbows and wrists. Concurrently, a report by Shuai et al. (2024) yielded findings analogous to those of the aforementioned research (Abdulmonem 2024; Almansour et al., 2024; Zohair et al., 2024). A study on musculoskeletal problems was commenced for middle leaders in educational institutions. The examination encompassed nine anatomical regions: neck, shoulder, upper back, elbow, hand, lower back, hip, knee, and foot. The survey findings revealed that middle school leaders experienced musculoskeletal issues, including complaints related to the ankles, feet, wrists, and hands.

Further research findings from the literature revealed musculoskeletal issues among middle managers in educational institutions. Mohan et al. (2024) reported that the repetitive execution of tasks by middle leaders predisposed them to microtrauma and tissue injuries affecting their muscles, ligaments, tendons, nerves, and bones, with resultant signs and symptoms including pain, weakness, clumsiness, and fatigability. A supplementary investigation conducted by Sankar (2024) validated the previously described findings. The research constituted a statistical comparative examination of India's middle managers in educational institutions across various countries. The survey findings revealed that the most common sites of pain reported by middle managers were the back and the

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lower extremities, specifically the knees and ankles. Additionally, a study report was incorporated into the conclusions of the studies referenced in this paragraph. The conclusions were derived from the findings of Tiku (2024). The results revealed that work-related musculoskeletal disorders were common among middle leaders, impacting both genders, with symptoms including pain, paraesthesia, numbness, and fatigue, along with specific conditions such as tenosynovitis, nerve compression disorders, and degenerative diseases. Markelj et al. (2024) revealed in their study that middle managers experienced musculoskeletal disorders, specifically back discomfort, knee issues, and hip problems.

2.3 Theoretical Foundations in Educational Leadership and Management**2.3.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs posits that individuals are motivated by a series of hierarchical needs, ranging from basic physiological needs to self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). In educational settings, middle leaders play a pivotal role in addressing these needs. For instance, ensuring that employees have a supportive and safe environment can fulfil basic needs, which is foundational for higher-level psychological and self-fulfilment needs. When leaders actively work to meet these needs, they create an environment conducive to optimal performance and well-being (Garg & Rastogi, 2009).

2.3.2 Transactional and Transformational Leadership Theory

Transactional and Transformational Leadership Theories provide insight into how leadership styles can influence workplace health and well-being. Transactional leadership focuses on exchanges between leaders and followers, where compliance is rewarded, and non-compliance is penalized (Bass & Avolio, 1993). While this approach can lead to short-term performance, it may not significantly enhance employee well-being. Conversely, transformational leadership inspires and motivates employees to exceed their own self-interests for the sake of the organization, fostering a culture of trust, inspiration, and emotional support (Bass, 1999). Research indicates that transformational leadership is linked to improved employee well-being and job satisfaction, making it a vital approach for middle leaders in educational contexts (Gunter, 2016).

2.3.3 Social Support Theory

Social Support Theory emphasizes the importance of social relationships in mitigating stress and enhancing emotional health (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Middle leaders who provide social support—through encouragement, empathy, and resources—contribute significantly to their team's ability to manage stress. This support not only promotes emotional health but also builds a sense of community within the workplace, which is essential for collaborative and effective educational environments (Rosenfeld, 2006). The provision of social support can buffer against the negative effects of stress, thereby fostering a healthier workplace climate.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**3.1 Research Design and Data Collection**

This study utilised a qualitative research method, incorporating purposive sampling and in-depth interviews, which is particularly effective for examining the intricate experiences of middle managers in primary schools. The researchers selected 13 participants—11 females and 2 males—to obtain comprehensive insights into the emotional and physical health issues encountered by these educational leaders. This demographic makeup illustrates the predominant gender distribution in educational leadership, with females frequently prevailing in the primary education sector (Baker, 2019). In-depth interviews enable participants to express their personal experiences and coping



mechanisms, offering a level of insight that quantitative methods could neglect (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

This approach effectively elucidates the intricacies of emotional work undertaken by middle managers, especially in high-pressure settings such as educational institutions (Hochschild, 1983). The qualitative method emphasises the specific obstacles encountered by these managers while also illuminating wider systemic issues in educational leadership. Nonetheless, the application of purposive sampling may result in bias, as the sample might not accurately represent all middle managers in elementary education. The results from this sample may not be applicable to male middle managers or individuals in varying educational settings. This technique is justifiable when the objective is to attain a comprehensive understanding of a particular occurrence, rather than to generalise results to a broader population (Patton, 2015). The findings from this study can aid in the creation of specialised support systems and treatments designed to improve the well-being of educational leaders.

3.2 Data analysis

The data analysis involved transcribing the tape-recorded interviews of 13 middle managers verbatim. The researchers adopted an interpretive paradigm to analyse the data, which focused on understanding the subjective experiences and perspectives of the participants. This approach enabled the researchers to identify key themes, patterns, and insights related to how middle managers manage their emotional and physical health. The analysis emphasized the meaning behind the participants' responses, allowing for a deeper understanding of their challenges and coping strategies.

3.3 Trustworthiness

Purposive sampling is frequently utilised in qualitative research to guarantee that participants are chosen based on certain attributes pertinent to the study inquiry (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The choice of schools from grades 3 to 6 indicates a focused strategy for examining middle management dynamics within a particular educational environment. Nonetheless, whereas purposeful sampling can improve the pertinence of findings, it simultaneously raises concerns regarding the generalisability of the results (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample of 13 middle managers, consisting of 11 females and 2 males, underscores a notable gender disparity. This gap may indicate wider societal trends in educational leadership, as female representation is generally more prevalent in middle management positions (Baker et al., 2019). The restricted number of male participants may distort the findings, as gender could affect managerial viewpoints and behaviours (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

This prompts questions regarding the generalisability of ideas derived from mostly female perspectives to the wider community of middle managers. The reliability of qualitative research is typically evaluated based on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Establishing credibility may include triangulation, when various data sources or methodologies are employed to validate conclusions. The study's reliance exclusively on interviews with middle managers introduces the possibility of bias, especially if the managers are cognisant of the study's aims and may adjust their responses accordingly (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

Based on the responses from the participants, the following themes emerged.

4.1.1 Increased Workload and Paperwork: Many participants highlighted the overwhelming amount of paperwork and administrative tasks, which took away valuable teaching time (Participants 1, 7, 10, 12, 13). COVID-19 further exacerbated this issue, doubling the workload for some (Participants 1, 13). Participant 1 said, "I do not want to be a Hod Anymore. I want to just be a teacher. A lot of time is taken away because you are a leader, you need to sort out stuff. Jaah, so I get interrupted a lot in class. My assistance if I can clown her will be great because she is awesome, she just goes on. The paperwork is a lot. I do not think we always get recognition or assistance from the

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people we help. Especially from our principal, we are different, she is paper oriented, and I am people-oriented we do not like we get recognition we deserve. It has become harder during the COVID it's like my work has doubled, even with children. Now I do everyday Paperwork. It's very difficult. I used to have a day to do paperwork, now I do it every day." Participant 7 said, "The main challenge is that there is a lot of paperwork that needs to be attended to on daily basis and taking away lot of teaching time. There is also no recognition from those people we serve. Our classrooms are extremely overcrowded and becomes so difficult to identify learners according to their learning barriers". Participant 10 said, "There is also no recognition from those people we serve. Our classrooms are extremely overcrowded and becomes so difficult to identify learners according to their learning barriers". Participant 12 said, "You must do paperwork. It impacts you, especially with stress". Participant 13 said, "It has become harder during the COVID it's like my work has doubled, even with children. Now I do everyday paperwork. It's very difficult".

4.1.2 Lack of Recognition and Support: Several participants expressed feeling unrecognized for their efforts, particularly by school leadership or the people they serve (Participants 1, 7, 10).

Participant 1 said, "I do not want to be a Hod Anymore. I want to just be a teacher. A lot of time is taken away because you are a leader, you need to sort out stuff. Jaah, so I get interrupted a lot in class. My assistance if I can clown her will be great because she is awesome, she just goes on. The paperwork is a lot. I do not think we always get recognition or assistance from the people we help. Especially from our principal, we are different, she is paper oriented, and I am people-oriented we do not like we get recognition we deserve. It has become harder during the COVID it's like my work has doubled, even with children. Now I do everyday Paperwork. It's very difficult. I used to have a day to do paperwork, now I do it every day." Participant 7 said, "The main challenge is that there is a lot of paperwork that needs to be attended to on daily basis and taking away lot of teaching time. There is also no recognition from those people we serve. Our classrooms are extremely overcrowded and becomes so difficult to identify learners according to their learning barriers". Participant 10 said, "There is also no recognition from those people we serve. Our classrooms are extremely overcrowded and becomes so difficult to identify learners according to their learning barriers". While some acknowledged support from colleagues or principals, it was often limited by external pressures (Participant 9). Participant 9 said, "I am just so discouraged on how everything is conducted. Not necessarily that we don't get support, we do, our principal is very kind, but he is also faced with lot of paperwork".

4.1.3 Health Challenges: Participants reported various health issues linked to stress and work demands, including physical ailments such as back pain, headaches, and allergies (Participants 2, 3). Stress-related absenteeism also surfaced as a concern (Participant 2). Participant 2 said, "I have never had health issues., I have never been absent from school never ever, I was absent when I had ny hysterectomy, now I am absent , a lot, (She laughed) stress Monday I could not walk because it was backpains, headache rushes was experiencing a lot of ailments. Allergies staff that I have never ever had. Health wise sometimes it goes well sometimes not that good. I do not have major health issues. Except I have an irritated throat, I try to keep healthy by trying to eat good and sleep enough". Participant 3 said, "Health wise I, eeh, You know it is sometimes good and at times is bad. It is only that I have a sore throat which is not bad. EEh, What I find with parents, most of the parents are younger than what I am, I find that they consider my advice or input than when I was a young teacher. When I was young, I found teachers and parents conflicting my advice but now that I am older, we go along well, and I think it's because of experience and maturity. I find them being considerate of my advice than when I was still young. My approach with learners in the class is to include parents. If I find the learner in my class a leaner is not given enough support, I contact the parents immediately. I do not wait for my parents' evening or meeting. I will contact parents immediately; I will call the



mother of the father in the afternoon. I have a very good open base with parents, and I find that the parents are very appreciative”.

4.1.4 Emotional Support and Listening: A theme of emotional support emerged, with some participants emphasizing the importance of listening without judgment to both parents and colleagues as a coping strategy (Participants 6, 11). Participant 6 said, “You listen without saying anything. Just listen to the person telling you everything that he wants, or she wants to tell you. You just listen to parents. Sometimes a person is venting everything that he wants, or she wants to say without judging, without giving an advice which just listen for a person to that person will is alleviating the weight on his shoulders”. Participant 11 said, “You listen without saying anything. Just listen to the person telling you everything that he wants, or she wants to tell you. You just listen to parents”.

4.1.5 Resource Constraints and Overcrowded Classrooms: Participants mentioned limited resources and overcrowded classrooms, making it difficult to effectively identify and support learners with barriers (Participants 7, 8, 10). This issue added to the stress of their leadership roles. Participant 7 said, “The main challenge is that there is a lot of paperwork that needs to be attended to on daily basis and taking away lot of teaching time. There is also no recognition from those people we serve. Our classrooms are extremely overcrowded and becomes so difficult to identify learners according to their learning barriers”. Participant 8 said, “We lack resources to carry out our duties”. Participant 10 said, “There is also no recognition from those people we serve. Our classrooms are extremely overcrowded and becomes so difficult to identify learners according to their learning barriers”.

4.2 Discussion

Increased Workload and Paperwork: Many instructors have highlighted the issue of increased effort and documentation in educational settings, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. A plethora of educators state that the overwhelming load of administrative tasks detracts from their core teaching obligations, leading to significant stress and work dissatisfaction (Participants 1, 7, 10, 12, 13). Participants expressed a collective sentiment that administrative responsibilities intrude upon vital instructional time. Participant 1 articulated a desire to focus solely on teaching instead of engaging in extensive administration responsibilities: “I do not wish to be a Hod anymore.” I aim to become an instructor. A considerable amount of time is expended on leadership duties, requiring the coordination of numerous affairs. Participant 1. Instructors widely fear that increasing documentation requirements hinder their ability to engage meaningfully with students.

The COVID-19 epidemic has exacerbated the administrative burden, with some educators reporting that their workload has effectively quadrupled (Participant 1, 13). The lack of recognition for the additional efforts teachers do in conjunction with their administrative duties is a considerable issue. Participant 7 stated, “There is a deficiency of recognition from the individuals we support.” Our classrooms are excessively crowded, complicating the identification of learners with specific learning barriers” (Participant 7). Participant 10 articulated similar complaints regarding the administration's failure to acknowledge contributions. The feeling of being unrecognised might lead to reduced job satisfaction and increased stress among educators (Participant 12). The consequences of these increased workloads are significant, particularly regarding student learning. Participant 12 remarked, "Completion of paperwork is mandatory." This requirement notably impacts stress levels." (Participant 12). Increased stress levels can adversely impact teachers' mental health, so reducing their teaching effectiveness and ultimately decreasing student performance. Studies demonstrate that teacher stress can lead to burnout, negatively affecting both teachers' well-being and their ability to provide quality education (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

4.2.1 Lack of Recognition and Support in Educational Leadership

The acknowledgement and support of educators is a significant problem in educational leadership and administration. Numerous participants in previous conversations have expressed their

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dissatisfaction with the absence of recognition for their contributions, especially from school leadership and the communities they endeavour to support. Participant 1 expresses significant discontent with their leadership position, declaring, “I do not want to be a Hod anymore.” I aspire to be an educator. This illustrates a prevalent view among educators who perceive administrative responsibilities as burdensome, diverting attention from their primary objective—teaching. The participant emphasises the disconnection with school leadership, stating, “we feel we do not receive the recognition we deserve.” The persistent issues intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified these sentiments, as they indicate that their workload has essentially quadrupled due to heightened paperwork and everyday obligations that restrict teaching time. Participant 7 also underscores the encumbrance of documentation: “The primary challenge is the extensive paperwork...which detracts significantly from teaching time.” This statement resonates with numerous instructors who frequently find themselves torn between administrative responsibilities and their dedication to teaching. Participant 10 remarked that the overcrowding in classes exacerbates the challenge of addressing individual learners' requirements, stating, “our classrooms are extremely overcrowded and it becomes very difficult to identify learners according to their learning barriers.”

These statements highlight a systemic problem wherein the focus on paperwork and accountability may eclipse the fundamental human elements of teaching and learning. Although certain participants recognised receiving assistance from colleagues or principals, the efficacy of this support is frequently compromised by external demands. Participant 9 expresses, “I am quite disheartened by the manner in which everything is managed... our principal is very benevolent, yet he is burdened with extensive paperwork.” This underscores the cyclical dynamics of assistance within educational settings, wherein leaders, burdened by administrative responsibilities, are constrained in their capacity to adequately assist their workers. The experiences articulated by these individuals correspond with the prevailing literature that underscores the significance of acknowledgement and assistance in educational environments. Studies demonstrate that insufficient acknowledgement can result in burnout and diminished job satisfaction among educators (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Moreover, the simultaneous demands of administrative duties and classroom management might foster a demanding atmosphere that undermines instructional quality (Baker et al., 2019). Acknowledging the efforts of educators and providing ongoing support can enhance morale and yield superior educational results. Leithwood et al. (2010) assert that good school leadership must prioritise teacher well-being to cultivate a healthy school culture that ultimately advantages learners.

4.2.2 Health Challenges in Educational Leadership:

Health issues among educators are a considerable concern, especially with stress and work demands. Participants in a qualitative study reported many health concerns, including physical problems such as back discomfort, headaches, and allergies. Stress-related health issues not only impact individual well-being but also lead to absence, hence disrupting the educational environment (Participant 2). Participants' testimonials indicate a concerning link between occupational stress and physical health. One participant remarked, “I have never experienced health issues...now I am frequently absent...on Monday, I was unable to walk due to back pain and severe headaches” (Participant 2). This remark emphasises how acute stress might present bodily signs that impede an educator's capacity to fulfil their responsibilities. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has acknowledged the influence of occupational stress on health, associating it with numerous medical diseases, such as musculoskeletal illnesses and respiratory ailments (WHO, 2020). Furthermore, absenteeism due to stress has emerged as a significant issue. Participant 2 indicated that their formerly regular attendance was interrupted by heightened stress levels, reflecting a change in their capacity to manage health in connection to job obligations. This corresponds with the results of a study by Mikkelsen et al. (2017), which revealed that elevated job demands are significantly associated with a rise in absenteeism attributable to health issues.



Participant 3 provided thoughts on the impact of age and experience on their interactions with parents. Participant 3 remarked, “I observe that parents regard my advice or input more than they did when I was an early-career teacher.” This illustrates a prevalent theme in educational leadership, wherein seasoned educators typically garner greater respect from parents, fostering a collaborative atmosphere that can alleviate stress. Research indicates that positive parental relationships might alleviate stress for educators. A study by Pomerantz et al. (2012) highlights that robust teacher-parent collaborations foster a supportive school environment, thereby mitigating work-related stress. To mitigate the detrimental consequences of stress, educators frequently implement personal wellness strategies. Participant 2 stated, “I endeavour to maintain my health by consuming nutritious food and ensuring adequate sleep.” This proactive strategy is essential, as lifestyle decisions profoundly affect stress management and overall well-being. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2021) asserts that sufficient sleep, proper nutrition, and consistent physical exercise are crucial for good stress management.

4.2.3 Emotional Support and Listening in Educational Leadership

The idea of non-judgmental listening as a kind of emotional support has surfaced as an essential coping mechanism for educators managing the stresses of their responsibilities. Participants in a recent study emphasised that offering a listening ear to both parents and colleagues is essential for emotional alleviation. For example, Participant 6 expressed, “You listen without uttering a word.” Simply attend to the individual conveying their desires and thoughts. One should heed parental guidance. Occasionally, an individual expresses their thoughts and feelings without judgement or advice; simply listening to them might lessen their burdens. This underscores the significance of active listening as a supportive mechanism, enabling individuals to articulate their emotions and experiences devoid of judgement or unsolicited counsel. In a similar vein, Participant 11 expressed this opinion, remarking, “You listen without uttering a word.” Simply heed the one conveying their desires or messages to you. One must heed the counsel of parents. The persistent focus on listening highlights its importance in cultivating a supportive atmosphere in educational contexts.

Listening functions as a potent mechanism for emotional alleviation, fostering a culture of trust and transparency among staff and between educators and parents. The significance of emotional support and active listening can be analysed via the framework of emotional intelligence, which is essential in educational leadership (Goleman, 1995). Leaders with elevated emotional intelligence are more inclined to practise empathic listening, facilitating conflict resolution and improving relationships within the school community (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008). Through active listening, educators can gain a deeper comprehension of the needs and concerns of their colleagues and the families they serve, therefore promoting a more collaborative and supportive atmosphere. Establishing a culture of emotional support through active listening can be executed in multiple ways inside educational institutions. Professional development seminars centred on effective communication skills, such as active listening approaches, can enable educators to offer enhanced support to their colleagues and parents. Furthermore, instituting frequent check-ins or feedback meetings can provide organised opportunity for individuals to articulate their issues in a secure environment.

4.2.4 Resource Constraints and Overcrowded Classrooms in Educational Leadership

In educational leadership, resource limitations and overcrowded classrooms are substantial obstacles that impede the efficient identification and assistance of students encountering learning hurdles. This discourse utilises qualitative insights from participants in a recent study, emphasising the widespread influence of these concerns on leadership roles and student results. Study participants repeatedly indicated that insufficient financial and human resources substantially hinder their capacity to properly meet their educational obligations. Participant 7 expressed annoyance over the burdensome paperwork, noting, “The main challenge is that there is a lot of paperwork that needs to be attended to on a daily basis and taking away a lot of teaching time” (Participant 7). This statement

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illustrates a prevalent issue among educational leaders, wherein administrative responsibilities diminish the time and energy allocated for direct instructional assistance.

Research corroborates this conclusion, demonstrating that insufficient resources might result in heightened stress and burnout among instructors. A study by Ingersoll (2001) indicated that educators in under-resourced settings frequently encounter elevated job discontent, adversely affecting student engagement and achievement. Moreover, the absence of acknowledgement from stakeholders, as emphasised by Participant 10, intensifies sentiments of isolation and devaluation among educators. This disconnection can undermine motivation and dedication, ultimately impacting the instructional atmosphere. Overcrowded classrooms exacerbate the complexities of educational leadership. Participant 8 stated, "We lack resources to fulfil our responsibilities," indicating the direct relationship between resource availability and classroom management. Overcrowding restricts the individualised attention educators may offer and complicates the identification of students with particular challenges. Participant 10 observed that the problem is exacerbated by the necessity to differentiate instruction in a very diversified classroom environment, which becomes progressively more difficult under overcrowded settings. Studies demonstrate that reduced class numbers can enhance academic performance and facilitate superior behavioural control (Finn & Achilles, 1999). Conversely, overcrowded classrooms are frequently associated with detrimental student behaviours and diminished academic achievement (Blatchford et al., 2003). This establishes a loop in which leadership stress intensifies, as educators endeavour to uphold order and deliver sufficient assistance.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The heightened labour and documentation demand in educational environments have emerged as considerable pressures for middle managers, especially during the Covid-19 outbreak. The administrative burdens frequently diminish essential teaching time, resulting in middle managers feeling inundated and undervalued. The accounts from these middle managers, including the preference to concentrate exclusively on teaching instead of managing unnecessary paperwork, underscore a systemic problem. This issue diminishes job satisfaction and contributes to stress and health complications, hence adversely affecting teaching efficacy and student performance. Furthermore, the absence of acknowledgement from educational leadership and the wider community intensifies sentiments of frustration and exhaustion. Educators are additionally burdened by limited resources and overcrowded classes, hindering their ability to meet the specific requirements of individual students. To tackle these difficulties, it is essential to prioritise the well-being of middle managers by providing sufficient assistance and alleviating administrative constraints, hence enhancing educational achievements. Acknowledging the crucial role of managers and equipping them with adequate tools and support is vital for cultivating a constructive educational atmosphere and improving student achievement.

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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF MIDDLE LEADERS IN MANAGING EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH IN GAUTENG PROVINCE: A CASE OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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