How Educational Middle Leaders Should Be Best Supported by Their Senior Leadership

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Abstract

Effective School leadership, commonly made up of middle leaders and senior leaders, is seen as a key element of successful schools in the first decades of the 21st century. The scope of this paper is the professional performance of educational middle leaders, regarded as the school practitioners who often can best impact the learning outcomes of students for having a direct influence on teachers and classroom teaching. This paper has derived from a qualitative educational case study whose unit of analysis was a team of middle leaders responsible for the lower elementary school division of a private school located in Brazil. The academic dissertation was carried out by the same researcher within the timeframe of 2021-2022 and underpinned by a set of research questions that included one concerning "how middle leaders should be best supported by their senior leaders" as a form of achieving their full potential. The purpose of this manuscript is to outline how the topic was approached in the empiric study. Through an electronic questionnaire and semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews, whilst being endorsed by a robust body of literature, it has been possible to find out evidence that senior leaders should support their middle leaders in specific ways, such as by 'formalizing their middle leadership positions across the school community', 'having their roles and responsibilities well-defined', 'keeping an effective communication with them', and 'providing them with full support' through 'identifying and meeting their developmental needs' – which would likely be achieved with an ongoing professional development programme on-site.

1. Introduction

Effective school leadership is currently a policy priority in countries like Australia, Canada, Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States – nations affiliated to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD).

The OECD is a unique forum developed by democratic governments that work together to address the economic, social and environmental challenges of globalisation.

The education systems of these countries are driven by improvement initiatives that consist in comparing policy experiences, seeking solutions to common problems, identifying and sharing good practice, and working to co-ordinate domestic and international policies, in a new era characterised by *"dispersed leadership and school change focused on the personalisation of learning and introduction of 21st century curriculum and pedagogy"* [1].

In this new millennium, teachers and school leaders who perform their roles with efficacy and commitment within a collaborative educational environment are considered the foundations of a world-class education system from preschool to university levels [2], [3]. Although school middle leadership is still an under-researched and under-Theo because worldwide [4], there is indeed an increasing interest in it by scholars [5],[6],[7] that have made relevant contribution to the field, as a result of effective middle leaders be considered essential for the success of educational institutions [8], mainly in terms of increasing the school leadership capacity [9].

This paper has derived from an educational case study undertaken in partial fulfilment of a master´s programme in Applied Educational Leadership and Management, whose scope was the 'professional performance of school middle leaders'. The academic study was undertaken in Brazil, where middle leaders often face obstacles that prevent them from realising their full potential.

Evidence emerged from both the robust literature underpinning the research and the investigation itself shows that these barriers include 'not receiving an induction training when they are appointed to their middle leadership position', 'not being properly supported by their senior leaders', and 'not being provided with a professional development programme (PD) in-service, through which they would likely develop themselves adequately to meet the demands of their contexts.

The fact of 'not having clarity about the responsibilities pertaining to the sphere of their position'

tends to lead middle leaders to waste a lot of time doing tasks that should not be assigned to them within a fast-paced routine that keeps them too busy and overwhelmed to focus on the most important roles they should perform.

Another barrier faced by middle leaders that contribute to diminish their professional performance is that of 'relying on an initial academic background and work experience in teaching', as they commonly start their careers as *emergent middle leaders*, i.e., schoolteachers who were promoted to a middle leadership position.

The complexity of problems faced by school middle leaders requires from them a set of knowledge and skills that are quite different from that of the classroom teachers [8], such as on how to carry out the professional development of the teaching staff in their care, one of their key roles.

Research carried out for the OECD [1] uncovers the fact that a teaching background does not in itself provide educators with the knowledge and skills set they need to perform their complex middle leadership roles. Other studies such as the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), released in 2019, have demonstrated that the landscape of teaching and school leadership has changed since 2008, regarding the profiles of these professionals, and on how they should be supported towards developing themselves [10] at work.

This paper aims at helping to shed light in an area that is still obscure due to scarce research-based studies, in terms of investigating the sort of support that senior leaders should give to their middle leaders, as a means of enabling them to make an effective delivery of the roles and goals set for them. For this reason, the research question underpinning this article is the following: *How should educational middle leaders be best supported by their senior leaders?*

2. Literature Review

The history of research on school leadership is long and insightful, but most of it concentrates on the important work of school principals, rather than on middle leaders, as remarked by some researchers [4], [11], [12].

Studies such as the International Successful Principalship Project (ISSPP), for instance, which was articulated by Leithwood and Colleagues – [13], [14] – and produced more than one hundred case studies about successful leadership by school principals have shown that effective practices include 'fostering a safe and stimulating learning environment', 'articulating a set of core values'; 'building a vision for the institution' and 'communicating it effectively across the school community'; 'inspiring trust through being visible'; 'introducing effective forms of instruction to staff members'; and 'resolving conflicts strategically' [15], as pointed out by some scholars [6].

More recently, studies coupled with implications from research on leadership [4], [16], [17] have demonstrated that the effective enactment of a number of roles performed by school principals relies on the engagement of other leaders, mainly of middle leaders. Hence, their importance in increasing the school leadership capacity has expanded at the same pace of the demands for improvement of the school systems, converted into pressure upon the school principals for more responsibilities and accountability, which has forced them to apply 'dispersed leadership' to meet the high goals set for their schools [4].

Thus, the workload of middle leaders has increased, both due to the need of performing more tasks and also because of a reduction in the number of staff members in middle leadership positions due to financial crises [18]. Some authors [9] have noted a shift in terminology from 'middle managers' to 'middle leaders' since the early 2000s, which seems to reflect the evolution of the roles played by them, from trivial administrative tasks to strategic leadership roles.

3. A Definition of School Middle Leaders

A succinct definition in alignment with some authors [5], [19], [20], [6], [21] is that educational middle leaders are school practitioners who have a formal middle-level management and leadership position, and lie hierarchically between the senior leadership team and the teachers and other staff members [3].

They hold titles such as department head, school division coordinator, subject coordinator, curriculum coordinator, year-level coordinator, educational coordinator, and so forth, depending on the context, in a school where they are accountable for leading and managing departments, programs, projects, processes, and staff members; as well as for implementing policies and improvement initiatives set by their senior leaders [18].

It is complex to define middle leaders in terms of the roles that they perform, as these are not necessarily implied in the title of the position they hold, because there are no consolidated conventional criteria to categorise them yet [6]. For instance, some authors refer to deputy principals as middle leaders [7], whilst others categorise deputy principals, department heads and alike positions as senior leaders [6]. Also, it is a fact that middle leaders can be non-teachers or teachers who still engage in classroom teaching [4], school practitioners who strive to promote the smooth run of the area under their supervision and, above everything, educators that

have a strong focus on students and their learning across academic, personal, and social dimensions [23].

4. The Roles of Senior Leaders in Supporting Middle Leaders Effectively

First, senior leaders should begin their effective support by formalising the middle leadership positions across the school community. Some authors [18] claim that principals play an essential role in shaping the school culture by influencing relationships and organisational structures and argue that sharing leadership roles with middle leaders is an effective strategy to increase the school leadership capacity.

Fullan [24] underlines that contemporary senior leaders should be able to apply dispersed leadership adequately to increase the school leadership capacity whilst empowering their middle leadership team. However, Lárusdottir and O'Connor [18] emphasise that creating a school culture that recognizes the presence of formal middle leaders who perform their roles with increasing responsibility, autonomy and agency implies a certain 'letting go' in terms of power, authority and control by the school principals or other senior leaders, in addition to specific knowledge and expertise to do it right.

Unfortunately, this step has been perceived as difficult to be taken in many school contexts [6] where senior leaders demonstrate resistance, due to a lack of wish, knowledge and/or ability [25].

Second, senior leaders should define the roles and responsibilities expected from the staff members holding middle leadership positions, and clearly assign them. [26].

Indeed, the first step that leads middle leaders to have a professional performance is the provision of an adequate outline of their roles. By having their roles and tasks well-defined and clearly assigned to them, they tend to be naturally encouraged to seek their self-development whilst performing their duties [27].

Third, senior leaders should set the knowledge, skills and attitudes expected from them, as a means of enhancing their possibilities to build their competencies grounded in local knowledge and experience towards reaching their full potential within their local setting [26].

Fourth, senior leaders should provide middle leaders with full support by identifying and meeting their developmental needs and providing them with guidance embedded in their daily work, within a collaborative school environment, by building a culture of inquiry and reflective practice, connected with the context. Initiatives such as coaching and mentoring should be given as needed [26].

Finally, as for the two last roles identified, researchers argue that a good strategy of senior leaders is providing 'modest leadership tasks' for middle leaders to gradually enable them to build a repertoire of experiences which, when coupled with mentoring or guided self-reflection, can later be drawn upon [21].

Such tasks delegated to middle leaders in a responsible manner would allow them to perform their leadership roles with increasing autonomy. These roles would likely include taking part in the decision-making process of their school [22].

Additionally, mentoring built around observation and feedback tends to form the heart of the learning process [29], so this is a tool that should be widely used in the process of developing and building capacity of middle leaders, as it is commonly utilised by them to develop teachers in their care.

Six broad roles of senior leaders regarding their effective support to middle leaders have been identified (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Six Broad Roles of Senior Leaders in Supporting Middle Leaders Effectively

5. In-Service PD Programme for Middle Leaders

Middle leaders need a PD programme to respond to broadened roles and responsibilities, and it should be approached as an ongoing process rather than through their participation in specific activities or events [1].

Effective PD programmes should include an induction course for middle leaders when they assume their positions, frequent training sessions, and incentive for middle leaders to attend courses at external institutions when appropriate.

Researchers [28] reporting on a study carried out in the U.K. argue that *"middle leaders taking on leadership roles need a different set of knowledge and skills to that of the classroom teachers, yet many of them not always receive appropriate training or guidance on leadership development"* (p.86).

In another study, the authors claim that, even when middle leaders have a previous experience, they will need to learn, adapt, develop, and integrate a new set of knowledge and skills into their repertoire [25], reinforcing that educational leadership is contextual, and that a PD programme on-site is necessary to address individual developmental needs to meet the local expectations.

Some authors [30], [31] note that the capabilities required to lead high-performance teams effectively may not come naturally to many team leaders, so this is another reason why the middle leaders should be provided with a PD at work.

An empirical study [8] reporting on the perceptions of middle leaders from the U.K. reveals that *"the factors that enable them to overcome the challenges that they face are those that can be learned through a leadership development programme"* (p.91).

Additionally, a study [32] undertaken by scholars who reviewed research on the effectiveness of middle leaders in more than twenty countries affirms that even when middle leaders have a solid repertoire with a set of core practices, these practices alone do not guarantee success; rather than that, middle leaders will succeed upon the enactment of these practices in direct response to their own unique contexts.

Another aspect to consider, as remarked by some authors [8], is that teachers appointed to formal leadership positions for the first time, known as 'emergent leaders', need a different set of knowledge and skills of that of the classroom teachers, and also different from that of a more experienced leader, which means that only a well-planned PD programme in-service would address a range of varied needs within heterogeneous middle leadership teams.

Hence, a PD programme especially tailored to meet the needs of the leadership team [33] at both individual and collective levels is likely one of the main enabling factors impacting the performance of middle leaders, thus a key element in the provision of effective support.

The research of Wells [27] also points out that, to be effective, a PD programme needs "*to be school based; be ongoing and personally active; encourage problem-solving; promote research as a core practice, and include investigations in which data are collected, analysed and acted upon to change practice*" (p.490).

It is also suggested by some authors [34] that the school principals themselves should have PD opportunities to learn how to implement dispersed leadership effectively, and develop a distributed mindset, through which they would start thinking about their practices from a distributed perspective.

6. Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to outline how the topic concerning 'the effective support that senior leaders should give to their middle leaders in schools' was approached in the academic study from which it has derived.

The academic study aimed at enhancing an understanding about aspects related to the professional performance of middle leaders, whilst seeking to gain insights on this subject, considered under-theorised and under-researched worldwide [4], in comparison with senior leadership.

The research question underlying this article is as follows: *How should middle leaders be best supported by their senior leadership in schools?*

The researcher was driven by an interest on the lived experience [35] and perspectives of a specific group of middle leaders, from whom subjective viewpoints were expected in relation to their work, which included their opinions about how their colleagues holding senior leadership positions should best support them in the workplace.

First, it was necessary to address two intimately related concepts – ontology and epistemology – which constitute how the aims of a scientific study are fulfilled [36]. Ontology is *"the study of being"* [37], also known as the study of 'the nature of existence', 'what is real' and 'what is in reality'. Denzin and Lincoln [38] argue that ontology *"raises basic questions about the nature of reality and the nature of human being in the world"* (p.40). Hiller [39] claims that ontological beliefs or assumptions shape the types of questions a researcher might pursue about *"how the world works"* or *"how people act and interact"*. The eternal ontological debate, as reminded by Levers [40], has the realistic or objective ontology in one side, claiming that reality exists independently of human consciousness and experience, and, in the other side, the 'relativist ontology', affirming that reality exists within our consciousness and only through experience.

In another sphere lies Epistemology, the theory of knowledge concerning with *"the nature, sources, and limits of knowledge"* [41], which addresses how we come to know what we believe we know.

As to ontology, a researcher might pursue knowledge through a range of different epistemologies, such as 'positivism' and 'interpretivism', which actually are not the only approaches within epistemology [42], as the researcher can make epistemological assumptions from a 'feminist' or 'postmodernist' viewpoint, or consider critical enquiries as a valid approach, for example. Each epistemology rests on its own variety of

assumptions or theoretical beliefs regarding the nature of the relationship between a researcher and the subject(s) of research.

For the purpose of this study, the relativist ontology and the interpretivist epistemology stances have been adopted; as they fit the way of seeking knowledge in this research.

The study is framed within the 'qualitative' paradigm, as it relies mostly on non-numeric data, collected through interviews, questionnaires and notes taken by the researcher, as means of placing an emphasis on meanings, experiences and descriptions, while producing insights not generally available; in contrast to quantitative research, which employs numeric data such as scores and metrics.

Thus, a 'qualitative educational case study' was undertaken, defined as an empirical enquiry about a singularity within a localised boundary of space and time, through an in-depth investigation on interesting aspects of an educational activity, programme, institution, system or work of individuals, mainly in their natural context, and within an ethic of respect for persons [43].

Another definition is that an educational case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a programme, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit [44].

Both definitions apply to this study. Additionally, some authors [42] [43] also underline that an educational case study can be a useful form of empirical research leading to greater understanding and enhancement of practice, thus playing an important role in growing a field's body of knowledge.

All the middle leaders and the principal of their division were invited to participate in the research. Five (out of six) middle leaders and their senior leader agreed to participate.

It is advocated that case studies call for an intensive and in-depth focus on the specific unit of analysis and they generally require a much smaller sample size than other methods [45].

Since each of the three existing divisions (lower elementary school, middle school, and high school) of the institution had its own particularities and different (middle)leaders, the sample size was intentionally small, by focusing on one school division only.

Another important sampling aspect considered was that the researcher was no longer a member of the middle leadership team, after having worked in that context for a couple of years.

Thus, to ensure that the data collected would not lead to uncomfortable feelings by the participants [46], only two research tools were used: an electronic questionnaire and semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews.

For the questionnaire, all the middle leaders were invited, whilst for the interviews, the researcher used her own judgement to select three interviewees among the five middle leaders available, in additional to the interview with the senior leader, so a purposive sampling was carried out [47].

6.1. Electronic Questionnaire

The electronic questionnaire was designed and sent by the researcher to the participants through the Forms feature on Google Digital Platform. The key advantages of an electronic questionnaire include its ability to collect data easier, faster and at a very low-cost in comparison with the paper questionnaire, since it can be designed by the researcher and completed by the respondents quicker, in a format that is almost non-invasive. As reminded by some authors [48], questionnaires allow participants to anonymously express themselves.

The on-line questionnaire provides a high level of convenience for the participants, who can answer the questions according to their own pace, available time, and preferences, by means of inputting their answers while being connected to the internet, which will keep their responses automatically stored in a survey database, providing hassle-free handling of data and a smaller possibility of data errors. However, as some authors [49] remark, it is quite challenging to design good questionnaires and to comprehend their results, so the effectiveness of utilising them should never be taken for granted.

The researcher paid careful attention throughout the process of putting the questionnaire together and, later, interpreting its results. This type of method is often perceived as being susceptible to 'errors or inaccuracy', as there might be respondents who neglect the completion of it by not answering the questions with accuracy and sincerity, revealing that they participated in the research for other reasons, rather than that of contributing to the advancement of the study. As a matter of fact, this was the main disadvantage identified about this tool.

After detailed discussions with the school principal regarding the data collection process and the ethical aspects, the electronic questionnaire was sent to the middle leaders, who participated in this phase by giving their responses, in an anonymous way, and returning them back to the researcher, through the same digital platform.

6.2. Semi-Structured Individual Face-to-Face Interviews

Interviews are a key tool in qualitative research [50], as they enable both researcher and participants to discuss their interpretations of the world, and to express

how they perceive their surroundings [51]. Hence, this research tool is not merely concerned with collecting data about life, but it is part of life itself, as it fosters an immersion in human thought and emotions.

Some authors [52] advise qualitative researchers to consider the impact of the social setting where the interview takes place, as well as the physical setting, and the impact of language on the interview, which means, for instance, that the use of expressions with which the interviewee is unfamiliar should be avoided.

The individual face-to-face interviews with three middle leaders were followed by an interview with the lower elementary school principal, which had a different set of questions. All the interviews were conducted on the same day, and the researcher recorded them by using two different electronic devices.

As stated in a paper recently published about another topic, derived from the same academic study [27], all the ethics related issues were considered quite carefully throughout the development of the case study. Also, the Ethics Form was submitted and approved (in advance) by the Institute of Education (IoE), from the University of London (UoL).

The main ethical aspects considered were the following ones: Invitation Letter and Formal Consent; Information Letter and Informed Consent Form; Right to Withdraw; Confidentiality and Anonymity; Harm or Discomfort Arising from Research; Data Storage and Privacy of Participants; and Dissemination and Use of Findings.

The proper names of the participants used in this paper are not their real names. The study followed the ethical guidelines provided by the British Educational Research Association – BERA [53].

7. Data Presentation and Analysis

The qualitative educational case study generated data from one electronic questionnaire responded by five middle leaders, and four interviews. The individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated, coded, and analysed, along with the data previously collected from the questionnaire, and the notes featuring non-verbal content taken by the researcher during the interviews. Data analysis was undertaken through thematic and constant comparative analysis.

7.1. Effective Support by Senior Leadership

Through the electronic questionnaire, one of the questions to the middle leaders was *"How do you perceive that your senior leadership should best support you?"* Different open answers were given (see Figure 2).
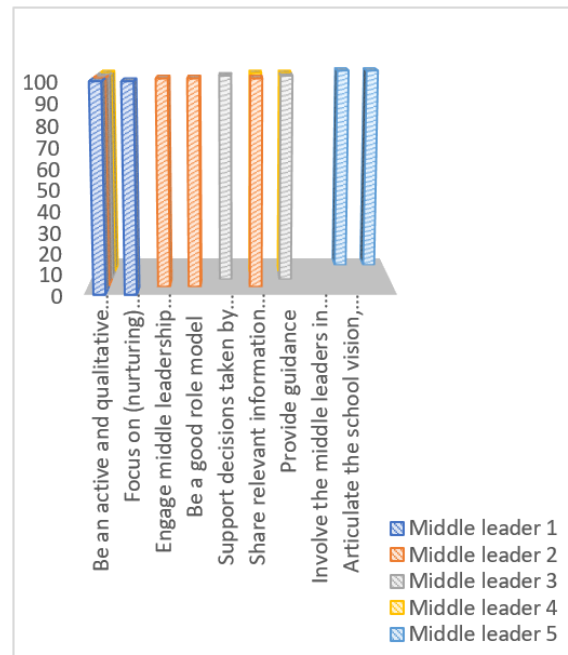

Figure 2. Roles of senior leaders in providing middle leaders with effective support

As shown in Figure 2, it stood out, in the questionnaire, the three forms of support that were recurrent in the answers given by the five middle leaders: 'being an active and qualitative listener', having a strong focus on 'nurturing their interpersonal relationships', and 'engaging the middle leadership team in the decision-making process'.

Additionally, they cited other forms, including 'being a good role model', 'providing guidance', and 'articulating the school vision, mission and goals across the school community'.

For the semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews, the three middle leaders chosen by the researcher, and their principal, had two slightly different set of questions to answer, but similar ones like the following: *"How do you perceive that your senior leadership team should best support you?".*

In the dissertation report, the three middle leaders were named **Anna**, **Ellie** and **Bea;** and their school principal, **Eve**. The school was referred to as **School C**. In the interview, **Anna** claimed that the senior leader supported her by being available whenever it was necessary, mainly *"by sharing and exchanging information and ideas on how some issues should be addressed [providing guidance]"*. She highlighted the importance of a close relationship between middle and senior leaders, which already existed: *"this proximity already exists"* [At this moment, she seemed a bit hesitant; her facial expression and body language were

interpreted as if they were not in complete harmony with her spoken language].

Ellie underlined that a key role of the school principal in supporting the middle leaders was that of helping them to have a broader vision of the school's goals and encourage them to engage in the articulation of this vision across the school community: *"(...) they should help us to have a broader vision of the school's biggest goals, what we want to achieve, dream and accomplish".*

Bea claimed that the role of the school principal and other senior leaders was fundamental to guarantee many of the aspects known as enabling factors: *"(...) when the school principal is also a facilitator because he/she pays close attention to all these aspects [enabling aspects], he/she provides the middle leader with autonomy, but an assisted autonomy".* The researcher asked her: *"You mean a responsible delegation?".* Bea answered, *"Yeah! A co-authorship, a monitored delegation",* emphasising that this happens when senior leadership encourages the middle leaders to perform their tasks with freedom and autonomy, but makes himself/herself available to guide, discuss and help when needed. Bea concluded by stating that *"this support comes in different ways (...) it comes through [reading, multimedia etc.] materials, study indications, discussions, and reflections on the issues raised by the middle leader".*

Additionally, all the middle leaders claimed that they did not have an induction course when they assumed the middle leadership position at School C.

The question *"Is there a professional development (PD) programme for the middle leadership team in place in School C.?"* was also contemplated both in the questionnaire and interviews.
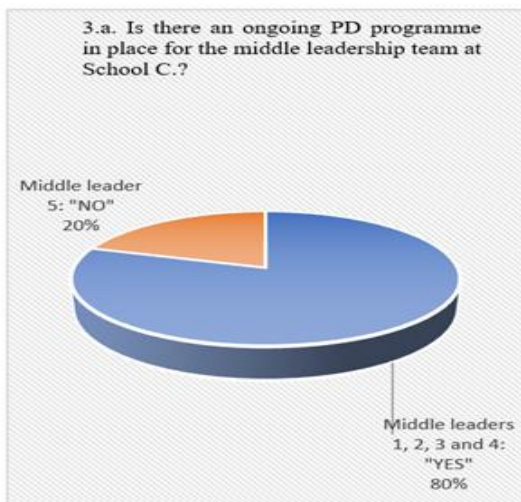

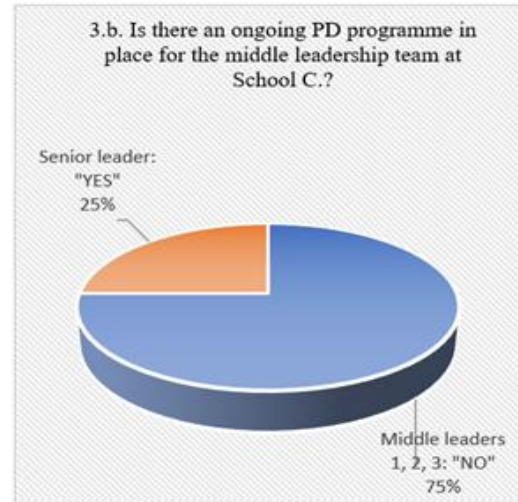Figure 3a. Data collected from the Electronic Questionnaire

Figure 3b. Individual Face-to-face Interviews

Evidence of 'contradiction' emerged from the answers. In the questionnaire (Figure 3a), most of the participants stated that there was an ongoing PD programme for middle leaders in their context. Paradoxically, in the interviews (Figure 3b), only the senior leader affirmed that there was a PD programme in service for their middle leadership team in School C.

Since two (out of three) middle leaders interviewed gave opposite answers to the same question, it has been interpreted as if two middle leaders either neglected this item in the questionnaire, as they had answered it on-line, or they provided evidence of 'contradiction', 'lack of consistency or veracity'.

In the interviews, the middle leaders unanimously expressed that perceived the implementation of a well-structured PD programme for them on-site as highly beneficial: *"I think it might be important, yes. This training, inside the school, the line of conduct will be similar for everyone"* (Anna); *"Yes, I think it would have a great impact on our professional performance"* (Bea); *"Yes, it would be extremely important"* (Ellie).

8. Discussion of the Research Findings

The data collected, gathered, and interpreted through constant comparative and thematic analysis, and presented in the previous section with explanations accompanied by visual aids seem good enough to answer the research questions underpinning this paper. The roles that senior leaders should play to best support their middle leaders, pointed out by these, in the questionnaire, included: 'being an active and qualitative listener', 'providing guidance', 'engaging them in the decision-making process', and 'articulating the school vision, mission and goals across the school community'.

In the literature, the effective support by senior leaders should start by the formalisation of the middle leadership positions, passing through a clear identification of their roles and tasks, to providing them with daily support mainly through identifying and meeting their developmental needs, whilst allowing them to work with increasing autonomy and agency and engaging them in the decision-making process.

Additionally, contemporary senior leaders have been increasingly expected to commit themselves with shaping a school culture that values and supports middle leaders, besides applying dispersed leadership adequately, if needed, to increase the school leadership capacity [18], [24].

The evidence that a well-structured PD programme carried out as a continuum process in-service would be one of the most important allies of senior leaders committed with the development of their middle leaders came across strongly through both the literature and the study.

Surprisingly, the 'provision of an effective PD programme for middle leaders in service' might have been identified as the most sensitive and fragile aspect within the unit of analysis investigated.

In the interview, all the middle leaders affirmed that there wasn´t a structured PD programme for them in their workplace, which was (paradoxically) the opposite answer that most of them had given in the electronic questionnaire.The school principal claimed that there was a PD programme in their context for the middle leadership team, although she would not be able to describe it accurately, as she was not involved with it. Based upon evidence of contradiction, lack of coherence and consistence, or even of veracity in addressing this topic, it has been perceived that the middle leadership team and their senior leader should make efforts to align their expectations regarding this matter. As such, it seems highly recommended that they face the reality that they should work together, driven by the common goal of finding out what would be the best format of an effective PD programme on site to meet the local needs.

9. Conclusions

It is currently hard to imagine an outstanding school without the presence of effective educational middle leaders, who hold a complex and increasingly important school leadership position, with research showing their relevance to school improvement and teacher development [54]. Indeed, they can make a significant impact in the classroom by influencing the learning outcomes of both teachers and students and the quality of the relationships built. Therefore, it is essential that the middle leaders themselves are given effective opportunities to reach their full potential as educational leaders and managers. To achieve that, the role of senior

leaders concerning increasing the school leadership capacity through developing their middle leaders has proved to be one of the main enablers with a greater impact on the professional performance of these.

Effective support should come in different ways: by formalising their middle leadership positions, defining their roles and responsibilities, and clearly assigning them, establishing the set of knowledge, knowledge and attitudes expected from them, identifying and meeting their developmental needs, allowing them to work with increasing autonomy, and engaging them in the decision-making process. As such, senior leaders should shape a school culture that values and supports individuals in middle leadership positions [18] whilst applying dispersed leadership as a means of encouraging middle leaders to experience leadership roles with autonomy [16], [17], [55], while contributing to enhance the school leadership capacity [24]. It has also been remarked that a well-structured PD programme for middle leaders in service would be a key aspect to promote genuine and long-lasting support.

In the questionnaire, the middle leaders identified nine roles of senior leaders perceived by them as forms of support, including: being an active listener, nurturing interpersonal relationships, engaging the middle leaders in the decision-making process, being a good role model, supporting decisions taken by middle leaders, sharing relevant information and decisions taken, providing guidance, and articulating the school vision across the school community.

In the interview, the middle leaders contributed with a broader exploration into the topic, by pointing out practically the same forms of support advocated in the literature, including open and sincere dialogue when needed, guidance, a responsible delegation of tasks, and assistance in allowing the middle leaders to have a clear view of the school´s main goals.

Drawing upon evidence obtained through the research, it has been concluded that the senior leadership of the target context would likely not have fulfilled all the roles seen as essential, in regards with the effective support that should have been provided to the middle leaders in 2021, timeframe of this educational case study.

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