















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.

## 10. References

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