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The Missing Middle in the Leadership Continuum: Voices of women deputy principals in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

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ABSTRACT
Current scholarship reveals that women in educational leadership face persisting challenges regarding school leadership. This paper examined the experiences of women deputy principals whose roles shift to oblivion within the school leadership continuum. The aim was to investigate how women deputy principals cope with the challenge of obscurity of their position within the school leadership hierarchy. We used role ambiguity theory as a framework. Role ambiguity occurs when employees have insufficient information to perform their jobs adequately or when performance evaluation methods are unclear. This paper argues that deputy principals are part of the school management team, however, their role as managers seems intangible and indefinable as the school principal and the departmental head are present to manage the school and the curriculum implementation, respectively. Underpinned by the interpretive paradigm, this qualitative paper used the phenomenological narrative inquiry as a research design, and through the narratives of the women, the paper focused on their lived experiences as deputy principals in schools. Data were analysed thematically. Findings revealed that participants faced different types of gender stereotyping, role ambiguity and felt invisible in their roles as women deputy principals. This paper recommends confronting patriarchal attitudes that infiltrate the school system, implementing capacity building through conducting seminars, workshops, and awareness programs, and revising policy to ensure that job descriptions are clearly defined, thereby avoiding ambiguities.

KEYWORDS
Women deputy principals; educational leadership; phenomenological narrative inquiry; role ambiguity; school leadership.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

There seems to be a misalignment between what deputy principals (DPs) perceive as their actual role, perceived role, and what their principals expect them to do in the school. The Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document of 2016, states that the main role of the deputy principal is to assist the principal in his/her duties and to deputize for the principal during his/her absence from school (Department of Basic Education - DBE, 2022). Based on this legislative framework, there is no clear distinction of roles for the deputy principal, as they are in school to "assist" the principal and act in their absence. Cranston et al. (2004) indicate that this phenomenon has been in existence for centuries. The author further claims that the deputy principal's role is the most disregarded in terms of importance and value and that their authority is invisible. Corroborating this view are Jansen et al. (2023) who argue that the roles and responsibilities of deputy principals are vague and not clearly defined.

In South African schools, the conventional hierarchical structure comprises the school principal, deputy principal, and the departmental head (DH), yet the DH seems to possess more power in their leadership role than the DP. Jansen and Du Plessis (2023) further state that many primary school DPs experience their job descriptions as inadequate as they seem to be underutilized in schools. There still exists a need to reconsider and elucidate the role of a DP in any school (Corona & Slater, 2017). The authors provide three reasons for the need to redefine the role of the DP. One of the reasons is to ensure the succession plan is in place as the DP is the second in charge in the school management hierarchy. Secondly, to augment the role of the DP and create a collaborative team that will be able to improve teaching and learning in the school. Thirdly, it is to modify the role of the DP to promote social justice for all in the school. However, findings from a study on how DPs perceive their role, indicate that there is no evidence of principals interested in working jointly with their DPs (Bulawa & Mhlauli, 2018). This makes it difficult for DPs to execute their roles effectively as principals feel threatened by their presence in the school. By their position, DPs are part of the school management, however, they can only assist the principal when allocated tasks and can only deputise for the principal in his or her absentia, as enshrined in the PAM document of 1999 (DBE, 2022).

An insight into the staffing regulations within the South African school context, management positions are allocated based on the number of learners in the school (Jansen & du Plessis, 2023). Based on the staffing regulations, there are schools with only the principal and the DHs in the school management team (SMT), yet they function effectively without the DP. Supporting this statement is a finding from Abrahamsen and Aas's (2023) study on the power and leadership of deputy heads in schools, which reveals that in schools where there were DPs, some principals made decisions on their own. Another finding relates to teachers overlooking the presence and authority of the DP and heading directly to the principal to report when they could have contacted the DP. Role ambiguity and role conflict are two common challenges DPs face regarding their position in school. DPs are expected to support their principals in leading the school, however, a clash of values results in conflict from the sources of authority in one

school. Supporting this view are Ho et al. (2023) who indicate that role ambiguity can be worsened since different principals have different expectations, and the system-level role profile for DPs adds 'partners principal' into the role profile for principals.

Statement of the problem

Deputy principals (DPs) in schools face the challenge of being underutilized as their specific job function is unclear. The Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document of 2016, states that their role is to assist the school principal and deputize in their absentia (DBE, 2022). The same document states that principals are supposed to be at school every day. Literature in education leadership suggests there is disregard for the specific duties and responsibilities of South African deputy principals compared to other leadership and management positions in schools (Jansen & du Plessis, 2023). Despite the legislation that exists and the many educational reforms since 1994, there is no significant policy amendment concerning the job description of the DP in South Africa. This is evident in both versions of the PAM documents of 1996 and 2016. Research indicates that the job description of the DP has been described as vague, less than adequate, not clearly defined, and not understood (Jansen & du Plessis, 2023; Kerry, 2000; Nieuwenhuizen, 2011). The problem is compounded when the DP is a woman, as the patriarchal practices discriminate against women. Male gender domination is a challenge when it comes to the hierarchy of school leadership. Mulawarman and Komariyah (2021) postulate that this phenomenon of role ambiguity affects women DPs in their leadership roles as the patriarchal culture has a strong influence, particularly when the school principal is a man. Given this background and problem, this paper responded to the following question: What predicaments do women deputy principals experience in their roles within the school leadership hierarchy?

Review of related literature

This paper reviewed the literature on the following themes: Current experiences and challenges for women deputy principals, causes of the missing middle, and the strategies for mitigating gender bias challenges. These themes are discussed in the subsequent sections.

Current experiences and challenges for women deputy principals

There is an increasing number of women in leadership, however, men's domination is still rife such that society perceives men as better leaders than women. One of the barriers to women in school leadership and management is that they are perceived as weak with traits such as being emotional, lacking assertiveness, lacking courage in taking risks, and being indecisive (Mulawarman & Komariyah, 2021). Assigning these characteristics to women is a result of the patriarchal culture that is deeply entrenched in society. Dor-Haim (2023) asserts that women deputy principals (DPs) experience loneliness in their positions, which is why they perform these unclear and undefined tasks and are seen as doing something. The position of deputy principal is perceived as a step toward becoming a school principal, however, Guihen (2019) indicates that many women deputy principals do not aspire for a career progression in that direction. Findings from a study on career experiences and aspirations of women deputy principals, Guihen (2019) states that participants indicated that they felt unsure about or had rejected

principalship as a possibility. Women experience gender biases and stereotypes but need to overcome these to break the glass ceiling and reach leadership positions in organizations, particularly in schools. However, in doing so, they face additional challenges based on leadership-specific biases and stereotypes.

As guided by the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document of 2016, which indicates that deputy principals have to deputise for the school principal in their absence (DBE, 2022), deputy principals experience role ambiguity in the performance of their roles. One of the findings from a study on women deputy heads' career advancement and retention, Oplatka and Tamir (2009) indicate that the unclear nature of deputy principals' role leaves them in a state of confusion and they end up doing administrative tasks to keep the day going. One of the women deputy principals stated that their role is defined by a necessity to react at the moment and deal with unpredictable circumstances as they lack clear daily responsibilities. To this end, Jansen and du Plessis (2023) assert that women deputy principals end up being entrusted with clerical duties rather than executing responsibilities associated with a properly functioning school management team. Some principals feel threatened by the presence of a deputy principal in the school management team and fear assigning them leadership responsibilities. Jansen and du Plessis (2023) further postulate that some deputy principals, particularly women, are not given the necessary experience and exposure and are denied opportunities to grow and develop. Depending on their leadership style and their relationship with the deputy principal, the principal should be the one placing great value on functional involvement and participation of the deputy principal, so that they are included in the decision-making process of the school. This may prevent women deputy principals from feeling out of place in their leadership domain.

Causes of being the missing middle for the women deputy principals position

The "missing middle" in women deputy principals' positions often stems from a combination of systemic, cultural, and institutional factors, which may include, among others, gender stereotypes and bias (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). As these traditional views on gender roles tend to penetrate the school system, they limit women's opportunities for advancement, reinforcing the idea that leadership positions are more suited for men. Women deputy principals then find themselves in a predicament as to their roles and functions as gender stereotypes and biases control how tasks are shared within the school leadership hierarchy. In some cultures, societal expectations regarding women's roles in leadership can discourage women from seeking or being considered for such positions (Koburtay et al., 2023). The author further states that societal expectations impose prejudicial stereotypes and discrimination against women in leadership and are linked to patriarchal socio-cultural traditions emphasizing male control.

The missing middle in the roles of deputy principals can be attributed to institutional barriers which are policies and practices in schools that may unintentionally favour male candidates, such as recruitment processes that lack inclusivity or networking opportunities that are male-dominated. Findings from Islam et al. study (2023) on organizational barriers to female inclusion indicate that in some cultural contexts, men tend to prefer to take directions from

other men rather than women, which is a crucial barrier for women to assume leadership positions. Women may have less access to leadership training and professional development opportunities that prepare them for deputy principal roles. Therefore, the department has a responsibility to provide professional development opportunities customised to women deputy principals' needs so that they do not feel "missing" in the enactment of leadership. Lack of mentorship and sponsorship would mean that women deputy principals may have fewer opportunities for mentorship and sponsorship compared to their male counterparts, which can limit their visibility and opportunities for advancement. Professional development may also provide networking opportunities for women deputy principals to allow for their visibility and opportunities for advancement. Addressing these issues requires systemic changes within educational institutions, including promoting gender equity initiatives, enhancing mentorship programs, and creating supportive work environments for women in leadership roles.

Strategies for mitigating gender bias challenges

Women worldwide encounter significant challenges in leadership positions due to entrenched patriarchal norms, despite the existence of legal frameworks aimed at promoting gender equity. In South Africa, several key legislative documents underscore the commitment to gender equality. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) emphasizes equality and non-discrimination based on gender and other characteristics, seeking to establish a fair labour environment that supports women in leadership roles (Chapter 2, Sections 9 and 23). The Employment Equity Act (1998) aims to rectify historical injustices by promoting gender equity and eliminating unfair discrimination, which is essential for enhancing women's representation in management positions. Furthermore, the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000) complements the Employment Equity Act by prohibiting discrimination and harassment, thus fostering a culture of equality (Albertyn, 2021). Despite these frameworks, achieving equal representation of women in leadership remains a challenge. The White Paper on Affirmative Action (1998) enhances the capabilities of historically disadvantaged groups, including women, in public service while emphasizing diversity within leadership (Mujtaba, 2023). However, systemic inequalities and patriarchal norms continue to impede women's progress in leadership roles globally. Barriers to gender parity persist, highlighting the need for effective strategies to combat gender bias and foster an inclusive work environment (Adongo et al., 2023; Alhalwachi & Mordi, 2021; Smith & Sinkford, 2022; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). These frameworks collectively demonstrate a commitment to gender equity; nevertheless, the practical challenges women face underscore the necessity for ongoing advocacy and reform to ensure that their rights and opportunities in leadership are fully realized.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is underpinned by the role ambiguity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) which indicates that when employees have inadequate information about their roles and responsibilities, it may

lead to conflict in the workplace. Role ambiguity occurs when an individual's role is undefined and how to perform that role is unclear (Tang & Chang, 2010). Women deputy principals (DPs) are often affected by the phenomenon of role ambiguity when in school leadership among men, as patriarchal influences emerge to frustrate them in their leadership roles. This theory indicates that although women are represented in school leadership, however, they are missing in terms of role and function as these are not clearly defined and are also influenced by gender domination which may lead to psychological stress and conflict within the school. Mulawarman and Komariyah (2021) further argue that women's functioning in any leadership becomes restricted such that they cannot perform their leadership roles as those roles belong to their male counterparts. The lack of definite roles for women DPs in school leadership diminishes their impact and influence as they are seen as less of leaders than men.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employed an interpretive qualitative paradigm using a phenomenological narrative inquiry. Women deputy principals had to narrate stories regarding their lived and situated experiences in their leadership domain. The women deputy principals are confronted with the struggle of being underutilized as their job description seems not to be clearly defined and distinguished from that of the principal. We generated data through in-person narrative interviews with the three women deputy principals who were from the same education circuit. These participants were selected based on their positions as deputy principals, their gender identity, and the purpose of this paper. During the interviewing process and while narrating about their lived experiences, participants revealed a reflective, cognitive, and emotional connection through their stories (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021), while bringing to light the meanings through their different interpretations (Aguas, 2022). The interviews were made up of open-ended questions which allowed the participants to reveal the in-depth details of their situation and life experience. To interview the deputy principals, we obtained permission from the school principals as the gatekeepers and obtained ethical clearance from our institution. Guided by Braun and Clarke (2006), we analysed data using thematic analysis. Since the data was generated from three individual participants at different times, that allowed us to employ data triangulation, as defined by Denzin (2012), where we employed the member-checking process to validate and verify the data that we had generated.

A demographic outlook of the participants and the research sites is shown in Table 1. The three schools are secondary schools which are located in one education district and have been purposively selected since they all have deputy women principals. The following pseudonyms are used in this paper to identify participants.

Deputy Principal1 1 to Deputy Principal 3 – DP1 to DP3

School 1 to School 3 – S1 to S3

Table 1.

Profile of the Research Sites and Participants

Participants and schools	Number of learners in the school	Qualifications	Age	Number of years as a teacher	Number of years as a deputy principal
DP 1 School 1	877	M.Ed.	43	23	3
DP 2 School 2	913	B.Ed. Hons M.Ed. in progress	45	24	7
DP 3 School 3	1208	M.Ed., PhD in progress	50	28	8

Keys: M.Ed. – Master of Education, B.Ed. Hons – Bachelor of Education Honours, PhD – Doctor of Philosophy

FINDINGS

The findings indicate the disconnect between the legislative framework for deputy principals and their practice in school management roles. From the words of the participants gender bias, role confusion, and inadequate support from principals are central themes, leading to frustration, conflict, and withdrawal.

When the participants were asked to share their management experiences, they shared the following:

DP 1

At my school we have a male principal, there are two deputies, myself and my male colleague right… As deputies, we do not get the same treatment from the staff and principal. Most of my colleagues even females prefer my male colleagues. You see, it is worse when the big man(principal) is at school, and we have nothing to do. I end up taking other teachers' periods in class and keep myself busy with teaching. The problem is that in the PAM document, the deputy and principal's job descriptions are the same. The difference is that one of deputising when the principal is not at school. But my case is different my male colleague deputies me and this makes me angry. My colleagues respect him, they call him Sir and they use my first name when they talk to me. You know that on its *isicefe nje*. I just pull back and make myself invisible. I also noticed that even though the principal undoes the decisions I take, for example, we had an assessment management plan. When I ask teachers to submit on the due date the principal says there is still time so they can submit on another day. I am constantly frustrated, and this is affecting my mental health, I am no longer sure what it is that I can do. I don't know if I am pulled over at school because I do not have a clear job description like departmental heads, you know they focus on curriculum, and that's it. The worst part of my work life is being asked to be

in charge of the kitchen staff, why me, now it is like I am home because I have to make sure that the NSNP, that food supplier has delivered enough groceries for the month. Even sick children are referred to me, I am just a superwoman without wings.

DP 2

My union deployed me to this position, so my case is different. My appointment was based on affirmative action and gender equality policy because the school only had one female and three males in the management team. So, I fit well in the school management profile. When I joined the school, I was told to manage the foundation phase, by the way, the one female that I joined was responsible for the foundation phase. She was doing all the curriculum aspects, from leading the grades to managing everything. I started to feel useless and found myself up and down in the corridors at the end of the day I achieved nothing. Well, that's not my style, I like to reflect on and count my daily achievements. We have management meetings on Wednesday, well I am very vocal and known for that. I asked the principal what I was expected to do because Mam was doing everything. He told me stories that I did not sign up for in my position like teachers must report to me when they are absent, *aybo*. I told him that his job description was according to the PAM document, not mine. He started to remind me how I came based on affirmative action otherwise I am useless. I feel like I am here as a token appointee, but I told him things that I cannot mention here and how he must get off the high horse. We fought and that made us enemies because he now thinks I was deployed to take his position. I now avoid him and stay in my office and do my things because at school well I can say I sign documents like foundation phase communications and talk to parents. I get paid for coming inside the school gate, the employer must look into our position because there are a lot of conflict cases between principals and deputies irrespective of gender. If you can see our union branch incident reports, you will agree with me that our position does not add any difference to the school management structure.

DP 3

Female deputy and male HOD, the principal when he is not coming to school or leaving the school early gives instructions to the male HOD. Well, when I joined the school, they were already a team of two. I leave them to do their own thing, but I am aware that the PAM document stipulates that I deputies in the absence of the principal, and that role is not in the job description of the HOD. I still have young children so for me it is important to protect my mental health at all times. I am invisible to these two and there is nothing I can do. I really feel as deputies our job description is not clear and I try to fit myself, but I do not fit. You know when you are forced to fit a square into a triangle? That is how I see my role. Sometimes I feel the school can run at peace without me because I seem to be disturbing the peace, especially in management.

From the three women deputy principals, the following themes were common and came out strong in their narrative:

Theme 1: Gender stereotyping of women deputy principals

The narrative of the participants reveals persistent gender stereotyping in their management roles, as illustrated by their testimonies. These accounts reveal a systemic bias that diminishes their authority and perpetuates patriarchal power dynamics in school leadership. DP 3 highlights how male principals often engage in practices that subordinate women, such as issuing instructions to male Heads of Department (HODs) rather than female deputies. As **DP 3** explains, *"When the principal leaves, he gives instructions to the male HOD, undermining my authority."* This practice devalues female leadership and reinforces a hierarchy where male deputies are favored, even when female deputies hold similar or higher positions. **DP 1** shares her frustration with the lack of respect she experiences in the workplace. Her male colleagues are addressed as *"Sir,"* while she is referred to by her first name, signaling diminished professional respect. *"Most of my colleagues, even females, prefer my male colleagues,"* she noted, illustrating how even women colleagues defer to male leadership. Additionally, she is assigned tasks associated with traditional gender roles, such as managing kitchen staff and student welfare, which she describes as feeling like she's *"at home,"* emphasizing how her role reflects domestic labour stereotypes. **DP 2**, on the other hand, discusses the emotional toll of being placed in her role due to affirmative action yet feeling devalued. *"I came based on affirmative action, … otherwise, I am useless,"* she expressed, indicating that affirmative action policies often fail to provide meaningful support and recognition for women in leadership. She also noted in the Union reported cases of the widespread conflict between principals and deputies, irrespective of gender.

This account highlights how patriarchal structures continue to dominate leadership dynamics in education, particularly in schools. Male principals often assume the role of "household heads," expecting female deputies to follow their directions, perpetuating traditional gender roles. This behavior not only undermines the Department of Education's gender equity initiatives but also hampers the leadership growth of women, especially deputy principals. Women in these roles face both emotional and professional challenges due to systemic gender bias, which questions their authority and reinforces the stereotype that leadership is inherently male. These gender stereotypes also affect how their competencies are perceived, often leading to the prioriti**s**ation of male colleagues in decision-making. Although affirmative action is designed to promote gender equity, it sometimes has the opposite effect of tokeni**s**ing women. As a result, women leaders may feel that their qualifications are overlooked, and their contributions undervalued, creating a hostile work environment where they struggle to gain the respect needed for effective leadership, even from female colleagues.

Theme 2: Challenges of Role Ambiguity on Women Deputy Principals

The data highlights that the participants face significant challenges stemming from role ambiguity, unclear job descriptions, and gender biases within the leadership structure. These challenges severely affect their authority, work relationships, and mental well-being. **DP 1** expresses confusion about her responsibilities due to the lack of a clear job description, which

leads to an overburdening workload. She states: *"I don't know I am pulled over at school because I do not have a clear job description like departmental heads, you know they focus on curriculum, and that's it.***"** This ambiguity forces her to take on miscellaneous tasks, diminishing her sense of professional identity. She articulates this by describing herself as *"...just a superwoman without wings."* Further, **DP 1**, added by mentioning that: "*You see, it is worse when the big man (principal) is at school, and we have nothing to do.*" **DP 2** echoes these sentiments, emphasising a lack of purpose in her role as a deputy: *"I started to feel useless and found myself up and down in the corridors; at the end of the day, I achieved nothing"* These testimonies highlight how undefined roles lead to inefficiencies and frustration among deputies, who feel sidelined in the school's management structure. **DP 3** illustrates this by saying: *"I try to fit myself, but I do not fit. You know when you force to fit a square in a triangle. That is how I see my role."* Ultimately, the lack of clarity surrounding their duties erodes their confidence and relevance in the school system, exacerbating conflicts and undermining their potential contribution to school leadership. DP 3's statement reflects a profound sense of role ambiguity and lack of clarity regarding her responsibilities as a deputy principal. She compares her situation to trying to fit a square into a triangle, indicating a misalignment between her actual duties and her understanding of the role. This misfit causes her to feel redundant and burdensome, particularly in the context of school management. The sense that her presence disrupts the "*peac*e" suggests underlying tensions within the leadership structure, possibly exacerbated by unclear job descriptions and power dynamics between deputies and principals.

The data underscores the significant challenges caused by role ambiguity, particularly stemming from the unclear job descriptions in the PAM (Personnel Administration Measures) document and the South African Schools Act of 1998, which do not adequately define deputy principals' responsibilities. This lack of clarity is especially detrimental to women in a patriarchal context, where they face additional gender biases within leadership structures. Gender-based discrepancies further exacerbate this challenge, as participants mentioned that they often experience unequal treatment compared to their male colleagues. The overall effect of this role confusion is a demoralized workforce, unable to perform optimally due to systemic barriers perpetuated by both unclear policy frameworks and ingrained gender biases.

Theme 3: #InvisibleButSurviving

The participants' narratives reveal significant challenges faced by all deputy principals (DP) within school management structures, particularly highlighting the emotional toll of the invisible. Peculiar to women DP's is the fact that the absence of clearly defined responsibilities and authority fosters feelings of redundancy and isolation. This compelled them to adopt coping mechanisms to endure the hierarchical and frequently patriarchal school environment. **DP 1** articulates her sense of purposelessness stemming from the invisibility of her position, stating, "*We have nothing to do. I end up taking other teachers' periods in class and keeping myself busy with teaching… I just pull back and make myself invisible*." This strategy of engaging in teaching tasks serves as a survival strategy to alleviate the frustration associated with lacking clear

leadership duties. By "pulling back" and rendering herself "invisible," she aims to sidestep conflict or confrontation, albeit at the expense of her professional development and self-worth. Similarly, **DP 2** expresses feelings of marginalisation and tokenism, asserting, *"I feel like I am here as a token appointee…I now avoid him and stay in my office and do my things."* Her response illustrates a pattern of avoidance and isolation; she withdraws from decision-making processes and interactions with male colleagues, seeking refuge in her office where she perceives herself to have more control over her duties. This sentiment is echoed by her remarks about union branch incident reports, which suggest a systemic issue of exclusion that disproportionately affects deputy principals, particularly women, from engaging in meaningful roles within school management. **DP 3** also resonates with this sense of invisibility, stating, *"… I still have young children, so for me, it is important to protect my mental health at all times. I am invisible to these two...I leave them to do their own things"* For her, prioritizing mental health and focusing on her children takes precedence, leading her to disengage from school leadership. She further notes that she occasionally feels her presence "*disturbs the peace"* in management, emphasising the perception that her contributions are both undervalued and unwelcome.

While both male and female deputy principals (DPs) experience role invisibility within school hierarchies, participants in this study encounter unique challenges due to societal expectations and gender biases. They often describe their roles as "token" positions, leading to a perception of their contributions as performative rather than substantive. In contrast, the participants' narratives indicate that male deputies generally command more authority and tend to receive preferential treatment, even when their ranks are equivalent to or lower than their female counterparts. Therefore, while role invisibility affects all deputy principals irrespective of gender, women face additional hurdles from ambiguous job descriptions and pervasive gender biases that undermine their leadership potential. It is pleasing to note their resilient coping mechanisms such as withdrawal and invisibility serve as self-preservation strategies in a system that often marginalised their contributions, ultimately exacerbating conflicts and reinforcing inequality within educational leadership **#**InvisibleButSurviving.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The study's findings illuminate the pervasive issue of gender stereotyping faced by women deputy principals, showing how entrenched gender biases erode their authority and leadership potential. These biases reinforce patriarchal hierarchies and sustain traditional gender roles, particularly through the delegation of tasks associated with domestic responsibilities. Consequently, women's professional contributions in these roles are frequently undervalued, which marginalizes them in leadership positions and leads to their exclusion from the leadership continuum. One of the central reasons deputy principals are "missing" from the leadership continuum is the lack of recognition and formalisation of their roles within the educational hierarchy. Despite holding significant responsibilities, they often find themselves positioned in an ambiguous middle ground, caught between the roles of principals and departmental heads.

The lack of clarity in job descriptions disproportionately impacts women deputy principals because it reinforces gender biases. Women are more likely to be assigned undervalued, gendered tasks, limiting their leadership opportunities.

Role ambiguity theory further explains how vague job descriptions and poorly defined responsibilities exacerbate the marginalization of women deputy principals. They are burdened with overwhelming workloads without clear expectations, and their sense of professional purpose diminishes. This frustration often leads to feelings of irrelevance and invisibility within the leadership structure. The Personnel Administration Measures (PAM) and the South African Schools Act of 1998, which should provide clear role definitions, fail to do so, further deepening this invisibility. Wronowski et al. (2024) argue that in some schools, deputy principals seem to be forgotten in the leadership spectrum. In response to these challenges, many women deputy principals adopt survival strategies such as withdrawal and isolation. While these strategies offer short-term coping mechanisms, they also perpetuate their marginalisation, limiting their ability to assert themselves in leadership roles as they have to constantly prove that they are suitable for these positions (Nhlumayo & Nkosi, 2024). By withdrawing, they reinforce their position as the "missing middle" in the leadership continuum, overshadowed by principals and departmental heads, and trapped in a role that neither acknowledges nor rewards their leadership potential. This exclusion from the decision-making and leadership processes contributes to ongoing gender inequality in educational leadership.

The study's findings align with broader research on women's leadership, particularly in the context of deputy principals, and highlight significant global and contextual dynamics. Around the world, women leaders face entrenched biases that undermine their authority, and their professional contributions are often devalued. This broader societal trend reflects traditional gender lenses that view women's roles through patriarchal norms, reinforcing systemic inequalities and creating persistent challenges for women in leadership positions. However, there are notable differences in the South African context. Legal frameworks such as the Constitution, the Employment Equity Act, and the Promotion of Equality Act aim to promote gender equity, yet women still struggle for equal representation in leadership roles. This disconnect between legal intent and actual practice underscores the complexity of the challenge. Additionally, the lack of clear role descriptions for deputy principals in South Africa intensifies feelings of irrelevance and invisibility, a challenge that may be less pronounced in contexts where roles are more clearly defined.

Implications for practice

To address the issue of gender inequality in educational leadership, several key practices should be implemented. First, patriarchal attitudes that infiltrate the school system need to be confronted, as schools are a microcosm of broader societal structures. By identifying and challenging these biases, we can foster a more inclusive culture that promotes gender equality in leadership roles. Additionally, capacity building through seminars, workshops, and awareness programs is crucial for educating staff, students, and the wider community on gender biases and

the importance of equitable leadership representation. Such initiatives can drive systemic change and build commitment to gender equality at all levels of society. Moreover, fostering a supportive culture through open dialogue on gender issues is essential. This encourages mutual support and empowers all leaders, regardless of gender, to express their leadership potential. Furthermore, revising the Personnel Administration Measures (PAM) document to ensure that job descriptions are clearly defined and gender-neutral will eliminate ambiguities that disproportionately affect women deputy principals, creating a fairer leadership environment. Lastly, further research using a participatory approach is needed to engage women deputy principals in exploring their experiences and developing strategies for more equitable leadership structures. By incorporating their perspectives, research can contribute to practical solutions that promote gender equality in school leadership. Ultimately, these actions can help create a leadership environment where all members of the school hierarchy are empowered to express their leadership within their respective roles, fostering inclusivity and diversity.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights how women deputy principals find themselves trapped in an ambiguous and often invisible space within educational leadership, a "missing middle" caught between principals and departmental heads. Despite holding significant responsibilities, they are marginalised by entrenched gender biases, unclear job descriptions, and patriarchal norms that devalue their contributions. They navigate a complex leadership landscape that fails to recognise their full potential, forcing them into survival strategies such as withdrawal and isolation. However, their ability to endure exclusion reflects a quiet resilience and strategic survival within a system that aims to dominate them. Rather than succumbing to the pressures of invisibility, they adapt, often developing ways to assert their influence without formal recognition. They continue to lead in the shadows, pushing the boundaries of leadership even when their contributions are underappreciated. The study, therefore, draws attention to the urgent need to address this invisibility and recognise and amplify the voices of women who have long been navigating and surviving within spaces that seek to exclude them.

This research study was limited to challenges faced by women deputy principals and the findings could not be generalised to the male gender in the wider population. Building on the limitations, we recommend further research on the experiences of male deputy principals as the legislative frameworks apply to both men and women.

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