

Exploring Middle Leadership and Its Effective Practices: Case Studies in Early Childhood Education in Chengdu, China

by

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Statement of Originality

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the perceptions from educational practitioners on middle leadership, its effective practices and the influential sociocultural factors in early childhood education in China.

Qualitative research method was used in this study. Data were collected from kindergarten principals, curriculum coordinators, logistics coordinators and teachers in 5 Band One kindergartens in Chengdu to explore perceptions of middle leadership and effective practices of middle leadership. Metaphors and semi-structured, individual and group interviews, and documents were the major data collection methods. Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's framework (1994).

The study's findings show that middle leadership was perceived as teacher developer, competent co-worker, mediator, teacher influencer, teacher's work controller and resource carrier. Four categories of effective practices emerged: *chengshang qixia*, understanding and developing teachers, building collegiality and building a half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers. Collectivism, the Golden Mean and moral modelling were main sociocultural factors influencing middle leadership in ECE in the Chinese context.

Main findings of this study were discussed with the contextual factors: collectivism, the Golden Mean and moral modelling. This study conceptualized middle leadership as cultural and context-based phenomenon. Implications are raised for middle leadership in ECE in China, middle leadership research, and contextualised middle leadership.

Acknowledgement

Before I started my PhD, I was a kindergarten teacher working in a Catholic kindergarten in Hong Kong. When I was teaching there, one of the teaching themes that I came across was ‘Angel’s Heart’, and I had to use the stories of Mother Teresa to teach the children the meaning of helping others. Curiosity hits me hard – I decided that I wanted to personally experience the spirit of Mother Teresa, so I picked up my backpack and travel to Kolkata to volunteer at the Mother House. As life would have it, I was disappointed by my experience there and it occurred to me that what India needed was not only Mother Teresa but revolutionary changes in its education system and the society as a whole. However, my experience there provoked me to think about the meaning of life and what I can do for society. It was then I decided that I wanted to make meaningful contributions to the education industry, to challenge myself and to explore and develop better ways to educate children. As a result, I have decided to quit my job and begin my PhD in education.

One of my close friends, Dr. Kim Quey, once said to me: ‘Pan, do you know that while you are studying for your PhD, your life will face a lot of changes? You will be under a lot of pressure, but you must persevere and have the courage to face up to all the difficult challenges.’ What she has said to me is almost like a curse – during my PhD years, my life completely changed: I began my research journey in Melbourne, then returned to Hong Kong to complete the journey, whilst in between I experienced marriage, giving birth to my son, taking on my first education consulting project, divorce and last but not least, adjusting to the ‘new normal’ during and after COVID. Looking back, I must say I am proud of myself for not giving up despite all the difficulties in life that I was facing, and having the will to press on to finish my thesis notwithstanding such difficulties.

Throughout the past few years, my son, Wang Zheng Xin, provided the best source of mental support for me. As I could not bring him along with me during that period, every time when we separate, he would hold my leg and say: ‘Mama, could you wait till I grow up first before you leave?’ As an educator, I understand the importance of companionship between a mother and her son, and I would trade anything in the world to spend time with him every day.

However, as a single parent with the responsibility of a mother as well as a father figure, I could only hold back my tears and comfort myself by telling myself that what I am doing now is to provide for him and set him up for a better life in the future and all my efforts will eventually pay off.

Needless to say, I am very fortunate to have very supportive parents who have given me their whole-hearted support throughout. It was because of their support and dedication that I had the freedom to pursue things that I actually wanted to do rather than just doing things to make a living. It was also after I have become a parent myself that I could appreciate how demanding it is to bring up a child. I am really thankful that they have helped me look after my son, which allowed me to focus on my research and work.

Speaking of fortune, it was my great fortune to have met my dear ‘Da Wang’ Alan Wong during the most difficult period of my life. Knowing that I would usually forget to take care of myself when I am under pressure, he would check on me regularly and be the caring partner that I needed. Whenever I have become lazy and wanted to procrastinate, he would be my source of encouragement and try to push me across the line. Whenever I have become depressed and stressed, he would try to comfort me and provide me the emotional support that I needed. Whenever I run into a mental brick wall when I am writing my thesis, he would discuss with me and help me clear my thoughts. Thank you my dear for going through this journey with me.

‘The world is full of many possibilities; it just depends on how you live your life.’ Dr. Yang Deyun, my dear friend and work partner, always surprises me with her various possibilities in life. It was her who brought me back to life when I was lost in stress and anxiety. She dragged me into education consulting and we took on a number of projects together. She taught me many things at work, and showed me by example of what it really means to work hard. Educators like us need to have inspirations so that we have the strength and courage to promote educational reform and development. That was perhaps what drove us forward when we were working on those projects together.

I would like to thank my senior, Dr. Wang Mo, who is almost like a time keeper to me. He would urge me every few days to finish my thesis and to graduate as soon as possible. Whenever I face any problem in my studies, he would provide me with all sorts of suggestions and assistance. I would also like to thank my colleagues in my office (Zhang Meng, Dr. Liu Cuina, Tang Jianjing and Kang Rong) and friends (Chen Tingyi and Dr. Lu Yang). Thank you for the good chats and for being good fun. Your presence made my PhD journey much more interesting and fun.

I would also like to thank Ms. Li Yun, Mr. Wen Shufei, Mr. Chen Guo Victor, and Mr. Yao Xiaorui David. Thank you for giving me the opportunities to participate in various kindergarten projects. I felt fortunate to have witnessed the evolutionary reform and development of early childhood education in China first-hand, which helped me to think more clearly as to what I wanted to do in the future. In addition, I would also like to thank the kindergartens in Chengdu which had kindly allowed me to collect data from them. Without their assistance, I would not have been able to finish my research so smoothly.

Last but not least, it is with my upmost sincerity that I would like to thank my two supervisors, Dr Lu Jiafang and Dr Qian Haiyan. During my darkest hours, they would shine on me like a beacon and offered me hope. Without their guidance and support, I would never have been able to finish my thesis. I also would like to thank Dr. Dora Ho, Dr. Lawrie Drysdale, Prof. David Gurr, Dr. Helen Goode, and Prof. David Beckett who helped and encouraged me in the journey.

It has been a long journey since I first started my PhD study. It has been a colourful journey with many ups and downs; it has inspired me to become bigger, to become better and to accept myself as to who I am. Needless to say, the journey does not end here. The next phase of life will be full of new challenges, but I am now better equipped and more prepared to face up to them. I very much look forward to it.



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Chapter 1 Introduction

As a researcher, my background and professional experience inspired me to conduct this study. My bachelor degree in psychology at a university in Chengdu, China, gave me a perspective lens to view people's past experiences in the context of their daily lives. I was professionally trained as a psychological consultant, which encouraged my interest in capturing information in interviews and interpreting people's artworks. After completed this degree, I began a Master in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Hong Kong, focusing on educational policy and teacher professional development in ECE. This research afforded me a deep understanding of the influence of educational policy and of teacher professional development and ignited my interest in educational research. Thereafter, I worked as a teacher at a local kindergarten in Hong Kong, where I was guided by middle leaders and practically involved in the followership of middle leaders. This experience gave me insight into the difficulties teachers experience in implementing senior leaders' instructions and a deep recognition of the importance of middle leaders' roles in leading teacher professional development and curriculum development. After this work experience, I travelled to Australia to carry out research and was involved in a project related to successful principal leadership in ECE. This inspired me to focus my research interests on exploring effective leadership. I also have been working as a 'critical friend' of kindergartens in China, helping them make sound decisions and challenging expectations and improvements from another viewpoint (Swaffield, 2005; Taylor & Storey, 2013). This experience provided me with a deep understanding of educational reform and policy, teacher professional development, curriculum development, and school leadership in ECE in China. My personal and

professional experience guided my excitement to explore effective middle leadership in ECE in China.

This chapter describes the context for studying middle leadership in ECE in China, that is, the complexity and challenges embedded in the educational reform and development background in ECE in China that drive the necessity and urgency to conduct this study. The research gaps, objectives, and research questions are explained before the study's significance is described. The structure of this thesis is highlighted in the final section.

1.1. Background of ECE in China

ECE in China generally refers to education provided to children aged three to six years old (Ministry of Education, 1996b, 2003, 2012b, 2012c). Kindergartens are China's formal ECE institutions and are run by diverse groups, such as education departments of local governments (provincial, municipal and district governments), public institutions [*shiye danwei*](organisations operated by central or local governments and other organisations using state-owned assets), and private organizations. The backgrounds of the operation groups are categorized as governments and non-governmental organizations (i.e., public and private kindergartens). Although the ownership of public and private kindergartens differs, all of China's kindergartens are macro-controlled by the central government through policies, rules and regulations and micro-regulated by local governments through local policies and regulations and regularly inspections.

1.1.1. Ownership, power and authority of ECE

The central government refers to the State Council, which is the chief administrative authority of the People's Republic of China. It is chaired by the premier and comprises 26 cabinet-level executive departments, including the Ministry of Education, which oversees early childhood education (ECE) in China across five main areas (Ministry of Education, 2022): (1) drafting and publishing educational laws and regulations for ECE settings – such as kindergartens, nurseries, and extra-curricular training centres – and workers in those settings; (2) planning the direction of educational reform for local governments and kindergartens; (3) establishing standards for all aspects of kindergartens, such as curriculum, worker qualifications, teacher professional training, kindergarten constructions; (4) undertaking the responsibilities of planning and organising pre-service and in-service teacher trainings; (5) participating in the formulation of guidelines and policies for funding provided for educational departments in local governments, research funding for ECE researchers, kindergarten financial support, and student funding.

Following the steps taken by the central government, local governments refer to the governments of provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions to establish ECE departments to govern and guide local kindergartens. Provincial governments are the leading local governments and the Provincial Government Coordination [*shengji tongchou*, 省級統籌] constitutes the main content of educational reform. *The National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* (The State Council, 2010) pointed out that the coordination responsibilities of the provincial government includes establishing standards for the physical environment of different school levels (e.g. kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, universities, and vocational colleges), teachers' *bianzhi* (loosely translated as 'establishment post': a school must have unfilled

bianzhi quota before hiring new staff members), and financial and cost sharing plans related to ECE. Lower levels of local governments, such as those of municipalities, autonomous regions, districts, or counties, follow the steps of the provincial government to establish ECE departments to govern and guide local kindergartens.

At kindergarten level, the organisational structure of Chinese kindergartens is generally hierarchical (Li, 2006). Yang and Xu (2015) and Liu (2015) described a typical organisational structure of kindergartens in China (see Figure 1). Parent-school committees and party branches are at both sides of the principal, guaranteeing and supervising policy implementation and providing political education to faculties and students (Sun, 2010). Normally, the school leadership team is comprised of the principal and vice-principal for teaching or vice-principal for logistics; a vice-principal usually acts as the secretary of the party branch (Law, 2012). Under the vice-principal for teaching are the heads of TRGs, while classroom teachers are organised under different TRGs. In the hierarchical organisational structure of a kindergarten, middle leaders can be those between the principal and the frontier staff (teachers and logistic staff) and senior leaders are those who above middle leaders, including principal. In the Chinese context, it is a common understanding of principal that the vice-principal of a school is a senior leader (Xiao, 2014; Zhao, 2019).

For educational reform, some kindergartens have established teaching research groups (TRGs). A TRG is a formal part of the organisational structure that facilitates teachers' learning of educational policy, educational theories and subject knowledge; improving curricula, textbooks, and pedagogy; and sharing of experiences in teaching (Shen, 2011). Although the central government (Ministry of Education, 1957) defined TRGs as professional learning communities rather than administrative organisations, they actually work on both teacher professional development and addressing teachers' affairs beyond

teaching and learning, such as competition amongst them, preparing them for professional ranks, resolving their personal problems, and improving their interpersonal skills (Guo, 2007). To this extent, a TRG shares the administrative tasks of teacher management (Hu, 2012; Wang, 2011). Due to their dual roles in leading teacher learning and teacher management, TRGs are able to promote collaborative works among teachers and encourage them to learn from each other by building a democratic, positive, harmonious and open-minded subculture and to build teachers' commitment to kindergartens to reduce turnover rates (Tao, 2010). They harmoniously enact collegiality in the hierarchical and bureaucratic system and provide a countering influence on the principal's power (Jarvis, 2012). Principals empower TRGs and providing shared power with TRGs and accept the decisions made by TRGs (Cao, 2019). Figure 1. Demonstrates the ownership, power and authority relationship between central government, local governments and kindergarten.

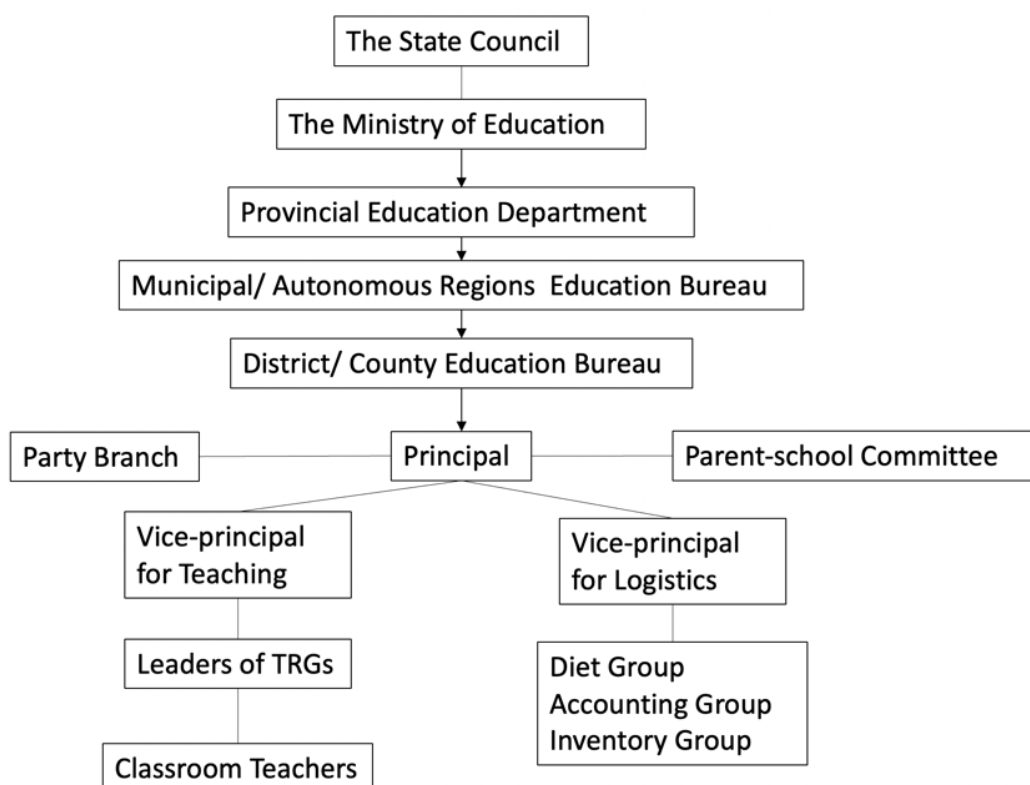


Figure 1. Ownership, power and authority of ECE and typical organisational structure of kindergarten

1.1.2. Educational Reform in ECE in China

Educational reform and development in ECE initially occurred at the national level with the issuing of a series of policy documents. These policy documents cover the instructions and requirements from the central government to kindergarten on all areas of a kindergarten operation, such as kindergarten work regulations (Ministry of Education, 1979, 1989, 1996b, 2003), principal training (Ministry of Education, 1996c), teacher professional development (Ministry of Education, 1996a; State Council, 2012), curriculum indicators (Ministry of Education, 2012b; State Council, 1993), sanitation standards (Ministry of Education, 1996b), children learning and development (Ministry of Education, 2012c, 2021) and so on. The policies issued by the central government exerted a positive influence on local government and school-level process to improve ECE in educational reform and development, including the decentralization of power and authority and emphasis on quality-based ECE (Liu & Dunne, 2009).

1.1.2.1. Decentralisation

Before the late 1970s, ECE in China was part of the planned economy system, and the central government governed kindergartens nationwide. With the establishment of the Department of ECE and Special Education [幼教特教處] in the General Education Division in 1978, and the Leading Children's Caring Work Team ECE [托幼工作領導小組] in 1979, the central

government decentralised power and authority, giving provincial and municipal governments and the governments of the autonomous regions the authority to govern and lead local ECE reforms and development (Tang, Qian, Du, & Zheng, 2009). The local governments (i.e. provincial governments and municipal governments) can make their local developmental plan and annual plan, arrange the public funding and infrastructure investment and manage human resources. They also own the power and responsibilities to lead, manage and supervise kindergartens and have some flexibility in implementation and accountability at the local level, as noted by other researchers in Asia Pacific context (e.g., Lee & Caldwell, 2011; Lee & Pang, 2011; Lee, Ding, & Song, 2008). While this creates tension between the central and local governments in a similar manner to the decentralised centralism presented by Karlsen (2000) in his work on the role of governance in education. This concept highlights ‘the dynamic interaction between decentralising and centralising forces’ in school governance (Tan & Ng, 2007, p. 156).

At the school level, the decentralisation simplified political procedures and gave autonomy to kindergarten principals. The central government’s *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Education System* (National State Council of China, 1985) gave principals autonomy in school-based management and innovation. Later, the *Kindergarten Management Regulations* (Ministry of Education, 1989) and *Kindergarten Work Regulations* (Ministry of Education, 1996b) formally established principals’ responsibility. Under this system, principals are the legal representatives of a kindergarten and the chief administrative officer, empowered by law to exercise decision making, administrative command, human resource management and financial management (Wang, 2000). In the process of educational reform, principals’ responsibilities have steadily increased, and their work has transitioned from passively managing kindergartens to actively

operating them; kindergartens have been gradually shifted from being externally controlled by governments to being autonomously run by principals (Liu, 2015). Consequently, principals hold authority over kindergarten operations and dictate the level of control middle leaders have over the implementation of the central curriculum. However, due to the diversification of school-operation groups and the co-existence of diverse funding systems, principals' degree of power and authority varies greatly. For example, in kindergartens run by district educational departments, principals are appointed by the district government. These principals are civil servants responsible for administering and managing the kindergarten with the secretary of the Party Branch; they are managed by and directly report to the educational department. In kindergartens that are funded and operated by public institutions (organisations operated by central or local governments and other organisations using state-owned assets), principals are appointed or hired by the institutions and are guided by both public institutions and education departments. Principals in private kindergartens are hired by private groups, and are answerable to the board of directors or shareholders. The various types of operation groups face difficulties in effectively implementing the principal-responsibility system because of the uneven distribution of power and authority of each kindergarten. In some kindergartens, especially in private kindergartens, the principal's power and authority are restricted, with most of the power being held by the principal's superiors (Zhu, 2016).

1.1.2.2. Quality-based Education in ECE

In 1993, the central government issued the *Outline of the National Educational Reform and Development* (State Council, 1993). In this document, aims of educational reform and

development have been pointed out: the education system should meet the needs of the socialist market economy system and the reform of the political and technological systems to better serve the socialist modernization. In 1999, the State Council mentioned in *Decisions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Deepening Educational Reform and Comprehensively Promoting Quality-based Education* that quality-based education aims to promote the quality of the student and emphasizes students' creativity and practical skills and nurture the Communist successors who have ambitions and morality and be knowledgeable and be disciplined. In line with the education reform in primary and secondary educational section, with the need for improvement in ECE quality and to enhance the capacity of kindergarten teachers, the ECE reform and development agenda has shifted from childcare to quality education (Liu, 2009). This approach focuses more on curriculum development at the school level (Liu & Dunne, 2009). Curriculum development aims to change the knowledge- and skills-focused and subject-based mode to promote an integrated play curriculum for children's all-round development in kindergartens (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). By executing the *Basic Education Curriculum Reform and Guidance of Kindergarten Education* in 2011 and the *Guidance on Learning and Development for Children Aged 3–6* (Ministry of Education, 2012c), the reform of the ECE curriculum has gradually achieved some progress in transforming from an academic knowledge-based to a play-based model (Gu & Fu, 2011).

At local government level, the provincial governments have issued a set of standards for selecting demonstrative kindergartens and the municipal governments have issue a set of standards for ranking the kindergartens into different bands. Each year, the municipal governments will carry inspection and rank each kindergarten according to its standards. In most provinces, the kindergartens are categorized into Band One, Band Two, Band Three and

No Band based on the scores from annual inspections. For instance, the standards set by the Government of Chengdu (2019) for ranking kindergarten include (1) environment and facilities, (2) safety and hygiene, (3) management system, (4) teacher professional development and team building, (5) caring and educating curriculum and (6) children development and profitability. Kindergartens which receive an overall score of more than 85 and a score of at least 80% in each sub-category are labelled as Band One Kindergartens. Those with an overall score of more than 75 and a score of at least 70% in each sub-category are labelled as Band Two Kindergartens. Band Three kindergartens are those which have received an overall score of at least 65 and a score of at least 60% in each sub-category. The rest are labelled as No Band Kindergartens. In other words, the Band One kindergartens are those which have demonstrated all-round excellence in its operations.

The public interest ECE [puhui xueqian jiaoyu]

The concept of ‘public interest’ [puhui, 普惠] ECE refers to providing families and children with generalised, beneficial ECE (Qin & Wang, 2012; Zhao, 2013). In Chinese, ‘Pu’ means general or widespread, and ‘hui’ means good quality at a low price. This suggests that the public interest ECE in China should consider citizens’ interest and strive to provide every family and child with *quality education at a low price*.

The public interest ECE was first revealed in the *National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* (The State Council, 2010a). In this document, the State Council mentions that everyone should have equal opportunity to receive quality education and that the education system should strictly follow the principles of considering public benefits and public interest in educational reform. In line with the *Outline*,

in *Some Opinions of the State Council on the Current Development of Early Childhood Education*, the State Council (2010b) points out that developing ECE should follow the not-for-profit purpose and be based on public interest principles. With regard to the distribution of power and authority, the central government only clarified the basic concept of the public interest ECE but did not provide explicit definitions and standards to measure it. Instead, the Ministry of Education (2012a) issued a document – *Comments on the Implementation of the Second Phase of the Action Plan for Early Childhood Education in Three Years* – requiring the provincial governments to provide detailed plans of the definition, concrete measures, beneficiaries, operational procedures, cost, fees, daily supervisions systems, accounting, funding policy, and exit mechanism before the end of 2015. Lv (2016) analysed the governmental policies and categorised the standards of the public interest ECE into 10 areas: (1) in line with the government’s overall development plan, (2) meeting the standards of operating a kindergarten, (3) being open for over one year, (4) perfect inner working system (mainly regarding accounting), (5) following the government’s advice on fees, (6) having stable funding, (7) teacher qualifications meeting the standards, (8) providing scientific education and quality care, (9) beneficial for specific groups of people, and (10) no prior occurrences of accidents. From the above standards formulated by local governments, it can be seen that the core purpose of the public interest ECE is to provide families and children affordable, accessible, quality, sustainable, and safe ECE. Table 1 demonstrates the types of kindergartens and their main sources of funding.

Table 1. Types of kindergartens and their main sources of funding.

| Types of kindergartens | Main source of funding |
|------------------------|---|
| Public kindergartens | Governments or public institutions and few tuition fees |
| Private kindergartens | <i>Puhui</i> kindergartens: private organizations, governments and tuition fees <i>Non-puhui</i> kindergartens: private organizations and tuition fees |

In Some Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Deepening Reform and Regulating Early Childhood Education (The State Council, 2018), the central government pointed out that, until 2020, 80% of kindergartens would be public interest kindergartens (including public kindergartens and *puhui* private kindergartens which partially received government financial support) to provide parents affordable ECE. The rest 20% of kindergartens would be non-*puhui* private kindergartens.

Due to the efforts made by the central government and local governments, educational reform in ECE has made lots progress in children enrolment rate and curriculum development (Ding, 2010). However, there are still some issues hindering the progress of educational reform, such as the unsatisfied teacher professional development, high teacher turnover rate and tensions between kindergarten and parents. The following paragraphs will explain these issues and how these issues hinder the educational reform and development.

Unsatisfied teacher professional development

Teachers' qualification and professional capacity is an important context in understanding ECE management phenomenon in China. Although China's governments have exerted much effort in promoting teacher education and improving professional levels, teacher qualifications and professional development remain unsatisfactory. According to the National Ministry of Education (2019), only 29.9% of principals and only 18.4% of full-time teachers hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Table 2 demonstrates the qualifications held by ECE principals and teachers in China.

Table 2. *Qualifications held by ECE principals and teachers in China*

| | Total | Bachelor's degree or above | College Diploma | High School Certificate | Below High School Graduate Qualification |
|-------------------|-----------|----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Principal | 252,865 | 75,532 (29.9%) | 135,637 (53.8%) | 37,412 (14.8%) | 3,284 (1.3%) |
| Full-time teacher | 2,051,021 | 379,303 (18.4%) | 1,134,371 (55.3%) | 492,029 (23.9%) | 45,318 (2.2%) |

Among all principals and full-time teachers, only 54.6% and 65.6%, respectively, have graduated from ECE programmes. Table 3 illustrates the numbers of principals and full-time teachers who have graduated from ECE programmes, including university degree [*benke*] and college diploma [*zhuanke*].

Table 3. *Principals and full-time teachers graduating from ECE programmes in universities and colleges*

| | Total | Graduated from ECE programmes |
|-------------------|-----------|-------------------------------|
| Principal | 252,113 | 137,726 (54.6%) |
| Full-time teacher | 2,051,021 | 1,346,856 (65.6%) |

Much research has shown the close and positive correlations between teachers' qualifications and their teaching quality (e.g., Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Trigwell, Rodriguez, & Han, 2012). In China, Ding (2010) claimed that teacher qualification is a factor hindering ECE reform and development, especially for curriculum development. To compensate for the low level of qualifications held by the ECE workforce, the State Council (2012) requires in-service teachers to have at least 360 hours of teacher professional development over a five-year-long training cycle. Professional development activities for teachers must be conducted by kindergartens or other teacher training institutions, such as the municipal teaching-research office or local universities. At kindergarten level, there should be a school-based teacher professional development programme, where school leaders shoulder the responsibilities of

promoting teacher professional development. A study conducted by Ho, Lee, & Teng (2016) found that the percentage of bachelor's degree holders in preschool increases, teachers are more positive about school-based professional development activities. That is, in educational reform, as the increasing of the teachers' qualifications, teachers might hold more positive attitude toward middle leaders' work in leading school-based teacher professional development activities.

High teacher turnover rate

High teacher turnover rate hinders the educational reform and development in ECE (Zhang, 2014). Ma (2017) observed the turnover rate in one kindergarten to be as high as 30%, while Lu and Wang (2006) found that 56.8% of 276 kindergarten teachers in their study were considering leaving their jobs. Zhang (2014) posited that the possible difficulties preschool teachers experience in achieving a professional rank [*zhicheng*, 职称] were related to the high teacher turnover rate. Professional rank is a title given to teachers equipped with recognised professional knowledge and skills at schools. Higher professional rank provides teachers higher salary and welfare and more comfortable working conditions (Ng & Burke, 2006). With higher professional rank, teachers have greater job satisfaction because Chinese culture emphasises respect for seniority and 'organising by pecking order' [*anzi paibei*, 按资排辈] (Zheng, 2007). In fact, until 2016 (Ministry of Education, 2017), approximately 72% of ECE principals and full-time teachers nationwide lacked professional rank, leading to the public regarding preschool teachers not as professional 'teachers', but rather as 'nursery providers' (Ding, 2010). Previous study found that a high teacher turnover rate drives a lower quality of education and fewer teacher-child interactions (Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shim, 2000). It also hinders educational reform and development by posing

difficulties for planning and implementing a coherent curriculum and sustaining positive relationships among teachers (Guin, 2004).

Tensions between kindergarten and parents

After implementing reforms and the opening-up policy, the ECE market has gradually opened up to private capital, allowing companies and individuals to run kindergartens. These private kindergartens are for-profit and market-oriented. While influenced by competition for primary school admission, parents may have specific requirements for their children's academic education and prefer teacher-initiated direct instructional learning (McMullen et al., 2005; Ting, 2007) rather than a child-centred, play-based curriculum. However, a child-centred, play-based curriculum is the ECE's aim for educational reform. In November 2018, the State Council of the People's Republic of China issued *Some Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Deepening Reform and Regulating Early Childhood Education* to regulate private kindergartens in terms of education quality and to achieve educational reform. It requires kindergartens to provide an educational environment, appropriate care and education services, a sound system for supervision and regulation, and a scientific system for quality assurance. Parents tend to send older preschool-age children to training centres that secretly impart academic knowledge to help promote children's future adaptation to primary education (Du, 2019). Therefore, generally in kindergartens the senior classes have fewer students and are known as 'Empty Nest Senior Classes' [空巢大班]. This situation harms school-based management and curriculum implementation and development, as well as hindering educational reform. Recently, the central government (Ministry of Education, 2021) issued a document, *Guiding Opinions about Vigorously Promoting Transition from Kindergarten to Primary School*, which clearly notes that kindergartens

should investigate the high withdrawal rate of children and report any ‘Empty Nest Senior Classes’ in their kindergartens to their educational department.

Another issue causing tension between parents and kindergartens is a lack of parental trust. Safety and hygiene issues that have been disclosed by social media have led parents to distrust kindergartens, and even demand open access to kindergarten CCTV systems to monitor every corner of the classrooms. Parents’ distrust of kindergartens not only causes management problems but also puts pressure on teachers by monitoring teaching activities. Studies have revealed the importance of trust between parents and kindergartens, which leads to good communication between parents and teachers and better school performance (Adam & Christenson, 2000). The level of parent trust was correlated with the dimensions of children’s behaviour and predicted parental involvement (Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie, & Moore, 2016). Therefore, teachers’ moral development has been strongly emphasised by middle leaders. The central government (State Council, 2012) issued *Opinions about Strengthening Teacher Team Building* and the Sichuan Provincial Government (2013) issued *Practical Opinions about Strengthening Teacher Team Building*, and both documents prioritise developing and strengthening teachers’ moral development. Recently, the government of Chengdu (2017) issued the *Code of Professional Ethics for Teachers in Secondary and Primary (Kindergartens) in Chengdu*. At the kindergarten level, there are school rules relating to regulating teachers’ ethics and strengthening their moral development. Moral development has also been prioritised in the area of professional development. As teachers’ superiors, middle leaders are responsible for promoting teachers’ moral development.

With lots of efforts been made by central and local governments, educational reform in ECE has made progress (Ding, 2010). While there are issues, such as unsatisfactory teacher

professional development, high teacher turnover rate and tensions between kindergarten and parents, hindering the educational reform at kindergarten level. Middle leadership at kindergarten level is a backbone force for educational reform. The following sections will describe its important role in leading kindergartens in educational reform.

1.1.2.3. Backbone force at kindergarten level for educational reform and development

Though it is principal responsibility system, the organizational structure of kindergarten is generally hierarchical and principals distributed power and authority along the organizational structure to middle leaders and then to teachers. Middle leadership which connects the principal and teachers plays a vital role assisting principals to deal with above issues and leading teachers in educational reform and development. In this section the following parts will explain the typical organizational structure of kindergartens and the important role of middle leadership in kindergartens in China. *Roles of middle leaders*

Middle leaders take a vital role in assisting principals to deal with above issues (Section 1.1.2.) and leading teachers in educational reform. In kindergarten, middle leaders are those who between senior leaders and frontier staff, including curriculum leaders, TRGs leaders, stage leaders, research leaders, lesson plan preparing leaders, carer leaders and so on, rather a definite title (Zhao, 2019). In the Chinese context, it is a common understanding of principal that the vice-principal of a school is a senior leader (Xiao, 2014; Zhao, 2019). Middle leaders are backbone force leading teacher professional development (Ge, 2009). Ge (2009) reported how school-based teacher professional development program was conducted in a Chinese

kindergarten and the roles of middle leaders. In the report, middle leaders constructed as a team as well as mentors for teacher to provide both group and individual support to teachers in diverse activities. With the support from middle leaders, the programme had successfully promoted teacher professional development level and more backbone teachers has been nurtured.

Middle leaders not only act as the backbones of teachers, but also assist the principal to deal with management work. Wang and Li (2014) claimed that middle leaders assist the principal in at least five different fields. The first is to assist the principal to prepare for government inspections and to prepare documents for governments to check. A kindergarten needs to be regularly inspected by local government departments, including Education Bureau, Food and Drag Administration, Health Station, Center for Disease and Prevention and Epidemic Prevention Station. Principal needs middle leaders to assist him/her to prepare for the inspections. The second is to assist the principal to deal with relationships, especially the relationships among the principal, the teachers and the parents. Third, middle leaders are expected to assist the principal to manage the teaching activities and to ensure the *Guidelines* are strictly followed. Forth, the principal needs middle leaders to assist him/her to children caring work, such as conducting regular physical examinations, supervising disinfections at different times of a day, designing dietary menus and undertaking other management work relating to daily caring work. Fifth, the principal also depends on middle leaders to promote teacher professional development in teachers' daily work and provide diverse training activities.

In fact, due to the agenda of education reform of preparing more ECE teachers and childcare to work in kindergartens (State Council, 2018), the role of middle leadership in assisting principals with managing and leading teachers and childcare works has become more

important. In *Some Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Deepening the Reform and Regulating the Early Childhood Education*, the State Council (2018) stated that the education reform of ECE aims to attract over 200,000 qualified ECE teachers to work in kindergartens from 2018 to 2020. In order to achieve an appropriate teacher to children ratio of 1:15, there needs to be an additional 71,000 teachers and 76,000 childcare workers working in kindergartens in China (Chen, 2018). Therefore, there will be more staff in each kindergarten and middle leaders play an increasingly important role in assisting the principals to manage and lead the teachers.

To sum up, ECE in China has been experiencing profound educational reform and development, with a trend of power distribution at the school level. Middle leaders act as the backbones of teacher professional developments and assist the principals to deal with management issues. They also lead school-based development to promote educational reform and development (Shen, 2011).

1.2. Research Gaps

The research gaps of this study is underpinned by three interrelated arguments. First, given the increasing importance of middle leadership in education reform in ECE in China, most middle leadership studies have been conducted in primary and secondary educational contexts (e.g., Ghamrawi, 2010; Aubrey-Hopkins & James, 2002) and little is known about how middle leadership is perceived and practiced in ECE. Middle leadership in ECE may have different styles compared to those in primary and secondary education due to the different types of curricula (play-based) and the vastly different needs of younger children. One local study (Hu, 2012) revealed that, for different types of curricula, curriculum development leaders could have different perceptions of their leadership roles. In addition, in

kindergartens, due to the younger ages of children (3-6 years old), a small ratio of children to teachers is required to provide appropriate care (Rodd, 2006) which may influence the organizational structure and leadership style. Accordingly, knowledge about middle leadership in ECE is required to guide middle leaders in executing their leadership roles in education reform.

Moreover, the vast majority of studies conducted in middle leadership in China are non-empirical. These non-empirical studies have tended to explore the desired personal traits, characteristics and abilities of effective middle leaders (e.g. Gu, 2008; Bai, 2013; Liu, 2015). Very few studies have empirically explored the roles, responsibilities, and practices of middle leaders in the ECE context in China.

Thirdly, cultural and social contexts shape the ways in which leaders enact leadership practices (Leithwood et al., 2010). That is, leadership concepts and behaviours that appear similar can be interpreted differently due to varying social-cultural contexts (Qian, Walker, & Li, 2017). It is problematic to seek understanding of leadership concepts and behaviours based on Western theories (Bush & Qiang, 2000). Therefore, it is important to understand how Chinese ECE stakeholders interpret middle leadership and behaviours under the influence of sociocultural context.

1.3. Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to explore how middle leadership is understood and practised in kindergartens in China and to understand what sociocultural contextual factors influence the perceptions and practice of ECE middle leadership in the Chinese context. Considering the effective experience of providing kindergartens to reference, the researcher chose Chengdu, a

city in southwest China, as the research site. Chengdu is a frontrunner in ECE reform and development. The quality of ECE in Chengdu has already been reported to be high-level by the central government, and the Chengdu government's experience of creating high-quality ECE has been referenced by other local governments in China (Education Bureau of the Chengdu Government, 2017). It also has been nominated as a National Pilot City for Educational Reform and Development in Early Childhood Education and has received political and professional support from the central government. In addition, leadership for curriculum development and teacher professional development has been reformed for effective educational management in Chengdu (Education Bureau of the Chengdu Government, 2016). Therefore, kindergartens in Chengdu might provide this study with rich and detailed descriptions to generate insightful knowledge to guide school development at the school level, according to the trends of educational reform and development.

Based on these research aims, the study's research objectives are:

1. To understand how educational practitioners (principals, curriculum leaders, logistics leaders, and classroom teachers) perceive middle leadership in kindergartens in China;
2. To identify the effective practices of middle leadership through multiple perspectives of various educational practitioners (principals, curriculum leaders, logistics leaders, and classroom teachers); and
3. To explore what sociocultural factors shape the perceptions and practices of middle leadership in kindergartens in China.

In light of these research aims and objectives, the following questions guide the research:

1. In the context of educational reforms in ECE, how is middle leadership perceived by educational practitioners in kindergartens in China?
2. What are the effective practices of middle leadership as identified by principals, curriculum leaders, logistics leaders, and classroom teachers?
3. In the context of educational reforms in ECE, what sociocultural factors shape the perceptions and practices of middle leadership in kindergartens in China?

1.4. Thesis Structure

This thesis comprises six chapters, as follows.

The present chapter has introduced the study's contextual and conceptual backgrounds, research gaps, research objectives, and research questions. Given the reform and development in ECE in China and the important roles of middle leadership in leading school-based development, in particular, curriculum and teacher professional development, this study is potential to make a significant theoretical and practical contribution in the Chinese and similar contexts.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review of middle leadership in ECE, effective school leadership, middle leadership in China, and Chinese sociocultural factors affecting middle leadership. The major argument is that the importance of middle leadership is still underestimated, and, to serve the research and practices in the Chinese context, those concepts and theories produced in the Western context might be revised in light of China's sociocultural characteristics.

Chapter 3 describes the study's research methodology. A qualitative research method, underpinned by the paradigm of interpretivism, is adopted to explore the educational

practitioners' understanding of middle leadership. This chapter presents the data collection process and justifies the choice of metaphors and semi-structured interviews as the major data collection method. It also describes the data analysis method in the qualitative research.

Chapter 4 presents the study's major findings, following the three research questions: the perceptions of middle leadership, effective middle leadership practices, and the contextual factors influencing middle leadership. It aims to paint a holistic picture of the role of middle leadership in ECE in China.

Chapter 5 discusses the study's major findings. The key features of middle leadership in ECE in China and effective practices of middle leadership are discussed. The contextual factors influencing middle leadership in ECE in China are highlighted.

Chapter 6 revisits the research progress and major findings of this study. Implications of the research findings are presented to discuss its practical and theoretical contributions. Further research avenues related to middle leadership in the Chinese context are suggested.

Chapter 2 Literature review

The aims of this study are to explore how middle leadership is understood and practised in kindergartens in China and to understand what contextual factors influence the perceptions and practices of middle leadership in ECE in the Chinese context. This chapter first describes the review process and then discusses the literature of middle leadership in ECE. Due to the limited number of middle leadership researches being conducted in ECE, the main literature review of this study includes middle leadership studies in primary education, secondary education and higher education. This chapter also includes literature review in roles and responsibilities of middle leadership, effective practices of middle leadership, school middle leadership in China and Chinese socio-cultural factors on middle leadership.

2.1. The Review Processes of School Middle Leadership

In order for this study to be systematic and transparent, I have adopted a systematic review of the literature so that there is a visible audit trail of the decisions made (Engel & Kuzel, 1992). Given the relatively small size of the literature available in school middle leadership, relevance is determined based on the three-steps approach outlined below. However, decisions on quality were not used as a selection criterion and were dealt with during the critique and analysis phase of the review.

Below is how the review process is implemented:

1. All studies reported in English scrutinising aspects of middle leadership were included, both empirical and non-empirical studies.
2. I began the review process by searching the following databases: Google Scholar; A+ education; EBSCOhost Research Databases; ERIC; and On-line Library of the Education University of Hong Kong. Keywords entered in the search were ‘middle

leader’, ‘middle leadership’, ‘subject leader’, ‘head of the department’, ‘middle manager’ and ‘leading from the middle’.

3. In the first round of searches, 1,281 results were retrieved. All literatures reported in English scrutinising aspects of middle leadership were included, both empirical and non-empirical studies. Upon review, many of the literatures found from the searches did not have a focus on discussing the theory of middle leadership. As such, I have divided them into four broad categories. Only categories 3 and 4 are included. The table below summarizes these categories.

Table 4. *The categories of literature*

| Excluded from literature review | Included in literature review |
|--|--|
| Category 1-Discussion on middle leadership in other industries | Category 3-Discussion on middle leadership in education not relating to the research questions of this study |
| Category 2-Discussion on middle leadership in education but not main focus of discussion | Category 4- Discussion on middle leadership in education relating to the research questions of this study |

The literature search outlined in the section above uncovered 115 research papers on middle leadership in the education field (see Appendix D.). These research papers discuss different topics of middle leadership, including topics such as the roles and responsibilities of middle leadership, the professional development of middle leaders and the professional identity of middle leaders. As the research questions guiding this review are about the roles and responsibilities and practices of middle leadership, I have included papers which talk about the practices or dimensions or strategies of middle leadership. There are 69 of such papers. In terms of empirical studies, as this review focuses on the empirical studies which provides detail methodology and first-hand data and analysis, I have only included empirical studies which talk about the roles and responsibilities and practices of middle leadership. There are 59 of such empirical studies. The two main research approaches used in these shortlisted studies are survey design and qualitative case study. The majority empirical studies in the

review were undertaken in the context of primary and/or secondary schools, whilst a few of them were undertaken in the higher education section or in ECE.

2.2. Middle Leadership in ECE

Among the few literature on school middle leadership, there are a handful of empirical middle leadership studies conducted in ECE settings.

Rönnerman, Edwards-Groves, and Grootenboer (2015) conducted a study including 14 preschool teachers who lead their colleagues in implementing the revised curriculum for ECE. The results show the nature of communicative spaces as mechanisms for enabling teachers to engage in learning-focused meaning-making activities connected to systematic quality work and the importance of middle leader to lead colleagues development.

Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, and Rönnerman (2015) presented a cross-nation study of middle leaders from Australian primary schools and Swedish preschools. They found that practices of the middle leader who facilitated the action research were instrumental in developing trust for teacher development.

Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, and Ronnerman (2015) investigated the practices of middle leaders in Australia and Sweden. They adopted a multiple case-study approach and drew data from three large-scale qualitative studies to explore the different and common leading practices of middle leaders across the two contexts of cases of Australia and Sweden. Data were collected by semi-structured interviews from 22 middle leaders in preschool settings in Sweden and primary school settings in Australia. The findings of their studies showed that the leading practices of middle leaders are: (1) managing and facilitating; (2) collaborating

and creating communicative spaces; (3) negotiating the teaching-leading nexus; and (4) relational positioning. These practices of middle leadership drew from both ECE and primary education. However, there are a lack of additional studies to support the findings.

Rönnerman, Grootenboer, and Edwards-Groves (2017) identified development teacher facilitator, first teacher or curriculum coordinator as middle leaders and drew on the theory of practice architectures to examine the leading practices of middle leaders in preschools in a city district in Sweden. They found that the middle leadership practice shaped the language and discourse, the activities and physical set-ups and the social relationships required for preschool improvement.

The above handful studies of middle leadership in ECE show that practices of middle leadership do contribute to the systematic quality of preschools. Given the limited studies of middle leadership in ECE, in order to provide a much more comprehensive picture of middle leadership in schools, this literature review includes and mainly rely on the literature on middle leadership in other educational sections, especially primary and secondary education, which constitutes the vast majority of literature in school middle leadership. The following sections of this chapter will discuss the literature relating to the research questions.

2.3. Roles and Responsibilities of Middle Leadership

Early research, before 2000, on the middle positions of an organisation focused more on middle management rather than middle leadership (e.g., Dopson & Stewart, 1990; Fleming, 2000; Guth & MacMillan, 1986; Porter, 1961; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). After 2000, there was increasing research interest on the topic of middle leadership. At the early stage of middle leadership research in school settings, the concepts of middle leadership tended to

view middle leadership through its position in the middle of the organisation (e.g., Aubrey-hopkins & James, 2002; Busher, Hammersly-Fletcher & Turner, 2007). That is, middle leaders are those between the top senior leaders and the grassroots junior staff of a school (Busher, Hammersly-Fletcher & Turner, 2007, Caughron & Mumford, 2012; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). Adopting this concept, some scholars directly pointed to one position as middle leaders to explore middle leadership. For example, in the studies conducted by Celikten (2001) and Cranston (2006), the assistant principal was defined as a middle leader, and in James and Hopkins (2003) and Kerry (2005) and Ribbins (2007), subject leaders were regarded as middle leaders, and the head of the department was considered a middle leader in studies conducted by Brown, Rutherford, and Boyle (2000) and Tam (2010) and Turner and Bolam (2010). Concepts of middle leadership through its position in the organisation is a dynamic way to view middle leadership. Because the position of the middle leader depends on the unit of analysis: when the scope of a study is a district to explore policy implementations, principals can be regarded as middle leaders (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013).

Through reviewing the previous studies in middle leadership, the concepts of middle leadership are viewed through its roles and responsibilities at organizational level and in the teacher group (Zhang, Wong, & Wang, 2021). The following parts of literature review on the concepts of middle leadership are organized by its roles at organizational level and in the teacher group.

2.3.1. Roles of middle leadership at organizational level

Through the analysis of the previous literature, the roles and responsibilities of middle leadership are closely related to their positions and part or all of the roles and responsibilities are formally designated (Bryant, 2019) such as administration, management, and supervision

work (Branson et al., 2016; Heng & Marsh, 2009). From this perspective, middle leaders act as a bridge that connects the department and school (Briggs, 2005). Specifically, the leading roles of middle leaders in schools are policymaker, strategic planner, resource manager, curriculum developer, corporate agent, and liaison (Briggs, 2003, 2005; Dinham, 2007; Friedman, 2011; Ghamrawi, 2010; Lai & Pratt, 2004).

Policymaker is to partake enthusiastically in school improvement efforts and plans and engages in affiliation agreements with other institutions (Ghamrawi, 2010). *Strategic planner* is to set long-term plans to introduce new content, program innovations, or other organizational structures and develops means to reach team. The strategic planner role is limited in the department level or in the group the middle leaders lead (Lai & Pratt, 2004; Ghamrawi, 2010).

Resource manager is to impart new high-quality resources for teachers and create community partnerships that support the creation of a sustainable learning environment (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006; Lai & Pratt, 2004; Nguyen, 2012). They use resources include time, space, and authority to perform both administrative and pedagogical duties (Farchi & Tubin, 2019).

Acting as resource manager overlaps with acting as liaison (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006).

Curriculum developer is to ensure formulation, development and implementation of school curriculum as well as concern about the maintenance of teachers' participation and endeavours (Grootenboer & Larkin, 2019). Acting as curriculum developer, they are also regarded as quality controller who assess educational programmes in terms of quality and adherence to regulations and standards (Ghamwari, 2010). They collect and maintain information about teacher performance and keep up with student achievement data and help teachers understand and use this data to control the quality of education (Jorgensen, 2016).

Corporate agent is that middle leaders understand and take part in 'whole picture' and work

closely and build up working relationship with stakeholders in a school (Briggs, 2003, 2005). Under this role, middle leaders should act as liaison, resource manager and proficient raconteur (Ghamwari, 2010). *Liaison* has been mentioned as a role to provide resource to teachers and maintain the learning environment by maintaining positive and productive working relationship with stakeholders (Ma, 2007). They are ‘bridge’ between senior management and the department team and work for whole-college and cross-college operation to promote and enable the work of the department (Briggs, 2005).

2.3.2. Roles and responsibilities in the teacher group

In addition to its role in organisations, middle leadership has been conceptualised through its particular functions in a teacher group or team. For example, middle leaders are defined as those who mentor individual teachers and support their on-site professional development (Franken, Penny, & Branson, 2015; Willis et al., 2019). They lead by serving teachers under senior leaders (Cardno & Bassett, 2015) and influencing teaching and learning (Bassett & Robson, 2017; Leithwood, 2016). Adopting this perspective to conceptualise middle leadership, scholars (e.g., Franken, Penny, & Branson, 2015; Willis et al., 2019; Bryant, 2019) tend to narrow the scope of middle leadership concepts, comparing with conceptualising middle leadership through their roles in the organisation, and concentrate on their roles as teacher leaders. To this extent, the roles of middle leaders are associated with middle leaders’ professional functions, such as pedagogical experts, action researchers, problem solvers, and functioning in building relationships and influencing teachers’ work by acting as change agents, teacher’s mental facilitators, and sub-cultural developers (Jorgensen, 2016; LaPointe-McEwan, Deluca & Klinger, 2017; Ghamrawi, 2010; Koh, Gurr, Drysdale & Ang, 2011; Friedman, 2011; Dinham, 2007). These roles aim to lead teachers’ professional

development and facilitate teachers' work. They are implementers (Briggs, 2005) who 'make it happen' in teacher groups (Cranston, 2006).

Pedagogical expert is to exhibit exceptional knowledge of subject matter and key characteristic of quality teaching and learning, to provide appropriate customized professional development, and to assist teacher development of effective lesson plans and their delivery (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, Hardy, & Rönnerman, 2019). This role requires middle leaders to be professional enough to facilitate teachers' teaching and students' learning (Farchi & Tubin, 2019). Similar roles are identified as teacher learning supporter (Jorgensen, 2016) and teacher facilitator (LaPointe-McEwan, Deluca & Klinger, 2017). *Action researcher* role means that middle leaders do research in exploring teaching methods and techniques and use the findings to monitor progress and improve teaching quality (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer & Rönnerman, 2016). Study conducted by LaPointe-McEwan, Deluca, and Klinger (2017) explores the middle leaders use evidence-driven method to improve teacher professional development and support this important role acting by middle leaders. *Problem solver* means approaching problems positively, flexibly and intuitively and providing advocacy for teachers who are in conflict with students or parents (Ghamrawi, 2010). *Change agent* means to affect, suppress, accelerate or retard change based on a deep understanding of community needs and values (Ghamrawi, 2010). Acting as this role, middle leaders are recognized as an implementer in the teachers group (Cranston, 2006). This leadership role is accomplished by setting up examples in implementation of syllabus changes and new initiatives in the subject area (Koh, Gurr, Drysdale & Ang, 2011). Middle leaders also act as *teacher mental facilitator* who are a motivational figure of teachers' self-esteem and a source of teachers' self-efficacy (Friedman, 2011). Middle leaders motivate teachers' self-esteem through communicating high expectations, delegation of

responsibilities, and serving as role model and they encourage teachers to put additional efforts to work and showed their appreciation for teachers' work to enhance teachers' self-efficacy (Friedman, 2011). *Sub-cultural developer* is to create a supportive climate and exercise professional leadership, as well as introduce new content, program innovations, or different organizational structures (Szwed, 2015; Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, & Ronnerman, 2016). This role in professional relating areas is that middle leader acting as a facilitator of department as PLC (Friedman, 2011) and team building in the department (Dinham, 2007).

In summary, in previous studies of school middle leadership, middle leadership has been conceptualised through its role in the organisation and in the teacher group. As having the leading role in an organisation, middle leaders should work as a bridge between the department they lead and other school stakeholders. According to their role in the teacher group, middle leaders should work as a buffer to mediate the external demands on teachers and promote teachers' learning and teaching to cater to these demands. Therefore, middle leadership is positioned as 'buffer and bridge' (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 462) between the operating core and apex (Mintzberg, 1989; Choi, 2013).

2.4. Effective Practice of Middle Leadership

From the previous study, effective practices of middle leadership can be categorized into four dimensions: setting direction for the department, understanding and development teachers, building collegiality and managing teaching and learning programme. These four dimensions mutually influence each other and drive one another in a virtuous spiral. These four dimensions will be explained by empirical studies as follows.

2.4.1. Setting direction for the department

In lots of previous studies of school middle leadership, setting directions as an effective practice of middle leadership is limited to the departmental level (Koh et al., 2011), as middle leadership is ‘boundary’ leading (Kerry, 2005) with limited amounts of authority distributed from principal leadership (Friedman, 2011). Generally, the direction set by middle leaders focuses on promoting curriculum development and student learning (Dinham, 2007) and ensuring sustainability (Grootenboer & Larkin, 2019). Setting student learning as a shared goal is in line with teachers’ individual values as educators, which forms acceptance of a shared goal (Leithwood et al., 2006). They also foster a set of common values in the department (Aubrey-Hopkins & James, 2010).

This category of practices involves the efforts of middle leadership to motivate teachers by goal setting (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). It concerns the ways in which middle leaders guide teachers to set individual and group and distal and proximal goals to motivate teachers to improve their performance (Latham & Locke, 1991; Locke & Latham, 2002; DuBrin, 2012). According to the theory about goal setting identified by Locke and Latham (1990), there appear to be two cognitive determinants of behaviours exerting influence on tasks performance: values and goals (intentions). Individuals’ values create a desire to do things that are consistent with their emotional judgements, and goals are intentions that an individual consciously tries to achieve. For Locke and Latham, goals motivate teachers to develop strategies that will enable them to perform at the required goal levels, given the conditions that the goals are consistent with their values. Based on Locke and Latham’s goal setting theory, teachers given a specific, difficult, but attainable goal perform better than

those given easy, nonspecific, or no goals at all. At the same time, sufficient ability, accepting the goals, and receiving feedback relate to performance (Latham, 2003).

When setting direction for the department, it is noteworthy that middle leaders can be influenced by a principal's leadership, and also acquire requisite materials and structural support from the principal (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2015). A study conducted by Ho (2010) in two preschools in Hong Kong found that although the power and authority distributed from the principal to subordinates were different, it was still principal-centralized in both preschools. Middle leadership hold the power to make departmental decisions on plans (Brown, Rutherford, & Boyle, 2000) following the demands of the principal (Koh et al., 2011). They design departmental policies following the principles of school policies (Aubrey-hopkins & James, 2010). More importantly, middle leadership demonstrates responsibility, power, and authority which are distributed from the principal leadership (Friedman, 2011; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017).

2.4.2. Understanding and developing teachers

The literature on middle leadership reveals that supporting and building teachers' capacity is the main effective practice of middle leadership (Jorgensen, 2016). Middle leaders are normally regarded as teacher facilitators, teacher developers, or teacher mentors (Franken, Penny, & Branson, 2015; Willis et al., 2019). They know the workplace and are responsive as 'insiders', share responsibilities, and develop and sustain changes in teachers' learning (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016). They set the platform and build PLCs (Grootenboer & Larkin, 2019) for sharing good practices to improve student learning (Aubrey-Hopkins & James, 2010). They provide advice and guidance to teachers and encourage teachers to

promote teaching and learning (Koh et al., 2011). All these practices are effective in building teachers' capacity and self-efficacy.

This category of practices makes a significant contribution to motivation by improving individual teacher efficacy. Self-efficacy, a key concept in Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory, refers to tasks specific to self-confidence. It has been shown consistently that self-efficacy has a powerful and direct influence on improving task performance (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is determined by factors related to an individual's expectations of their successor, such as ability, experience, training, information about appropriate task strategies, past success, and internal attributions (e.g., Earley, 1986; Hall & Foster, 1977; Locke, Frederick, Lee, & Bobko, 1984). High self-efficacy can be achieved by capacity-building that leads to a sense of mastery (Leithwood et al., 2006). Lots of studies have provided evidence that teachers' self-efficacy is positively relating to their commitment to school and found to predict teacher profession and school effectiveness (Chesnut & Burley, 2015; Blasé & Blasé, 1996; Bogler & Somech, 2004). For example, Chesnut and Burley (2015) used meta-analysis to examine research on the effects of preservice and Inservice teachers' self-efficacy beliefs on commitment to the teaching profession and found that preservice and inservice teachers' self-efficacy beliefs influence their commitment to the teaching profession ($ES = +0.32$). Blasé and Blasé (1996) and Bogler and Somech (2004) found that self-efficacy is one dimensions of teacher empowerment which could contribute to teacher commitment.

In a school, building teachers' capacity and increases teachers' self-efficacy and is the main responsibility of middle leaders, as they are directly leading teachers (Leithwood et al., 2006). A study conducted by Friedman (2011) showed that middle leaders adopt effective practices, such as participating in learning activities and leading learning for teachers, and the teachers reported that their self-efficacy was enhanced. Even teacher participants

reported that middle leaders enabled them to feel self-actualisation when middle leaders focused on teachers' capacity-building and individual achievement.

2.4.3. Building collegiality

In the category of building collegiality, middle leaders create subcultures of professional collaboration (Ghamrawi, 2010; Grootenboer et al., 2015); establish teacher leadership (Friedman, 2011); promote communications (Aubrey-Hopkins & James, 2010); build fraternity and equality; and design the means for departmental decision-making (Aubrey-Hopkins & James, 2010). Through these practices, the department structure changes and the individuality of middle leaders is broken down by the raising of collegiality and power sharing with teachers. This category of practices concerns redesigning the working situation or conditions in which teachers are motivated when they find that they are conducive to accomplishing the goals they hold to be personally important (Leithwood et al., 2006).

Building collegiality is core to middle leadership (Grootenboer & Larkin, 2019). Collegiality assumes that teachers have a right to share in the decision-making process of the department (Brown, Rutherford, & Boyle, 2000). To this extent, common values, common understanding and common priorities, and the micro-political structure is therefore integrative and exclusively held by members of the department. Further, the departmental structure is particularly redesigned to empower teachers (Kim, 2010). As Wise (2001) pointed out, collegiality often relates to school structures and coexists within a wider hierarchy. This is to view collegiality as structure (Harvey, 1997; Tight, 2014) which presents a contradiction to an increasing culture of line management, and it can be regarded as a means of defending middle leaders' individuality of the department (Bennett et al., 2007) and to provide teachers power motivation (McClellan, 1987). Power motivation is a form of extrinsic motivation

which refers to an individual's desire to influence others, acquire recognition, and gain social status (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; McClelland, 1975). It also captures an individual's desire to get ahead (Luria & Berson, 2013). Teachers with a high degree of power motivation tend to take initiatives and seek responsibilities. Furthermore, they are eager to learn and their satisfaction and commitment to school are high (Chan & Drasgow, 2011; Hogan & Holland, 2003; McClelland, 1975; McClellan, 1987).

2.4.4. Managing teaching and learning programmes

This category of practices is effective for middle leaders acting as curriculum leaders who work closely with school senior leaders to identify problems and areas of improvement in schools; they are also expected to lead a team of teachers or spearhead a curriculum in a department, and thereby influencing student learning significantly (Grootenboer & Larkin, 2019). As curriculum leaders, middle leaders participate in curriculum framework designing work in the process of designing or promoting curriculum development. The practices of middle leadership as curriculum leader are deciding the teaching content with teachers, modelling and sharing good teaching practices, and walking the talk of a shared system of monitoring and evaluation (Aubrey-Hopkins & James, 2002; Koh et al., 2011; Nguyen, 2013). Middle leadership practices in developing curriculum are expected to be evidence-informed (LaPointe-McEwan, DeLuca, & Klinger 2017; Grootenboer & Larkin, 2019).

Through these practices, middle leaders work closely with teachers to achieve the aims and objectives of a curriculum which is aligned closely with the expectations of the principal (Koh et al., 2011). Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves and Rönnerman (2015, pp. 524-525) stated that middle leaders have three significant characteristics in leading curriculum development. First, middle leaders are positioned structurally and relationally between a school's senior

management and teaching staff. They do not play one role and are members of both groups simultaneously. Second, philosophically, middle leaders practise from the centre or alongside colleagues. In this sense, middle leaders are not ‘heroic crusaders’ leading from the front; rather they work alongside and in collaboration with their colleagues for curriculum development. Third, middle leading is understood and developed as a practice. To this end, the focus is on the words, actions, and relationships of leaders rather than the characteristics and qualities of middle leadership. As a ‘engine room of the school’ for curriculum development (Toop, 2013, p. 58), middle leaders gain supports of the school principal or proposed head and teachers as a critical dimension of the relational arrangements that enabled and constrained their practices (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2015). This support from the principal should be material and structural backing and create hospitable conditions under which the middle leaders could act to effect change in their particular schools (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2015). Support from the teachers are their full recognition of middle leadership, engagement of curriculum activities, and attitudes to accept changes (LaPointe-McEwan, DeLuca, & Klinger, 2017; Lai & Pratt, 2004).

To sum up, through literature review, the categories of effective practices of middle leadership are setting direction for the department, understanding and developing teachers, building collegiality and managing teaching and learning programmes. Supporting the effectiveness of these practices are mainly about human motivation theories. Practices of setting directions are effective by underpinning of goal motivation (Locke & Latham, 1990). Effectiveness of the practices of understanding and developing teachers is on the basis of social-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1986). Building collegiality results in collegiality and which is supported by power motivation (McClellan, 1987). Practices in managing the teaching and

learning programme refers that middle leaders deeply participate in curriculum development and gains support and recognition from both principal and teachers.

2.5. School Middle Leadership in China

After reviewing middle leadership in ECE and roles and responsibilities and effective practices of middle leadership, this section will review literature of school middle leadership in China. From previous studies conducted in China have not yet clearly pointed out who are considered middle leaders in a school (e.g., Wang, 2007; Wang & Xin, 2014; Gu, 2008). Most of the previous studies of middle leadership were conceptual research (e.g., Liu & Huo, 2015; Zhang, 2016; Guan, 2011), and refer to ‘middle leader’ or ‘middle-level leader’ in multiple positions in the middle tiers of a school’s organisational structure. However, some researchers (e.g., Niu & Liu, 2012; Liu & Huo, 2015; Zhang, 2016) define explicit positions as middle leaders. For example, Niu and Liu (2012) regard staff with management responsibilities in the party branch and in the teaching management department as middle leaders in higher education settings. Liu and Huo (2015) pointed out that the subject coordinator, after-school activities coordinators, and moral education coordinators are middle leaders in a school setting. Zhang (2016) refers to the teaching and learning coordinator, moral education coordinator, administrative coordinator, and leaders of each grade as middle leaders in a school in China. Li (2007) points out that the coordinators who are responsible for teaching and moral education, administrative coordinator, leader of TRGs, and leader of each grade are middle leaders. Guan (2011) refers to coordinators who are responsible for school moral education, teaching and learning, logistics, and administrations as middle leaders.

The roles of middle leaders in Chinese schools vary and depend on their positions in the organisational structure and their responsibilities. Previous studies in China show that middle leaders act as a bridge between the senior leaders and classroom teachers as well as the executor and organiser of the decisions made by senior leaders (Li & Yang, 2006; Wang, 2009; Liang, 2009; Niu & Liu, 2012). As they work closely with the principal, they are regarded as the principal's brain trust and capable assistants (Liang, 2009). Niu and Liu (2012) claim that middle leaders also play the role of consultants for school decision-making and departmental manager in a school. Ma (2007) states that the middle leaders for curriculum development are experts who are skilled in teaching and learning, the sheep leader of educational research, the coordinators of staff interpersonal relationship and external liaison, managers of school administration, trainers of the professional learning community, and keeper of the facilities in TRGs. Shi and Xie (2009) find that the roles of leaders of TRGs have been changing from information conveyers to organisers of TRGs, from arrangers of TRGs activities to equally cooperative participants, from managers of TRGs to leaders of learning and research, and from teaching researchers to self-reflected promoters. A study conducted by Lee and Ip (2021) found that teacher participation in PLC-like activities, such as communities of practices, co-planning meetings and lesson observation, in the Chinese context, had likewise extended from from their roles of promoting teacher learning to develop teacher leadership capacity. To this extent, the roles of middle leadership in these PLC-like activities in TRGs can establish and nurture teacher leadership.

Most of the related studies (e.g., Gu, 2008; Bai, 2013; Liu, 2015) on effective practices of middle leaders in China studies focus on the personal traits, characteristics, and abilities; researchers consider these to be key contributing factors to effective leadership; a few of

them explores the effective practices. For example, Gu (2008) proposes that excellent middle leaders should have a sense of danger, awareness of cooperation, innovation awareness, the overall awareness, and dedication. Bai (2013) claims that if a capable middle leader would like to execute his roles in school work, he or she should equip the learning and innovation ability, academic knowledge, organisational coordination and communication skills, ideological and moral modeling, team spirit, responsibility and service awareness. Liu (2015) suggests that middle leaders must have a strong grip over the following attributes: comprehension, planning, commanding, controlling, coordinating, and high work efficiency. Wang and Xin (2014) conclude the diverse personal traits, characteristics, and abilities into three main categories which contribute an effective middle leader:

1. Have high moral standards: clear about the responsibilities, seek truth from the facts, have integrity in politics; dare to take responsibility, adhere to principles, and persist the bottom line of moral standards; sensibly treat the promotion
2. Being professional in work: able to lead teaching and research work and leaders in professional development
3. Implement the work and have a clear identification of roles as a middle leader

A study conducted by Guo (2011) shows that middle leaders (TRGs leaders) have an ideal level of teaching ability, communication ability, self-management ability, but they are weak in discipline planning ability, scientific research ability, and organisational ability. Guo (2011) explains that middle leaders are weak in these abilities because of the confusions of their professional roles, the lack of professional development opportunities, and the lack of empowering.

Wang (2007) explored the relationship between leadership style of middle leadership and teacher working attitude. Collecting data from 525 teachers in 25 secondary schools, the study

found that there was a significant relation between transformational leadership of middle leaders and teacher working attitude. The findings of this study suggested that middle leaders should be charismatic, inspiring morale, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Other non-empirical studies in other industry in China also claimed that middle leaders should adopt transformational leadership and provide individualized consideration to teachers to provide personal caring and consider their individualized needs in work (Zhao, 2019; Rao, 2003). This is in alignment with the findings conducted by Yukl and Tracey (1992) that effective leadership tactics are using inspirational appeal, ingratiation and pressure in a downward direction from leader to followers, and using emotions as a basis for gaining teachers' commitment and expressing their acceptance of teachers to increase positive regard and influence the teachers' work. Individualized consideration is one key component of transformational leadership as it satisfies the followers' needs and encourages them to complete a task (Avolio & Bass, 1995). More importantly, it is on recognizing follower's individualized differences in needs and developing potential to achieve higher performance (Avolio & Bass, 1995).

Given the vast majority of studies in middle leadership in ECE in China are non-empirical, few studies empirically explore what are the roles, responsibilities and practices of middle leaders. More studies are needed to seek understandings of the concept and practices of middle leadership in China.

2.6. Socio-cultural Factors on Middle Leadership

Since the 1990s, scholars working in the school leadership field have claimed that sociocultural contexts should be highly emphasised while adopting theories and practices of school leadership across cultures (e.g., Bajunid, 1996; Cheng, 1995; Halinger, 1995;

Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998; Wong, 1996). Sociocultural context influences people's perception and behaviours and the practices of students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other school stakeholders (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998). However, over 20 years have passed since the 1990s, and based on recent literature reviews (e.g., Hallinger & Bryant, 2013; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Lumby et al., 2009; Mertkan, Arsan, Cavlan, & Aliusta, 2007; Walker & Hallinger, 2015), the importance of socio-culture to school leadership has not yet been adequately addressed by relevant studies (Truong, Hallinger, & Sanga, 2017). Indeed, the current scene of educational administration and leadership studies in East Asia, including China, has been blamed for being full of 'cultural borrowing' (Cheng, 1998; Walker & Dimmock, 2000; Walker & Hallinger, 2015). Because leadership is a value-laden concept (Gronn, 2001; Sergiovani, 2005) influenced by social, political, cultural, and economic contexts (Bush & Qiang, 2000; Wang, 2007), it is important to understand the influence of Chinese sociocultural context on leadership concepts and behaviours.

Numerous studies have attempted to identify the influence of Chinese culture on leadership concepts and practices (e.g., Bush & Qiang, 2000; Cheng & Wong, 1996; Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998; Lin, 2008; Ribbins & Zhang, 2006).

Contextual factors lead to the different roles and responsibilities of middle leaders (Gronn, 2009; Wise & Wright, 2012). Mercer and Ri (2006) explored the roles of secondary school heads of departments in China. They compared the roles of middle leaders in Western contexts to those in the Chinese context. The findings confirmed that middle leadership is influenced by the sociocultural context, and the roles of middle leadership tend to be different in the Chinese context from those in Western contexts. Mercer and Ri (2006) found that several important roles of middle leaders in Western contexts did not appear in the Chinese context, for instance, monitoring and evaluating student progress, undertaking action

to address problems related to pupil progress, budgeting for departmental development, managing and organising accommodation, and managing and developing effective relationships with the senior management team.

Numerous studies have attempted to identify the influence of Chinese socio-culture on leadership concepts and practices (e.g., Bush & Qiang, 2000; Cheng & Wong, 1996; Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998; Lin, 2008; Ribbins & Zhang, 2006). Few of them explore the influence of Chinese socio-culture on middle leadership. This literature review of socio-cultural factors on middle leadership tries to identified the social cultural factors which may influence on middle leadership in ECE in China. After reviewing, these contextual factors were collectivism, the Golden Mean and moral modelling.

2.6.1. Collectivism

Recent cross-culture studies have supported collectivism in Chinese culture, especially in a large-scale project called GLOBE (House et al., 2004). Collectivism is a value, which refers to the prioritisation of group benefits over the pursuit of individual success (Lin & Huang, 2012). In the view of collectivism, the power of each individual is limited. Only when the individuals become a group, the power of the individuals together as a group far exceeds that of each individual alone. In a group, everyone should closely cooperate and stand on others' shoes and consider about the interest of the group when making decisions. Collectivism also claims that the interest of every member in the group is in line with the interest of the group. When the interest of the group has been reached, the interest of everyone in the group can be achieved. Therefore, when there is a conflict between personal interest and the group interest, collective interest should unconditionally prevail over personal interest.

Some research on collectivism has gradually shifted to explore the influence of collectivism on organization. That is, the influence of collectivism on the shared goal, interest and values and the behaviors of the group members. Jackson, Colquitt, Wesson, & Zapata-Phelan (2006) found that psychological collectivism which consist of five facets: preference for in-groups, reliance on in-groups, concern for in-groups, acceptance of in-group norms, and prioritization of in groups contribute to a greater member performance. The reason is that the organizational norms guide the behaviors of members. Members regarded themselves as part of the organization and highly depend on the organization. Members also show a high level of compliance and are willing to participate in teamwork or group work. It also believes that organizational goals take precedence over personal goals, so the members will adjust their own behaviors according to the organizational situation, so that individual behaviors conform to the expectations of role norms, and are motivated by group needs and goal orientation. Sluss, Klimchak, & Holmes (2008) claimed that leadership has its emotional attributes and the belongings and identifications of members are regarded as one of the human basic needs which are also important in maintaining and ‘internalizing’ organizational values. Collectivism influence on the organizational values, goals, and norms contributes to the process of the member’s transformation from ‘I’ to ‘us’, which helps members transform their potential knowledge, skills and believes into practices in teamwork or group work. Smith and Ingersoll (2004) found that teachers, especially new teachers, who are provided with mentors and are closely involved in collective activities, such as planning and collaboration with other teachers, are less likely to resign.

To leadership in China, core to collectivism is to serve the people (Ni, 2016). According to socialist collectivism, middle leaders should correctly deal with the interest among the country, the groups and individuals in accordance with the Mass Line [*quzhong luxian*

群眾路線], which was proposed by Chairman Mao. The Mass Line follows the principle of ‘from the masses, to the masses’ [從群總中來，到群眾中去] which means that leaders should take into consideration the opinions of followers and other groups of people to know their thoughts and extract their main ideas to serve them better (Xia, 2020).

In school setting, collectivism exerts influences on the decision-making (Lin & Huang, 2012). From middle leadership’s perspective, the influence of collectivism in the decision making of middle leadership means that when they making decisions for teachers or the teacher’s group, they should ensure that the teachers’ interest is consistent with the overall interest of the kindergarten. Also, how middle leaders bind teachers with team norms, values, and honors is also influenced by collectivism (Chen, Zhang, & Zhang, 2016).

2.6.2. The Golden Mean

The doctrine of the Golden Mean [*zhongyoung*, 中庸] is a philosophy that has been considered to be the foundational philosophy of Confucianism (Zhang, 2018). The Golden Mean consists of two concepts: Zhong [中], which means ‘in the middle’ and refers to an impartial position and justice; and Yong [庸], which means ‘the unchangeable rules and laws.’ In other words, the Golden Mean refers to the unchangeable rules and laws that help one develop an impartial position and be just [不偏之謂中，不易之謂庸。中者，天下之正道。庸者，天下之定理]. Leaders who believe in the Golden Mean should first determine the rules and laws governing any conflict between multiple parties, and then act as a mediator who can maintain a balance, be impartial, and satisfy all stakeholders. Essentially, the rules and laws are connected to morality, which is the core of Confucianism. The difficulty of practicing the Golden Mean is to handle the degree to which balance can be kept

and all stakeholders can be satisfied (Liu, 2017). In school leadership and management, the Golden Mean helps leaders balance the degree of setting up boundaries when establishing the school's rules, demonstrating strict or gentle personal characteristics to followers, building a family-like environment, or strictly following policies (Chang, 2020).

2.6.3. Moral modelling

Morality is highly emphasised in Confucianism. It argues that Confucian virtues contribute to an ideal leadership result; such virtues include unselfishness, a desire to pursue noble causes, loyalty to relationships, full engagement in core tasks, empathy, a willingness to work tirelessly for the common good, treating family members well, and serving the leader loyally (Ma & Tsui, 2015). A leader's moral character is like their backbone (Wah, 2010). A cross-culture study conducted by Ling, Chia, & Fang (2000) found that the Chinese participants expected the leader to be willing to be a public servant, to have integrity and honesty, to be consistent in thought and word, to be willing to search for truth, to be fair, to serve as a model, and to be willing to accept criticism from others and from him- or herself. The Chinese participants, thus, considered virtue as the most important feature of leadership.

High morals can ensure that a leader gains the confidence and trust of their followers. Confucian leaders lead followers with virtue and regulate them using rituals, rather than orders and penalties; moreover, they expect followers to have a sense of shame and a desire to be an upright citizen (Watson 2007). Therefore, a common Confucian leadership practice is to be a role model with high moral virtue and lead by setting good examples.

A study conducted by Li and Shi (2005) found that there is a unique dimension of transformational leadership in the Chinese organization: moral modelling. This makes the

transformational leadership different from it in the western context which can be traced to the influence of Confucianism. Confucius believes that personal morality and virtues are the basic fabrics of the society. From the perspective of governing citizens, Confucius emphasizes morality, examples of good moral behaviours and the use of the moral principles to persuade citizens. It is a good way for governments to manage the country by setting good examples for followers and influence followers' behaviours. In an organization, the leaders should be the role model who can lead by setting good example and influence followers.

In education field, teachers are expected to demonstrate high morality and professional ethics, which called “teacher’s morality” [*shide*, 師德]. Teacher’s morality refers to teachers’ professional ethics, which are the moral principles and disciplines a teacher need to obey (Yin, 2021). In ECE in China, teacher’s morality is put in the priority of the requirements as a teacher, as teachers may have subtle influence on children. Moral modelling is important for middle leadership. As a middle leader is acting as teacher leader, in order to gain the teachers’ trust, they should practise what they preach by demonstrating their morality to them. It is also a way to demonstrate a good behaviour example for teachers as there have been some issues with kindergarten teachers being suspected of abusing children which became a much-discussed societal issue.

2.7. Summary of Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

This study aimed to explore how middle leadership is understood and practised in kindergartens in China, and understand the contextual factors that influence the practices of middle leadership in ECE in the Chinese context. The literature review discussed in this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive conceptual description of this study. However, few studies on middle leadership have been conducted in ECE contexts. Therefore, the main

body of this literature review rely on the studies conducted in primary education, secondary education, and higher education.

Middle leadership has been conceptualised through its leading role in the organisation and in the teacher group. Middle leadership is positioned as the ‘buffer and bridge’ (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 462) between operating core and apex (Mintzberg, 1989; Choi, 2013). These two perspectives of perceptions reveal that middle leadership is supposed to bond two different functional groups: management group and implementation group (Javadi, Bush, & Ng, 2017), and have both vertical and horizontal influences on school improvement (Dinham, 2007). As discussed in Section 2.1.1., middle leaders at organisational levels play the roles of a policymaker, strategic planner, resource manager, curriculum developer, corporate agent, and liaison. As discussed in Section 2.1.2., middle leaders in the teacher group play the roles of a pedagogical expert, action researcher, problem solver, change agent, teacher’s mental facilitator, and sub-cultural developer. Given these roles and responsibilities revealed in the other educational sections, mainly in primary and secondary education, what roles and responsibilities could be perceived in ECE? Are there any difference in the roles and responsibilities in ECE in China?

Table 5. *Concepts of roles and responsibilities of middle leadership in literature*

| Roles | Responsibilities |
|-------------------|---|
| Policymaker | To partake enthusiastically in school improvement efforts; to plan and engage in affiliation agreements with other institutions. |
| Strategic planner | To set long-term plans to introduce new content, program innovations, or other organizational structures; to develop means to reach team. |
| Resource manager | To impart new high-quality resources for teachers; to create community partnerships that support the creation of a sustainable learning environment; to use resources include time, space, and authority to perform both administrative and pedagogical duties. |

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Curriculum developer | To ensure formulation, development and implementation of school curriculum; to concern about the maintenance of teachers' participation and endeavours; to assess educational programmes in terms of quality and adherence to regulations and standards; to collect and maintain information about teacher performance; to keep up with student achievement data and help teachers understand and use this data to control the quality of education. |
| Corporate agent | To understand and take part in 'whole picture'; to work closely and build up working relationship with stakeholders in a school. |
| Liaison | To provide resource to teachers and maintain the learning environment by maintaining positive and productive working relationship with stakeholders. |
| Pedagogical expert | To exhibit exceptional knowledge of subject matter and quality teaching and learning; to provide appropriate customized professional development; to assist teacher development of effective lesson plans and their delivery; to facilitate teachers' teaching and students' learning. |
| Action researcher | To do research in exploring teaching methods and techniques; to use the findings to monitor progress and improve teaching quality to use evidence-driven method to improve teacher professional development. |
| Problem solver | To approach problems positively, flexibly and intuitively; to provide advocacy for teachers who are in conflict with students or parents. |
| Change agent | To affect, suppress, accelerate or retard change based on a deep understanding of community needs and values; act as an implementer in the teachers group by setting up examples in implementation of syllabus changes and new initiatives in the subject area. |
| Teacher's mental facilitator | To motivate teachers' self-esteem through communicating high expectations, delegation of responsibilities, and serving as role model; to encourage teachers to put additional efforts to work and showed their appreciation for teachers' work to enhance teachers' self-efficacy. |
| Sub-cultural developer | To create a supportive climate; to do team building in the department. |

The categories of effective practices of middle leaders are as follows: setting direction for the department, understanding and developing teachers, building collegiality and managing the teacher and learning programmes. The specific practices of each category are derived from empirical studies on middle leadership and have been discussed and presented in Section 2.1.

These practices were derived mainly from studies conducted in the primary and secondary

education. What leadership practices identified in the literature review are relatively more salient in middle leadership in ECE in China?

The following Table 6 demonstrates the categories and practices of middle leadership reviewed from literature.

Table 6. *The categories and practices of middle leadership*

| Category | Practices |
|---|---|
| Setting direction for the department | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on curriculum development and student learning; • Making departmental plans based on the demands of the principal; and • Designing departmental policies following the principles of school policies. |
| Understanding and developing teachers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a deep knowledge of the workplace; • Developing and sustaining the change of teacher learning; • Setting platform and building PLCs for sharing good practices; • Providing advice and guidance to teacher matters; and • Encouraging teachers to promote teaching and learning. |
| Building collegiality | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating subcultures of professional collaboration; • Establish teacher leadership; • Promoting communications; • Building fraternity and equality and collegiality; and • Designing means for departmental decisions making. |
| Managing the teaching and learning programmes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating in curriculum framework designing work; • Deciding the teaching content with teachers; • Modelling and sharing good teaching practices; • Walking the talk of a shared system of monitoring and evaluation; and • Being evidence-informed to develop curriculum. |

Reviewing the literature review on middle leadership research in China showed that many studies have not yet clearly identified the middle leaders in a school (e.g., Wang, 2007; Wang & Xin, 2014; Gu, 2008; Liu, 2015), or have referred to multiple middle-tier positions as middle leaders (e.g., Liu & Huo, 2015; Zhang, 2016; Guan, 2011). Meanwhile, most studies focus on the personal traits, characteristics, and abilities that the researchers consider important for effective leadership, and few explore effective practices. Given the situation of the confusions in concepts and weak leadership practices in China (Guo, 2011), more studies are needed to seek understandings of the concept and practices of middle leadership in China.

In ECE in China, the power and authority have been decentralized from the central government to local government in educational reform. On one hand, governments (both central and local governments) set standards to supervise and control kindergartens to achieve the agenda of quality-based ECE. At kindergarten level, middle leaders are backbone force in leading teacher professional development and curriculum development to achieve the goal of providing quality-based education to families. On the other hand, governments financially support public interest kindergartens and children's tuition fees to provide families affordable ECE. With different affiliations and financial subsidy policy, principals in public kindergartens and private kindergartens may have different levels of authority and power distributed due to the fact that the external resources they could draw from to manage kindergartens are also different. As the power and authority of middle leadership are distributed from the principal, how does the decentralization of power and authority influence middle leadership in different kindergarten settings?

Chinese social and cultural context shape middle leaders through three main factors: collectivism, the Golden Mean, and moral modelling. Collectivism influences the decision

making of middle leadership and generates influence through team norms and values. The Golden Mean helps leaders to take a balanced approach in different leadership scenarios, such as when they are establishing rules, or when they need to decide whether to demonstrate strict or gentle personal characteristics to followers, or whether they should build a family-like environment or simply strictly following policies. Moral modelling focuses on influencing the teachers by encouraging middle leaders to demonstrate high morality and act as role models. How do these Chinese cultural factors influence middle leadership in ECE?

Aligned with the research aim and purposes, the key concepts of this study are the roles and responsibilities of middle leadership, practices of middle leadership, and sociocultural factors. These three concepts are the major constituents of the conceptual framework. Figure 2 demonstrates the conceptual framework of this study.

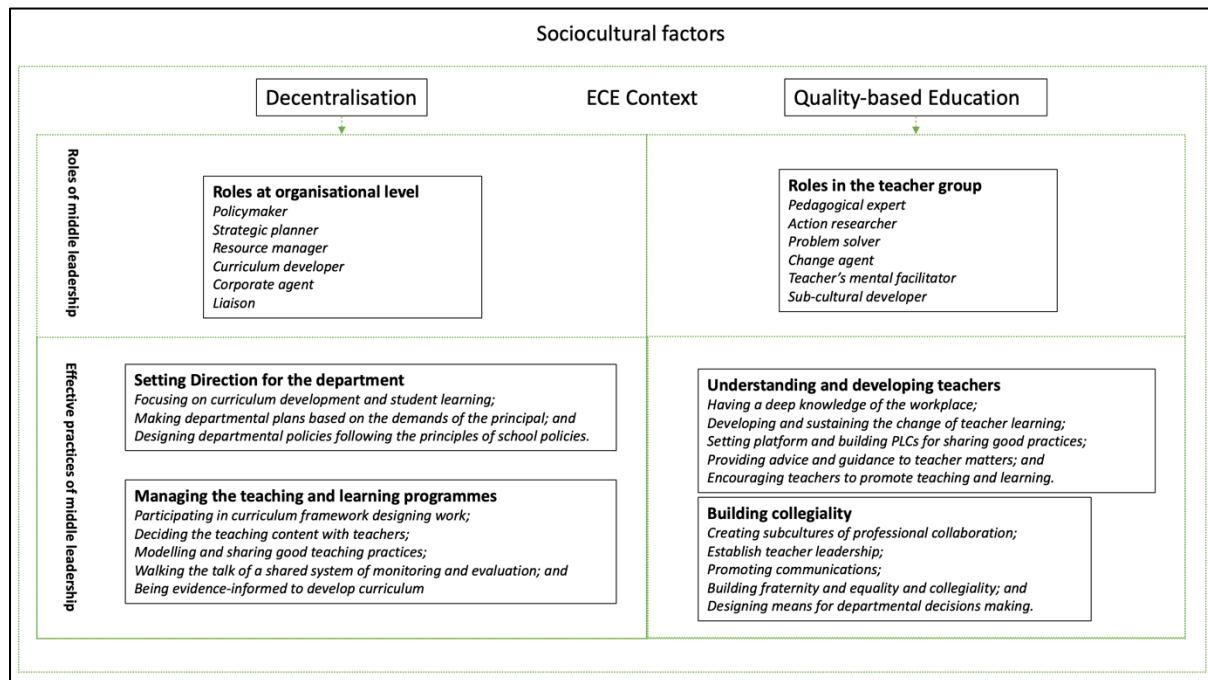


Figure 2. The conceptual framework of this study

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

This chapter describes the study's methodology. Qualitative case studies, underpinned by the paradigm of interpretivism, are adopted to explore ECE practitioners' perception of middle leaderships. This chapter then proceeds to present the major data collection methods, metaphors and semi-structured interviews, the concrete data collection process, intended data analysis strategies, and the research site in details.

3.1. Research Paradigm

The research paradigm of this study is interpretivism. It recognises that leaders and followers with their own backgrounds and experiences contribute to the ongoing construction of the reality of leadership in the social cultural context through interactions (Wahyuni, 2012). The reality about leadership may change and can have multiple perspectives because of the subjectivity of such backgrounds and experiences (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). Therefore, interpretivists embrace interactions and dialogues with the participants in a study (Wahyuni, 2012). The ontology held by interpretivists requires the inquirer to grasp the meanings that constitute an action; the perceptions and practices of leadership should only be understood in a context which generates a system of meanings to which they belong (Schwandt, 2000). To this extent, to find meanings of the perceptions and practices of middle leadership, requires that the participants interpret in a particular way what the leaders and followers are doing and why.

3.2. Research Design: Qualitative Case Studies

This study was exploratory which attempted to study a problem that has not been clearly defined yet. Exploratory research is the initial research, which forms the basis of more conclusive research and it ‘tends to tackle new problems on which little or no previous research has been done’ (Singh, 2007, p.64). As little is known in middle leadership in the Chinese kindergartens, exploratory study could provide us a better understanding of the phenomenon and research questions.

Given the interpretivist paradigm, the research design of this study was based on qualitative case studies. Qualitative research identifies a range of things with relevant meanings, such as a group of people, kinds of actions, beliefs and interests, focusing on differences in forms of things that make a difference in their meaning (Erickson, 2018). This focus on meaning is central to what is known as the ‘interpretive’ approach to social science (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982; Geertz, 1973; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979). In this study, I tried to understand middle leadership among the educational practitioners in kindergartens in China in terms of their understanding of the meaning of middle leadership, effective practices, and influence of the sociocultural context. Hence, qualitative research method is used in the study.

A case study is effective in providing detailed information (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Johnson & Christensen, 2008) within its real-life context (Yin, 2009). A case study is also effective in providing rich descriptions and details of the concepts and practices of middle leadership within real-life contexts, offering detailed information about what sociocultural contextual factors influence the understanding and practices of middle leadership in the Chinese context.

Considering more rigorous and substantial findings (Yin, 2013), a multiple case study was employed. Each case is a kindergarten in Chengdu, China. Each case study demonstrates the perceptions and effective practices of middle leadership and what the sociocultural context influences them and allows the study to be enriched by the analyses across the five cases.

3.3. Research Site

The research site was in Chengdu, a city in China. Education, especially ECE, was substantially popularised in Chengdu at the time of this study. In 2016, the enrolment rate for children aged between three to five was much higher at 98.89% (Education Bureau of the Chengdu Government, 2017) than that for the national enrolment rate (77.4%). The experience of building public interest in kindergartens in Chengdu was officially extended nationwide (Education Bureau of the Chengdu Government, 2017). Chengdu was nominated by the central government as a National Pilot City of the Educational Reform and Development in Early Childhood Education for its achievement of a high enrolment rate in 2016 with the goal of promoting quality-based education. Since then, the agenda for educational reform and development in ECE in Chengdu has shifted to achieving high-quality education. The agenda emphasised curriculum development (Education Bureau of the Chengdu Government, 2017). Therefore, choosing Chengdu as the research site provided access to exemplary kindergartens with ongoing curriculum development programmes to promote high-quality education in an ECE setting.

In addition, the role of leadership in school management and administration was emphasised in Chengdu. Since the central government issued its ‘Professional Standards for Principals’ (Ministry of Education, 2015), the government of Chengdu has reformed and strengthened principals’ leadership and management skills for curriculum development in kindergartens

(Education Bureau of the Chengdu Government, 2016). Principal leadership has a strong influence on middle leadership, because it determines the distribution of power and authority among middle leaders (Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007; Harris, 2007; Ho, 2010; Louis et al., 2009). Simultaneously, the government emphasised TRGs and their activities in leading teacher development and curriculum development in kindergartens in Chengdu.

Chengdu has many political regional divisions, including 22 sub-municipal cities, counties, and districts. Its central urban area has six ‘central urban’ districts: Wuhou, Qingyang, Chenghua, Jinniu, Jinjiang, and the High-Tech Development Zone. This study focuses on kindergartens in these six districts, because (1) kindergartens in rural districts face much more complex issues regarding middle leadership (e.g., teacher turnover) compared to those in urban areas (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016); (2) they are directly under the governance of the municipal Education Bureau of the Chengdu Government; and (3) quality education resources tend to be concentrated in these six urban districts, and their quality of education is better than that in rural areas. For example, 86 of 115 Band One kindergartens across Chengdu are located in these six urban districts.

At the time of the study, these six urban districts hosted a total of 619 kindergartens, of which 502 (approximately 81%) were private, and 117 (approximately 19%) were public. Information about all 619 kindergartens was collected from the website of the Education Bureau of the Chengdu Government (2018) and included names, addresses, properties, types of ownership, ranks, and contact numbers. Based on the selection criteria, I contacted the kindergartens to inquire about accessibility, based on the publicly available information or recommendations from my friends.

3.4. Sampling

3.4.1 Selection criteria

Purposive sampling was adopted to choose the case kindergartens. Purposive sampling in this study was identified the effective practices of middle leadership, to select case schools and participants from each case school, to establish particular comparisons between case schools and to enable the research to build the most productive relationship with participants and collect data to answer the research question (Creswell, 2013). Five cases were selected based on sampling criteria based on the information published on the webpage of the Education Bureau of Chengdu Government. The criteria for case selection were as follows:

1. The kindergarten is a Band One kindergarten.
2. The kindergarten has, at least, a two-tier organisational structure (more than nine classes) and a leadership role with a formal title.
3. The kindergarten has these four positions: principal, curriculum leader, logistics leader, and classroom teacher.
4. Both private and public kindergartens included

These criteria were set to achieve the goals of purposive sampling identified by Creswell (2002, 2013). I selected case schools only among Band One Kindergartens for these reasons. First, purposive sampling is based on the assumption that the selected case enables one to learn a great deal about the aims and objectives of a study (Patton, 2002). The aims and objective of this study were to explore the concepts and practices of effective middle leadership in ECE in China. Band One kindergartens were excellent in terms of their environment condition, school-based management, curriculum, children development, and outcomes of the operations (Education Bureau of Chengdu Government, 2017), including

management for teacher professional development and curriculum development, which are the main tasks of middle leaders. On that account, research on Band One kindergartens provided rich information with respect to the aims and objectives of the study (Patton, 2002). Second, Band One kindergartens were not ‘representative’ of those kindergartens in Chengdu and across China but could provide experimental and pioneering experience of pursuing excellence for other kindergartens. In 2018, the National State Council of China issued *Some Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Deepening the Reform and Regulating Early Childhood Education*, which required kindergartens to aim to reach the governmental requirements for excellent ECE service.

The second criterion concerns the class sizes of a kindergarten. This study aimed to explore the perceptions and practices of middle leadership in ECE in China. To be different from teacher leadership, middle leaders should have formal titles and positions in the organisational structure. The government of Chengdu requires kindergartens that had over nine classes (medium to large size kindergarten) to set up a middle tier to lead teacher professional development and curriculum development (Education Bureau of Chengdu Government, 2019). In a study conducted by Ho, Lee, & Teng (2016), in small-size kindergartens in Hong Kong, teachers’ perceptions on organizational support were more positive than those in medium and large size kindergartens. In this study, choosing Band One Kindergartens with over nine classes in this study not only because they had a middle leader for teacher professional development and curriculum development.

The third criterion concerns the presence of formal middle leader positions. I selected participants from four positions of the kindergarten because they could answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013). Due to the research aims, objectives, and research questions, this study focuses on middle leadership for curriculum in kindergartens in China and the multiple

perspectives from educational practitioners, namely principals, curriculum leaders, logistics leaders, and classroom teachers. This requires a case to have these four positions in their organisational structure.

The fourth criterion is to include both private and public kindergartens in this study. As mentioned in Section 1.1.3.2., private kindergartens tend to be market-oriented and may face much more obstacles in acting the play curriculum and quality-based education (McMullen et al., 2005; Ting, 2007). And public organizational management tends to be more bureaucratic and leaders in public organizations have weaker organizational commitment compared with their counterparts in private organizations (Boyne, 2002). With different financial support and resources, there might be something difference in middle leadership in private and public kindergartens.

3.4.2. Access

To gain access to the case schools and participants in this study, I first contacted and invited an officer at the Education Bureau of Chengdu to recommend case schools which satisfied the case selection criteria. She recommended four public kindergartens which were affiliated with the Education Bureau of Chengdu. I also contacted a friend who was an investor in the education field and introduced the selection criteria for case schools. She recommended two private kindergartens to me. Another friend who was a researcher working in a local university, recommended two other private kindergartens based on the case selection criteria. Contact information of the case schools was obtained from these acquaintances. Thus, eight kindergartens were recommended in total.

I contacted the recommended preschool principals via phone calls and WeChat. After introducing myself and my research by sending them the Information Sheet (In Chinese, see Appendix B) and answering their questions and concerns, five of the eight recommended kindergartens were willing to participate in the study. Among these, two were public kindergartens and three were private. Although only five kindergartens participated in the study, they displayed desirable variances in terms of their property (i.e. private and public kindergartens, chain and individual kindergartens), size (both medium-sized and large-sized), geographical location and family background, their organisational structure, and the school-based curriculum types. Therefore, these kindergartens could provide a holistic picture about middle leadership perceptions and practices in Chengdu.

After I briefly explained that middle leaders were those who between senior leaders and front-line staff, I invited the principals of these five case kindergartens to recommend one middle leader in curriculum area, one middle leader in logistic area, and three classroom teachers in three stages (junior class, middle class and senior class) as other participants. In each kindergarten, the principal, two middle leaders and three teachers participated in data collection. After they agreed to participate, I went to the kindergartens on the decided date. I first presented the Consent Form (In Chinese, see Appendix C) to participants and encouraged them to speak out their concerns or ask questions about the data collection and confidential issues before signing it. Before the metaphor and interviews, each participant was reminded of the purpose of my study and that their information and personal identifiable data were confidential.

3.5 Case Schools

Based on the case selection criteria and accessibility, five kindergartens agreed to participate in the study. These five Band One kindergartens (in pseudonyms) included Red Flag Kindergarten, Five Stars Kindergarten, Lotus Lake Kindergarten, King Baby Kindergarten and Happy Baby Kindergarten. All of them met the professional requirements of the Education Bureau of Chengdu Government. This section will provide a brief description of the contexts of the case study schools and profiles of the participants.

The school-level contextual factors, including the school's background (affiliation and history), mission, nature of service, structure, size, and staffing, are essential to influence middle leadership practices and programme quality (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006).

Through organising and analysing the contexts of the case study schools, it was found that all five kindergartens had similar mission, nature of service, structure, and staffing. The mission of the case study schools was focused on providing quality education for children and families. All the case study schools provided whole day service to children starting from 8:00-8:30 am to 4:30-5:30 pm on working days. Their organisational structure was similar with indispensable organizational structures, such as the parent-school committee, party branch, and two main departments (curriculum department and logistics department). This is because these organizational structures were required to be set in each kindergarten by the Education Bureau for Band One kindergartens. The organisational structure of both public kindergartens was same because they were affiliated with the district Education Bureau. In these two public kindergartens, there were no vice-principals. Even though there was a position of vice-principal in the organizational structure, the tasks of the vice-principal were taken by the principals and curriculum coordinators and logics coordinators. The curriculum

coordinator and logistic coordinator managed and led the curriculum team and logistic team respectively. The organisational structure of King Baby Kindergarten and Happy Baby Kindergarten were same as they belonged to the same educational group. There was a position of vice-principal in the organization, but the tasks of the vice-principal were shared by both principal and curriculum coordinator. The principal directly managed the budgeting, kitchen staff, logistic team and teachers. The organisational structure of Lotus Lake Kindergarten was more complex due to its large size. The organisational structure of each kindergarten will be presented in the descriptions of the case study schools in the following sections.

Children studying in these five kindergartens were mainly from the communities around the kindergarten. According to the neighbourhood enrollment principle, children in the two public kindergartens were from the same communities as the kindergarten. As the public kindergartens were financially supported by the government, the tuition fee of Band One kindergarten for each child was as low as 650 RMB per month and the catering fees was around 300-400 RMB per month. Comparatively, the three private kindergartens had higher tuition fees ranging from 4000-5500 RMB per month for each child.

All the five kindergartens had high percentages of teachers holding bachelor's degree. The percentages ranged from 36.7% to 58.0% and were exceptionally higher than the national average (18.4%) (See Section 1.1.2.1).

The affiliations and histories of kindergartens were different. Two of them were public kindergartens affiliated to the Education Bureau, and three were private kindergartens managed by two education companies. Meanwhile, the two public kindergartens with less

than ten years of history. Comparatively, the private kindergartens in this study had been operating for more than 10 years.

The sizes of the case study schools were also different. Lotus Lake Kindergarten, with around 170 staff serving over 800 children, was the only large-sized kindergarten. The other four were medium-sized with 45-58 staff serving 250-286 children.

In the following sections, the context of each case study school will be briefly described to provide a comprehensive picture.

3.5.1 Red Flag Kindergarten

Red Flag Kindergarten was a public kindergarten affiliated with the Education Bureau of Wuhou District, Chengdu City. It was founded in 2012 and nominated as Band One Kindergarten of Chengdu City in 2017. All children attending the kindergarten lived in the neighbourhood of the school. The kindergarten was spread over 3,886 square meters out of which 1,684 square meters were set aside for sports. This enabled the kindergarten to develop football curriculum as its special curriculum for children.

The kindergarten adhered to the philosophy of ‘discovering and developing more aspects of children development’ and the principle, ‘caring children is protecting China’s growth’. The kindergarten established the goal of ‘happy play and happy growth’. In line with this goal, the school-based curriculum focused on the improvement of children’s health. Therefore, a football curriculum from a curriculum company was imported and modified to fit the kindergarten context. This adjusted football curriculum was its special curriculum for

children besides the five-domain basic curriculum. In the morning and afternoon, there were two hours of outdoor physical activity including the football class.

Red Flag Kindergarten was providing whole-day service to 254 children. It operated 10 classes, including 3 junior classes, 4 middle classes and 3 senior classes. The kindergarten had 50 staff members, among whom 27 were teaching staff and 23 were non-teaching staff. Among the 50 staff members, 6 (12.0%) had *bianzhi* and been authorised as permanent staff. Others were hired by the kindergarten. 13 teachers (48%) had a bachelor's degree, and others had a diploma in education. 20 had high professional ranks with first rank. One male teacher was responsible for the football curriculum. The average age of the teachers at Red Flag Kindergarten was 26. The kindergarten's organisational structure provided by the kindergarten is shown in Figure 3. The descriptive and demographic profile of Red Flag Kindergarten is provided in Table 7.

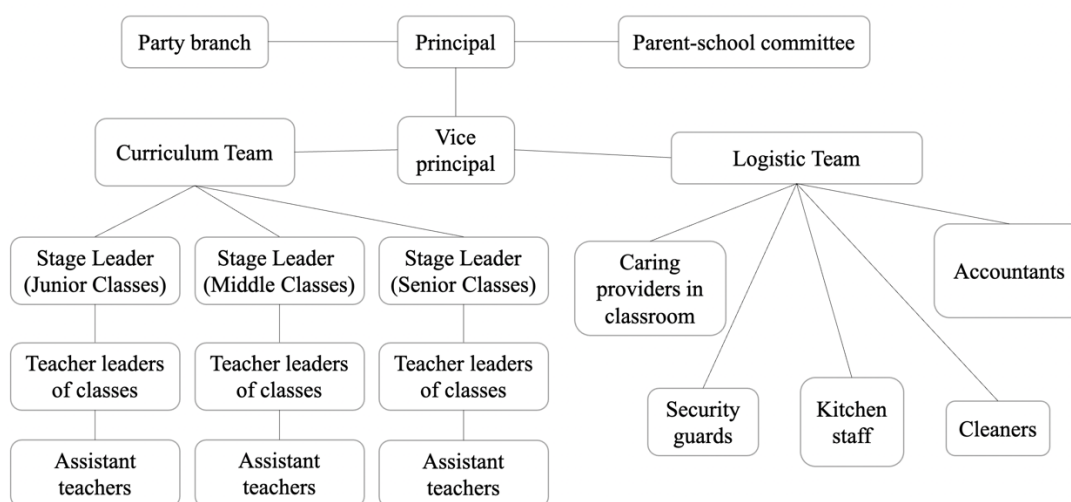


Figure 3. The organisational structure of Red Flag Kindergarten

Table 7. Descriptive and Demographic Profile of Red Flag Kindergarten

| Kindergarten Characteristics | Red Flag Kindergarten |
|--|------------------------------------|
| Public/private | Public |
| Affiliation | Education Bureau of Wuhou District |
| Year Founded | 2012 |
| Nominated as Band One Kindergarten | 2017 |
| Location | Cuji Community |
| Geographic Size | 3,886 square meters |
| Number of Children | 254 |
| Children ages | 3-6 years old |
| Number of Classes | 10 |
| Number of Staff | 50 |
| Number of Teaching Staff | 27 |
| Number of Teachers holding bachelor degree | 13 |
| Number of Teachers having professional ranks | 20 |
| Number of Teachers authorized as permanent staff | 6 |
| Average Class Size | 25.4 |
| Children/Teachers Ratio | 9.4:1 |
| Programme type | Whole day service |

3.5.2. Five Stars Kindergarten

Five Stars Kindergarten was a public kindergarten affiliated with the Education Bureau of Wuhou District, Chengdu City. It was founded in 2015 and nominated as Band One Kindergarten of Chengdu City in 2019. The principal of the kindergarten was the project manager who led the designer and construction teams to build this kindergarten. The kindergarten was a two-layer building surrounded by playgrounds and gardens. Due to the fascinating surroundings, the kindergarten emphasised Chinese aesthetic education in school-based curriculum.

The kindergarten adhered to the philosophy of ‘experience in life and learn through play’ with the principles of ‘moral, warm, stories, and aesthetic’. The kindergarten established the aims of school-based curriculum called Four Happiness—happy exploration, happy aesthetic

appreciation, happy communication and happy life. In line with the goal of the kindergarten, the school-based curriculum focused on children's aesthetic education. The featured curriculum was Chinese pottery arts. Chinese pottery making classes were offered to children in a pottery classroom. Further, the kindergarten surroundings were decorated with Chinese pottery.

Five Stars Kindergarten was providing whole-day service to 260 children. It operated nine classes, including three junior classes, three middle classes and three senior classes. The kindergarten had 43 staff members, among whom 30 were teaching staff and 13 were non-teaching staff. 11 teachers (36.7%) had a bachelor's degree, and others had a diploma in education. 34 teachers had professional ranks with first rank. The kindergarten's organisational structure is shown in Figure 4.

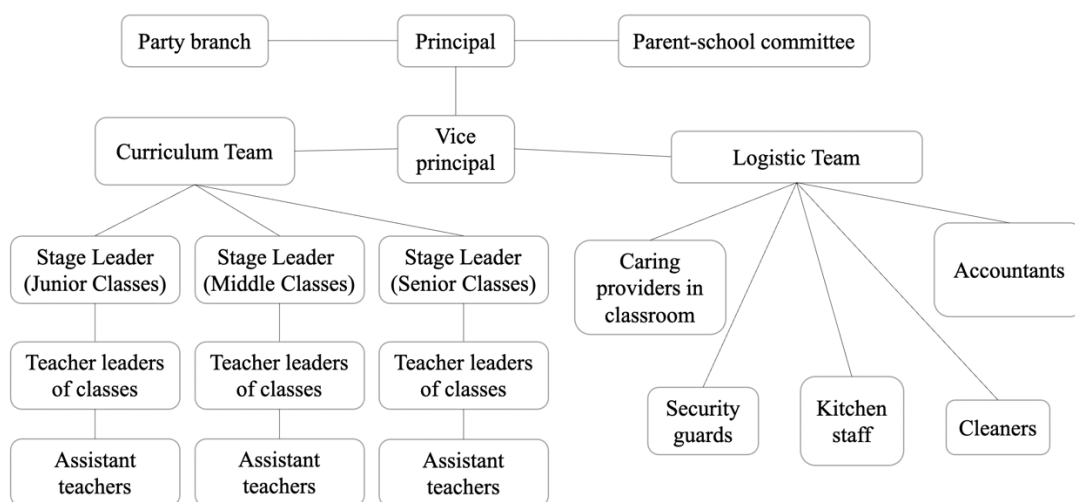


Figure 4. The organizational structure of Five Stars Kindergarten

The descriptive and demographic profile of Five Stars Kindergarten is provided in Table 8.

Table 8. *Descriptive and demographic profile of Five Stars Kindergarten*

| Kindergarten Characteristics | Five Stars Kindergarten |
|--|------------------------------------|
| Public/private | Public |
| Affiliation | Education Bureau of Wuhou District |
| Year Founded | 2015 |
| Nominated as Band One Kindergarten | 2019 |
| Location | Taiping Community |
| Number of Children | 260 |
| Children ages | 3-6 years old |
| Number of Classes | 9 |
| Number of Staff | 43 |
| Number of Teaching Staff | 30 |
| Number of Teachers holding bachelor degree | 11 |
| Number of Teachers having professional ranks | 34 |
| Average Class Size | 29 |
| Children/Teachers Ratio | 6:1 |
| Programme type | Whole day service |

3.5.3. Lotus Lake Kindergarten

Lotus Lake Kindergarten was a private kindergarten which belonged to an education company. This education company had one kindergarten, one primary school, and one secondary school. Lotus Lake Kindergarten was founded in 2006 and nominated as Band One Kindergarten of Chengdu City in 2013. The kindergarten and primary school of the education company were located in the same place and shared a large outdoor playground. The kindergarten also owns a small playground. The large outside space enabled Lotus Lake Kindergarten to develop gymnastics as its special curriculum for children.

‘Nurturing moral character and improving children development’ was the mission of the kindergarten. This kindergarten adopted Reggio Emilia Inspired Approach as their curriculum style. This project-based loose curriculum had a high requirement of teacher professional development. The principal and teachers of this kindergarten participated in the

2016 World OMEP Assembly and Conference where they presented their teachers' school-based teaching research projects.

Lotus Lake Kindergarten was providing whole-day service to over 800 children. It operated 25 classes, including 7 nursery classes, 6 junior classes, 6 middle classes, and 6 senior classes. The kindergarten had 170 staff members, among whom 118 were teaching staff and 52 were non-teaching staff. All the staff were hired by the kindergarten. 52 teachers (44%) had a bachelor's degree, and others had a diploma in education. Over 40 staff had high professional ranks with first rank. 3 male teachers were responsible for gymnastics education. The average age of teachers at Lotus Lake Kindergarten was 28.

Large groups and organisations have a greater demand for structure, coordination, impartial application of rules, and competence than small groups which have influence on leadership (Bass, 1990; Livi, Kenney, Albright, & Pierro, 2008). As Lotus Lake Kindergarten was large-sized with 118 teaching staff, middle leaders had to lead a large team. For management and leadership, their slogan was 'everyone is a leader, and everyone has leadership'. The principal of the kindergarten encouraged teachers to participate in management work and empowered them to have some authority and power, and autonomy in TRGs activities. The kindergarten's organisational structure provided by the principal is shown in Figure 5. Based on the explanation of the kindergarten, the 'Kindergarten' at the top of the organisational structure refers to the principal and the 'Office' under the Kindergarten refers to the administrative group, including the administrative staff and middle leaders. The descriptive and demographic profile of Lotus Lake Kindergarten is provided in Table 9.

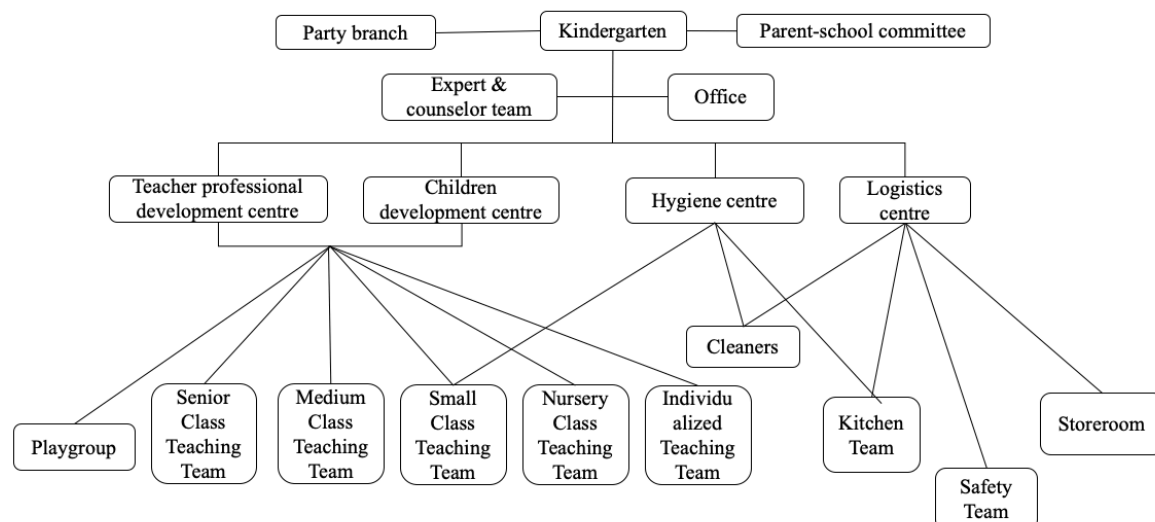


Figure 5. The organisational structure of Lotus Lake Kindergarten

Table 9. Descriptive and demographic profile of Lotus Lake Kindergarten

| Kindergarten Characteristics | Lotus Lake Kindergarten |
|--|------------------------------|
| Public/private | Private |
| Affiliation | Lotus Lake Educational Group |
| Year Founded | 2006 |
| Nominated as Band One Kindergarten | 2013 |
| Location | Shuangliu Community |
| Number of Children | Over 800 |
| Children ages | 2-6 years old |
| Number of Classes | 25 |
| Number of Staff | 170 |
| Number of Teaching Staff | 118 |
| Number of Teachers holding bachelor degree | 52 |
| Number of Teachers having professional ranks | Over 40 |
| Average Class Size | 32 |
| Children/Teachers Ratio | 6.7 |
| Programme type | Whole day service |

3.5.4. King Baby Kindergarten

King Baby Kindergarten was a private kindergarten and a sister kindergarten to Happy Baby Kindergarten. These two kindergartens were run by an education company. King Baby

Kindergarten was founded in 2000 and nominated as Band One Kindergarten of Chengdu City in 2013.

‘Children-centred, respecting children, cooperating with families’ was the mission of King Baby Kindergarten. Its educational philosophy was to ‘improve children’s comprehensive and balanced development, and to nurture children’s noble and independent personality’. The goals of their curriculum covered these aspects as ‘know oneself, good personality, wide interest, critical thinking, creative innovation, courage, good communication’.

King Baby Kindergarten was providing whole-day service to 286 children. It operated nine classes, including two nursery classes, two middle classes, two senior classes, and one mixed ages class. The kindergarten had 58 staff members, among whom 36 were teaching staff and 22 were non-teaching staff. 21 teachers (48%) had a bachelor’s degree, and others had a diploma in education. 18 had high professional ranks with first rank. The average age of the teachers at King Baby Kindergarten was 27. The kindergarten’s organisational structure provided by the kindergarten is shown in Figure 6. The descriptive and demographic profile of King Baby Kindergarten is provided in Table 10.

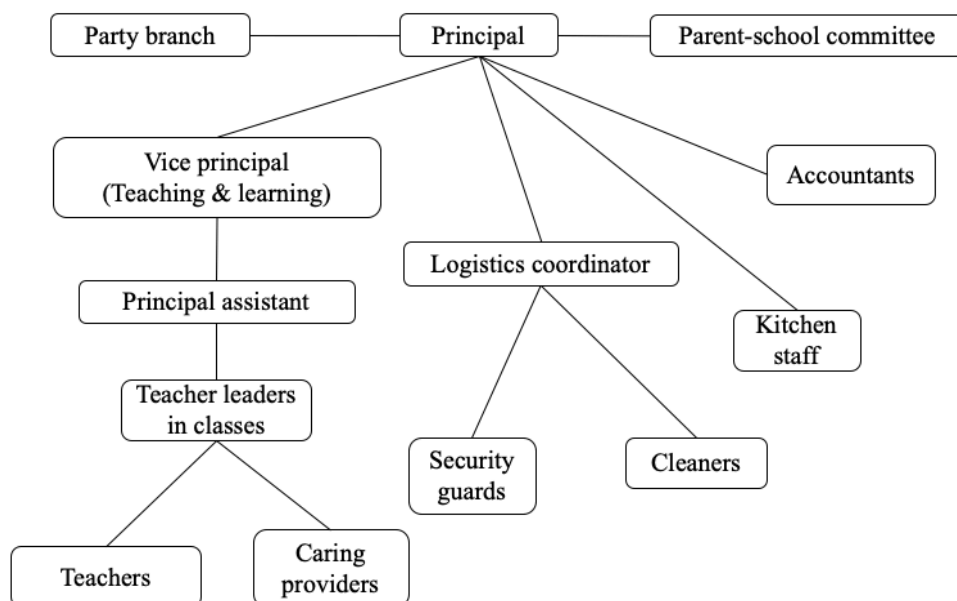


Figure 6. The organisational structure of King Baby Kindergarten.

Table 10. Descriptive and demographic profile of red flag kindergarten

| Kindergarten Characteristics | King Baby Kindergarten |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| Public/private | Private |
| Affiliation | Happy King Baby Educational Group |
| Year Founded | 2000 |
| Nominated as Band One Kindergarten | 2013 |
| Location | Jinsha Community |
| Number of Children | 286 |
| Children ages | 2-6 years old |
| Number of Classes | 9 |
| Number of Staff | 58 |
| Number of Teaching Staff | 36 |
| Number of Teachers holding bachelor degree | 21 |
| Number of Teachers having professional ranks | 18 |
| Average Class Size | 31.7 |
| Children/Teachers Ratio | 7.9:1 |
| Programme type | Whole day service |

3.5.5. Happy Baby Kindergarten

Happy Baby Kindergarten—a sister kindergarten to King Baby Kindergarten—was a private kindergarten. It was founded in 2002 and nominated as Band One Kindergarten of Chengdu City in 2015.

Both the kindergartens share the same mission: ‘children-centred, respecting children, cooperating with families’. The educational philosophy of Happy Baby Kindergarten was to ‘improve children’s comprehensive and balanced development, and to nurture children’s noble and independent personality’. Due to the different community contexts, curriculum aims of Happy Baby Kindergarten were different from those of its sister school. They emphasised children’s health development, cultivation of good life habits, and learning from life.

Happy Baby Kindergarten was providing whole-day service to 250 children. It operated nine classes, including three nursery classes, two middle classes and two senior classes. The kindergarten had 55 staff members, among whom 34 were teaching staff and 21 were non-teaching staff. 19 teachers (55.8%) had a bachelor’s degree, and others had a diploma in education. 12 had high professional ranks with first rank. One male teacher was responsible for physical education. The average age of the teachers at Happy Baby Kindergarten was 26. The kindergarten’s organisational structure provided by the kindergarten is shown in Figure 7. The descriptive and demographic profile of Happy Baby Kindergarten is provided in Table 11. The organisational structure of Happy Baby Kindergarten was similar to that of King Baby Kindergarten and is shown in Figure 7:

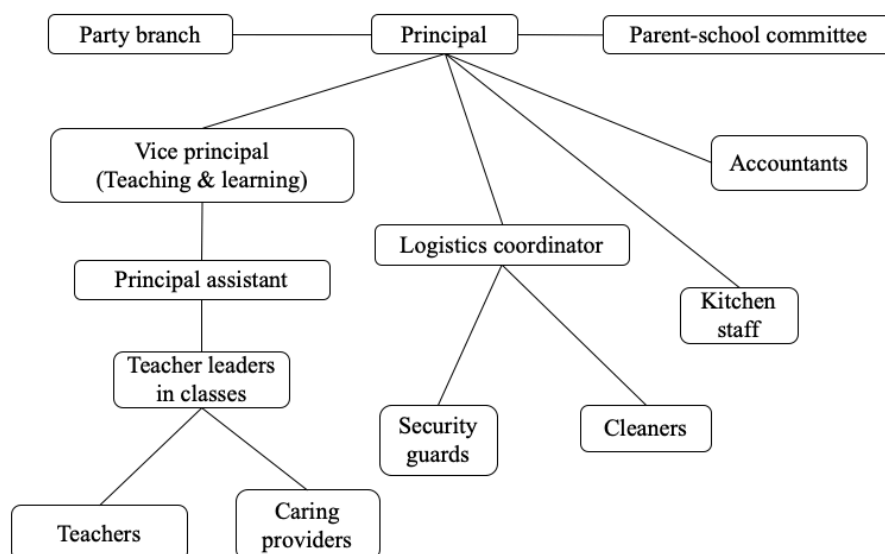


Figure 7. The organisational structure of Happy Baby Kindergarten

Table 11. *Descriptive and demographic profile of Happy Baby Kindergarten*

| Kindergarten Characteristics | Happy Baby Kindergarten |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| Public/private | Private |
| Affiliation | Happy King Baby Educational Group |
| Year Founded | 2002 |
| Nominated as Band One Kindergarten | 2015 |
| Location | Shuangnan Community |
| Number of Children | Around 250 |
| Children ages | 2-6 years old |
| Number of Classes | 9 |
| Number of Staff | 55 |
| Number of Teaching Staff | 34 |
| Number of Teachers holding bachelor degree | 19 |
| Number of Teachers having professional ranks | 12 |
| Average Class Size | 27.8 |
| Children/Teachers Ratio | 7.4:1 |
| Programme type | Whole day service |

3.6 Participants

This study aimed to explore how middle leadership was understood and practised in kindergartens in China and understand what contextual factors influenced the conceptualisation and practices of middle leadership in ECE in the Chinese context. Multiple

perspectives from principals, curriculum leaders, logistics leaders and classroom teachers were collected. Collecting data from multiple perspectives of educational stakeholders enables the researcher to capture the ‘silent voices’ of authentic sources of data and compare data from different perspectives and sources for the purpose of triangulation (Day, Harris, & Hadfield, 2001, p. 21). Principals were included in this study because it is principal leadership that is dispersing and distributing power and authority to middle leadership (Dinham, 2007). Middle leaders for curriculum were included in this study to provide deep and insightful information about the perceptions of leadership, their leadership roles and responsibilities, the effective practices that they use and the sociocultural factors that influence their leadership practices. Middle leaders for logistics were also included in this study. Contrary to the cases in other educational stages such as primary and secondary education, logistics leaders constituted a very important component of childcare in kindergartens and indirectly influenced curriculum development (Yang, 2017). The classroom teachers, as members of TRGs, were directly influenced by the middle leadership and were, hence, included in this study. Specifically, because there were typically three classes of children who were of different ages (the Junior Class, Middle Class, and Senior Class), the programme design, lesson and unit planning, and student evaluations in the curriculum were different in each stage. Teachers’ perspectives were collected during each stage, and three teachers participated from each school. I required the principal to provide a list of teachers and randomly selected classroom teachers from each stage to avoid bias (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Children and parents were excluded from this study because the former were too young to express their perspectives on middle leadership while the latter were unfamiliar with the concept.

Altogether, 30 participants contributed to an in-depth and rich understanding of middle leadership in Chinese kindergartens. Six members with different designations joined the study from each kindergarten (see Table 12).

Table 12. *Types and numbers of participants*

| Type of Participant | Red Flag Kindergarten | Five Stars Kindergarten | Lotus Lake Kindergarten | King Baby Kindergarten | Happy Baby Kindergarten |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Principal | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Curriculum Leader | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Logistic Leader | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Classroom Teacher | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Total from Kindergarten | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |

I will now present brief profiles of the participants with the similarities and differences in their backgrounds. For participants in management positions, such as principals and middle leaders, I will describe their designation, size of the group they lead, professional background, working experience, and working years in the case schools. For teachers, I will portray their gender, designation, professional background, working experience, and working years in the case schools. Both the personal and professional backgrounds of educational practitioners are important in outlining their perceptions towards middle leadership.

3.6.1. Principals

All the principals who participated in data collection hold a bachelor's degree or above.

Principal C from the Lotus Lake Kindergarten had got a part-time master's degree in education and management with the financial support of the kindergarten. They were able to

manage and lead a group of 43 staff or above. Principal A and Principal B who worked in public kindergartens had been working in primary schools for 25 and 28 years, respectively. They were nominated as demonstrative and successful primary school principals and appointed by the Chengdu Education Bureau to be kindergarten principals. In contrast, Principal C, Principal D and Principal E were employed by the educational companies to which their kindergartens belonged. Table 13 provides the profiles of the principals who participated in the study.

Table 13. *Profiles of principal participants*

| Principal Participant | Principal A | Principal B | Principal C | Principal D | Principal E |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Kindergarten | Red Flag Kindergarten | Five Stars Kindergarten | Lotus Lake Kindergarten | King Baby Kindergarten | Happy Baby Kindergarten |
| Professional qualification | Bachelor | Bachelor | Master | Bachelor | Bachelor |
| Size of subordinator group | 50 | 43 | 170 | 58 | 55 |
| Working years | 32 years | 34 years | 34 years | 33 years | 18 years |
| Management experience | 16 years | 19 years | 14 years | 11 years | 7 years |
| Years working in case school | 3 years | 6 years | 11 years | 16 years | 18 years |

3.6.2. Middle leaders

As mentioned earlier in this section, middle leaders in this study were the leaders for curriculum and leaders for logistics from each case study school. They were regarded as

middle leaders and recommended by the respective principals. The size of the subordinator group they led ranged from 21 to 118. The number of teaching staff was more than the number of non-teaching staff in all the case study schools. Therefore, a curriculum leader led a larger size of subordinator group than a logistics leader. Curriculum leaders from all the case study schools owned a bachelor's degree. Most of the logistic leaders who led cleaners, chefs, security and accountants, held a diploma. The working years of middle leaders ranged from 18 to 33 years. Middle leader C who was a curriculum coordinator at Five Stars Kindergarten had been a principal in a private kindergarten in Shanghai for three years before she joined Five Stars Kindergarten. The newer kindergartens such as the two public kindergartens, tended to hire someone who already had management experience as middle leaders, while the kindergartens with a longer history, such as the three private kindergartens, tended to select middle leaders from the existing staff. Table 14 provides brief information of middle leaders in terms of their positional and professional backgrounds.

Table 14. *Profile of middle leader participants*

| Kindergarten | Red Flag Kindergarten | | Five Stars Kindergarten | | Lotus Lake Kindergarten | | King Baby Kindergarten | | Happy Baby Kindergarten | |
|------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Participants | Middle Leader A | Middle Leader B | Middle Leader C | Middle Leader D | Middle Leader E | Middle Leader F | Middle Leader G | Middle Leader H | Middle Leader I | Middle Leader J |
| Titles | Curriculum coordinator | Logistics coordinator | Curriculum coordinator | Logistics coordinator | Curriculum coordinator | Logistics coordinator | Curriculum coordinator | Logistics coordinator | Curriculum coordinator | Logistics coordinator |
| Size of subordinator group | 27 | 23 | 30 | 13 | 118 | 52 | 36 | 22 | 34 | 21 |
| Professional qualification | Bachelor | Diploma | Bachelor | Diploma | Bachelor | Diploma | Bachelor | Bachelor | Bachelor | Diploma |
| Working years | 21 | 24 | 22 | 18 | 33 | 31 | 20 | 21 | 27 | 18 |
| Management experience | 8 | 12 | 9 | 6 | 18 | 9 | 8 | 16 | 11 | 12 |
| Years working in case school | 5 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 12 | 11 | 10 | 12 | 14 | 11 |



3.6.3. School teachers

15 teachers, 3 from each kindergarten participated in the data collection. The followers' genders, as a personal characteristic, may influence their perceptions towards conceptualisation and practices of middle leadership (Lee, Smith, & Cioci, 1993; Thompson, 2000). 1 male teacher and 14 female teachers participated in this study.

As mentioned earlier (Section 3.7.1.), in the case study schools, the percentages of teachers holding a bachelor's degree ranged from 36.7% to 58.0%, which were exceptionally higher than the national average (18.4%) (Section 1.1.2.1). In this study, eight teacher participants held a diploma in education and seven held a bachelor's degree in education.

Working years of kindergarten teachers influence their professional commitment to the kindergarten (Lee, Chou, Chin, & Wu, 2017). 8 teachers who participated in the study had 5 to 10 years of working experience, 5 had 1 to 5 years and 2 had been working there for over 10 years. Thus, most of the teacher participants were not novice teachers.

Longer service implies higher pay and job satisfaction (Rad & Yarmohammadian, 2006), especially in the given context of high teacher turnover rate in ECE in China (Section 1.1.2.2.). 8 out of the 15 teachers who participated in the study had been working in the case study schools for 1 to 5 years, especially those who were working in the 2 newer public kindergartens. 5 had been working in the case study schools for 5 to 10 years, and 2 teachers from Lotus Lake Kindergarten had been working there for over 10 years. Table 15 demonstrates the demographic background information of teacher participants in the case schools.

Table 15. *Teacher participants' demographic background information in this study*

| Kindergarten | | Red Flag | Five Stars | Lotus Lake | King Baby | Happy Baby |
|----------------------------|---------------|----------|------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender | Male | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| | Female | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| Professional qualification | Diploma | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| | Bachelor | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Working years | 1-5 years | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| | 5-10 years | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Over 10 years | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Length of service | 1-5 years | 2 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| | 5-10 years | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| | Over 10 years | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |

3.7. Data Collection

In this section, the data collection process and instruments used in the study will be explained. To carry out the research for this study, data were collected from metaphors, interviews, and documents. For the data collection process, I conducted a pilot study in September 2019 and used that experience to refine the instruments for data collection. I then contacted the proposed case study schools to gain permission from the principals in order to proceed with the study. After being granted the permission, I collected data from October to November 2019.

Data were collected through multiple sources: metaphors, interviews and documents.

Multiple sources of data were also used to triangulate the findings and increase their

credibility (Merriam, 2009; Shenton, 2004; Yin, 2009). A pilot study was conducted to verify the data collection instruments and relating tools, namely, the metaphors and guides for interviews. The following table (Table 16) presents the methods used to collect data to answer the research questions.

Table 16. *Methods for research questions*

| Research questions | Methods used to collect data to answer the research question |
|---|--|
| 1. In the context of educational reforms in ECE, how is middle leadership perceived by educational practitioners in kindergartens in China? | Metaphors |
| 2. What are the effective practices of middle leadership as identified by principals, curriculum leaders, logistics leaders, and classroom teachers? | Documents and interviews |
| 3. In the context of educational reforms in ECE, what sociocultural factors shape the perceptions and practices of middle leadership in kindergartens in China? | Interviews |

3.7.1. Metaphors

Metaphors are often used as tools to collect data, because they function at all levels of understanding—from everyday communication to the development of scientific theories (Argyropoulou & Hatira, 2014). It is able to collect the whole system of concepts of middle leadership from participants as it involves another kind of experience to explain and understand an abstract and metaphoric experience. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 116) claim that:

We view language as providing data that can lead to general principles of understanding. The general principles involve whole systems of concepts rather than individual words or individual

concepts. We have found that such principles are often metaphoric in nature and involve understanding one kind of experience in terms of another kind of experience.

Metaphors can also be created consciously or unconsciously to describe the participants' concepts of middle leadership (Wallace, 2001). To this extent, they can provide rich information from the subconscious, and they work as a 'mirror' to reflect the images of their attitudes towards middle leadership (Argyropoulou & Hatira, 2014). Metaphors have the ability to communicate inexpressible and tacit information about middle leadership because middle leadership is a phenomenon that is abstract and individually constructed and interpreted and participants can use their own other experiences to explain their understandings of middle leadership.

Schmitt (2005) stated that metaphors can be used in qualitative research as a way to collect data, directly eliciting explicating metaphors from participants. Deacon (2000) asked participants to describe either themselves or product-relevant happenings in terms of colours, as a fairy tale, television show, object, piece of music, etc. By using metaphors in this way, he was able to access valuable and deep narratives. Christensen and Olson (2002) and Zaltman (2003) suggested that participants bring some pictures to the interviews showing their personal feelings and attitudes towards the product. The participants explain their respective pictures and their personal meanings. These pictures were treated as metaphors, and subsequently new verbal metaphors to project their feelings and attitudes towards the product were explained in depth. Examining the metaphors used in qualitative data collection is a way to evaluate data collected from other methods. The possibilities of reconstructing metaphorical concepts inherent in cognitive linguistics are not used (Schmitt, 2005).

In this study, before individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, the participants were required to provide metaphors on the image of middle leaders and middle leaders' roles in kindergarten work. Once the participants had provided metaphors about middle leaders and middle leadership, they were required to explain the reasons why they metaphorised middle leaders and middle leadership as they did. This step of providing explanation was undertaken to avoid multi-faceted interpretations beyond the initial information provided by the participants (Schmitt, 2005).

3.7.2. Interviews

3.7.2.1. Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were conducted following the metaphor drawing. Interviews focus directly on the research topic and provide insightful causal inferences and explanations (Yin, 2009).

Compared with structured and unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews are more flexible and allow the researcher to probe in greater detail or to clear up any misunderstandings; they can also result in unexpected answers from participants (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The design of the interview guide was based on the literature reviews and the conceptual framework and research questions of this study. The interview guide is attached in Appendix A. In this study, principal participants and middle leader participants, including both curriculum leaders and logistics leaders, had been given individual semi-structure interviews. The individual interviews took places in meeting rooms and offices of the case study schools.

3.7.2.2. Focus group interviews

In the interviews, as the classroom teachers in kindergartens should stay in the classroom for the whole day in order to not disturb their daily work and children's learning, I used focus group interviews to collect data from teachers. Focus groups have advantages in collecting intentional and in-depth data in interviews by concentrating on the role of the group in producing interactions as well as the role of the moderator in guiding the interactions (Morgan, 1996). In order to have deep interactions with teacher participants and to gain data intentionally, I launched the focus group interviews in the form of a discussion seminar to discuss the topic of middle leadership, specifically, teachers' conceptualisation of middle leadership, effective practices of middle leadership and what sociocultural contextual factors influence their understanding of middle leadership in their classes.

3.7.3. Documents

Documents were also used in data collection. Collecting documents produced by others provides a researcher with significant evidence to check against the data collected from other sources (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Documents were collected twice, once before the interviews were conducted. The documents collected included kindergarten introductions, graphs of their organisational structures, job descriptions of the curriculum leaders, and curriculum booklets. The kindergarten introductions enabled the researcher to clearly understand general information about the kindergartens, such as the number of teachers and children (teacher-to-children ratio), curriculum emphasis, visions, and the cultures of kindergartens indirectly or directly related to the middle leadership. At the same time, the kindergarten introductions could also provide information about sociocultural factors, especially communist values. Graphs of the organisational structure directly

identifying the middle leaders' roles and responsibilities and leadership practices were also collected. The job descriptions of the middle leaders afforded the researcher a comprehensive understanding of their responsibilities. The official curriculum materials—called the *Curriculum Plan* in some kindergartens—might provide information about the history of curriculum development in the kindergarten and what the middle leaders have done to improve the curriculum. After the interviews had been conducted, I asked the principal to provide any relevant documents mentioned by the participants. The documents collected from each kindergarten were shown in the following Table 17.

Table 17. *Documents collected in each case study school*

| Type of Document | Red Flag Kindergarten | Five Stars Kindergarten | Lotus Lake Kindergarten | King Baby Kindergarten | Happy Baby Kindergarten |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Kindergarten Introduction | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Kindergarten Organizational Structure | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Job Descriptions of Curriculum Leader | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Introduction of Kindergarten Curriculum | 2 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

3.7.4. Pilot Study

To verify the data collection methods and relating tools, namely the metaphors and guide for interviews, a pilot study was conducted in a kindergarten in September 2019 in Chengdu, China. The kindergarten in the pilot study was not included as case in this study. Before the pilot study, I sent my interview guide to participants and invited them to comment on it. The pilot study took place in the kindergarten meeting room and all the interviews were audio-recorded. Pilot metaphors and interviews were conducted with a principal, a curriculum coordinator, a logistic coordinator, and three classroom teachers. After the pilot study, I

found that almost all the research questions were clear and easily understood by the participants. Furthermore, some practical tips were obtained from the pilot study. The first concerned the clarity of the interview questions. Almost all the interview questions were clear; however, to some participants, several interview questions had the same meaning, such as ‘What’s middle leadership?’ and ‘How do you describe middle leadership?’ As semi-structured interviews were used, I integrated these two interview questions and used the latter as a sub-question to the former to probe the description of middle leadership. The second tip regarded occasions when some challenges of middle leadership were discussed; the participants, notably the teachers, seemed to regard these questions as talking about the adverse aspects of middle leadership and reluctantly provided answers or just said they did not perceive the challenges of middle leadership. I thus refined these interview questions and expressed them in a more positive way. Third, I found the prepared interview questions to be too general for participants with three different positions. I refined some interview questions to be more explicit and considerate of interviewee’s positions; as a result, I constructed three versions of interview questions for the principal, middle leader, and teacher. After the pilot interviews, a new version of the interview guide was prepared for data collection. The final interview guide is attached in Appendix A.

3.8. Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study involved a combination of inductive and deductive approaches (Patton, 2002), with inductive approaches being implemented in the initial rounds of analysis, and more deductive approaches being utilised in the latter stages of analysis. The data analysis process was guided by Miles and Huberman’s (1994) approach, which consisted of ‘three concurrent flows of activities- data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification’ (p. 10). These three components gave an overall view of data analysis.

In the process of data analysis, coding—the concrete activity of labelling data—helped facilitate the data analysis and was continued throughout the process (Punch, 2002).

Coding is a way to categorise the text to establish a framework of thematic ideas (Gibbs, 2007, p. 38). In this study, concept-driven coding and data-driven coding were employed to analyse the data (Gibbs, 2007). Concept-driven coding is a deductive approach which starts with a pre-defined list of codes, called a coding frame or start list (Miles et al., 2013). It helps to focus on the coding of issues that are known to be important in the existing literature (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Data-driven coding is an inductive approach which is usually called open coding. Open coding ‘fractures the data and allows one to identify some categories, their properties, and dimensional locations’ (Strauss & Corbin, 2008, p. 236). Combining these two analytic approaches were used in this study to construct a meaningful and coherent picture of the data.

I started with concept-driven coding, because starting deductively ‘ensures structure and theoretical relevance from the start, while still enabling a closer inductive exploration of the deductive codes in later coding cycles’ (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p. 264). The start list of pre-defined codes comes from researching literature, previous studies, topics in the interview schedule, and so on (Gibbs, 2007). In this study, the pre-defined codes were specified following a literature review (See Chapter 2). The aim of concept-driven coding in this study was to identify the relevant segments of the texts which fit into the pre-defined codes on the start list. I read the texts thoroughly and assigned codes to segments of texts relevant to the pre-defined codes. Table 18 provides an example of the application of deductive codes to the data.

Table 18. *Example of concept-driven coding of interview transcripts*

| Interview Transcript (extract) | Code (Concept-driven) |
|---|---|
| What she built is a climate of learning, learning from each other. Teachers have diverse meetings for learning every day, and I saw that teachers are willing to participant in these learning meetings... with this climate, teachers become full of positive energy and they encourage each other and be positive to learn. [2-3-019] | <i>Climate building</i> |
| Lucia participates in outside school training almost every month and each time the training is lasting for several days. Then she brings some advanced contents to our kindergarten to discuss with teachers. In addition, our kindergarten is belong to the educational bureau of the government, there are lots of resources from the educational bureau, such as experts visiting and professional materials, to help Lucia to solve problems in work. [2-3-023] | <i>Participating learning</i> <i>Sharing new learned knowledge with teachers</i> |

Data-driven coding followed the concept-driven coding. The aim of employing data-driven coding in this study was to identify relevant segments of the texts which concerned answers to the research questions. It was also used to uncover any local factors not found in the pre-defined codes. In the process of data-driven coding, new codes were identified and sorted into what are known in NVivo as ‘free nodes’. Table 19 demonstrates an example of how data-driven coding was used to the data.

Table 19. *Example of data driven coding on interview transcripts*

| Interview Transcript (extract) | Code (Data-driven) |
|--|--|
| What she built is a climate of learning, learning from each other. Teachers have diverse meetings for learning every day, and I saw that teachers are willing to participant in these learning meetings... with this climate, teachers become full of positive | <i>Building learning climate;</i> <i>Providing teacher learning opportunities</i> |

energy and they encourage each other and be

positive to learn. [2-3-019]

Lucia participates in outside school training almost

every month and each time the training is lasting for *Self-improvement;*

several days. Then she brings some advanced *Sharing new learning knowledge with*

contents to our kindergarten to discuss with teachers. *teachers;*

In addition, our kindergarten is belong to the

educational bureau of the government, there are lots *Using outside school resources to solve*

of resources from the educational bureau, such as *work problems;*

experts visiting and professional materials, to help

Lucia to solve problems in work. [2-3-023]

These two approaches were recursively used, a process known as constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), resulting in segments of text within codes being sorted, new categories being developed, or existing categories being collapsed as required. Once the coding phase was completed, categories identified from the concept-driven and data-driven coding were integrated. The then cross-tabulation was used to identify overlapping categories, and to refine and reduce themes by clustering categories (Azungah, 2018).

What I want to mention is the categorization of metaphors collected in this study. A categorisation of metaphors is a natural way of identifying a kind of object or experience by highlighting certain properties, downplaying others, and hiding still others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Focusing on one set of properties shifts our attention away from others. Since the natural dimensions of categories (perceptual, functional, etc.) arise out of our interactions with the world, the properties given by those dimensions are not properties of objects in themselves but are, rather, interactional properties, based on the human perceptual

apparatus, human conceptions of function, etc. In doing the categorisation of metaphors given by the participants, I followed the suggestions of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) to category the metaphors by its functions which were based on the previous studies on middle leadership concepts and my understanding of the functions of middle leadership in metaphors.

I invited my academic peer, who holds a PhD and works in leadership at an ECE school, to collaboratively code the data to increase inter-rater agreement. My academic peer and I independently coded the interview transcripts using NVivo 12.0. In the first step of collaborative coding, I randomly chose one of the interview transcripts. After coding the first interview transcript, we discussed the nodes of disagreements and differences in coding, which were resolved whenever possible.

The inter-rater agreement was calculated before and after discussion (Tsui et al., 2006). The inter-coder agreement was 82% before the discussion and 89% after. Based on this high inter-rater agreement, we independently coded the remaining 29 interview transcripts (I coded 15 and he coded 14). After my academic peer coded his 14 interview transcripts, I randomly selected 3 to code myself and then calculated the inter-rater agreement. Before discussion, the inter-coder agreement of the three interview transcripts was 83%, 87% and 89%, while it was 87%, 89% and 92% after the discussion.

3.9. Subjectivity and Trustworthiness

Subjectivity in educational research is a critical issue, especially in a qualitative study in which research within one's background and personal experience are considered tools of the research (Maxwell, 2013). As Finlay (2002, p. 531) states:

As qualitative researchers, we understand that the researcher is a central figure who influences the collection, selection, and interpretation of data. Our behaviour will always affect participants' responses, thereby influencing the direction of findings. Meanings are seen to be negotiated between researcher and researched within a particular social context so that another researcher in a different relationship will unfold a different story. Research is thus regarded as a joint product of the participants, the researcher, and their relationship: It is co-constituted. Furthermore, the qualitative research process itself has the potential to transform the very phenomenon being studied.

Though a study relying entirely and exclusively on the researcher's subjectivity may not respect the criteria established by science, avoiding subjectivity poses certain risks such as projection on behalf of the researcher (Kahn, 1996) and limitations due to the researcher's own blind spots and unclear demarcation between subjectivity and objectivity (Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, proper use of subjectivity lies in understanding the subject of a study by drawing on the researcher's background knowledge and experience as well as understanding how a significant personal relationship such as the researcher-participant dyad may influence data collection, analysis, and understanding (Drapeau, 2002).

My professional research, practical background, and experience in education introduce subjectivity into my study, especially in data collection and data analysis, when I should build dyadic relationships with participants and analyse the information they provided. In order to use subjectivity in a trustworthy way, researchers should engage in explicit and self-aware analysis of their own role in research (Finlay, 2002). To achieve the goal of trustworthiness, in this study, I followed these eight strategies provided by the Merriam (2009). *Maximum variation*: I tried to include as many variations of the case study schools as possible to achieve maximum variation in Band One kindergartens in Chengdu. *Adequate engagement in data collection*: In order to achieve adequate engagement in data collection, I collected data through multiple data sources, such as metaphors, interviews, and documents. *Researcher's position*: I am a PhD candidate and I had not worked in any case school in this study. I contacted the case study schools and participants for data collection purpose only. Before the data collection, I introduced my position in this study to the participants. *Triangulation*: Data was collected from multiple sources (metaphors, interviews, and documents) and from multiple perspectives (principals, curriculum leaders, logistics leaders, and teachers) which were used to triangulate and compensate for the limitations of one-off interviews. *Member checks*: All of the interviews were audio-recorded and saved in digital format. The audio files were transcribed, and transcripts had been sent to the participants for checking and editing. The participants had the opportunity to amend the transcripts before returning them for analysis. *Audit trail* : In order to manage data, I prepared a detailed data collection and analysis timetable. *Peer review/examination*: There was a qualifying examination and which the researcher presented the study proposal in front of colleagues, researchers and other PhD students. During the process of coding, the researcher invited academic peer who work in school leadership in ECE and had doctoral degree to assist with the data analysis to guarantee the reliability of the coding (Section 3.9). *Rich and detailed*

descriptions: In this thesis, rich and detailed descriptions were presented, allowing the readers to have a comprehensive understanding of the study context.

3.10. Limitations of This Study

I recognised two main limitations. The first issue is that this study only included Band One Kindergartens in one city in China. According to Yin, case studies are to see ‘if two or more cases are shown to support the same theory’ (p. 38). The categories and themes emerging from the data can thus help shed light on the effective practices of middle leadership in excellent kindergartens in China.

Another issue relates to the limited methods for data collection. In this study, the major sources for data collection were metaphors and interviews with the supplement of documents; I was unable to access school meetings to gain ‘insider knowledge’ (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) of middle leadership and to collect data from observations. In my research proposal, I planned to use participant observation to collect data and answer the research questions. However, I collected data in the second half of 2019. Influenced by the social movement in Hong Kong, only limited five kindergartens agreed to participate in this study, including two public kindergartens and three private kindergartens. Also the case kindergartens were not willing to participate in a long-term study which was conducted by a researcher from a university in Hong Kong. Therefore, I could only collect data through one-off interviews and metaphors with supporting documents. Under these circumstances, I listened carefully to the information provided by each participant and made cross-references among these participants to see whether there were any internal inconsistencies and gaps in information they provided.

3.11 Ethical Consideration

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) proposed two guidelines on ethical research: informed consent of participants and minimization of potential harm to participants. In the informed consent step, the principals of the case study schools received the Human Research Ethics Review Application Form developed by The Education University of Hong Kong to inform them of this study. As the study adopted the metaphor, interviews, and documents as data collection methods, processing was conducted ethically to minimized potential harm to participants.

Before the data collection, each research participant received a consent form, stating the purpose of the study and including a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity. During the data collection, I ensured that participants understand that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Recordings were conducted only with the permission of the participants. After the interviews, the research participants were again informed that their responses were confidential, and I gave them my telephone number and wechat number in case they had additional information to share or any concerns about the study. I upheld dignity, self-esteem and rights of the participants at all times throughout the study. Finally, all of the data collected were kept confidential. All the names of kindergartens and participants were pseudonyms in all reports and papers. All the data and information have been secured by use of password protected electronic files. Backed-up data has been password protected and would be stored for five years.

3.12. Summary

Qualitative methodology was used to study the phenomenon of how effective middle leadership is understood and practised in kindergartens with Chinese socio-cultural context. The conceptual framework of this study synthesised the existing literature on concepts of

middle leadership, practices of middle leadership and the factors of sociocultural context impacting leadership. As a case study research, contexts of case study schools and profiles of participants were present. Metaphors, interviews (semi-structure interviews and focus group interviews), and documents were the data collection methods. The data analysis was guided by Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework. The next chapter will present the main findings of this study.

Chapter 4 Findings

This chapter presents and discusses the major findings of this study. The findings will be presented according to the research questions and organised into three sections: perceptions of middle leadership, effective practices for middle leadership, and sociocultural factors that influence middle leadership.

4.1. Perceptions of Middle Leadership

All 30 participants, including kindergarten principals, curriculum leaders, logistics leaders, and teachers, were invited to draw an image and articulate their perceptions of middle leadership. The perceptions were mainly focused on roles and responsibilities, which can be categorised as follows: ‘teacher developer’, ‘competent co-worker’, ‘mediator’, ‘teacher influencer’, ‘teacher’s work controller’, and ‘resource carrier’. Three of the participants perceived middle leadership through their personal characteristics. Table 20 presents the categories and metaphors of the participants’ perceptions of middle leadership.

Table 20. *Categories and metaphors of middle leadership perceptions*

| Categories | Metaphors | Perceptions | PositionS |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|--|---------------|
| Teacher developer | The central circle of two circles | More professional than teachers | Teacher |
| | Scaffolding | Helping teachers to move up | Teacher |
| | Mama bird of a bird family | In professional area (curriculum) | Principal |
| | The leading wild goose of a flock | Direction leading in work | Teacher |
| | The leading sheep of a flock | | Teacher |
| | Brick | Inspiring teachers | Middle leader |
| | Lighthouse | Important in direction leading | Teacher |
| | Light bulb | for novice teachers | Teacher |
| Competent co-worker | The central of three gears | Collaboration and core to kindergarten operation | Middle leader |
| | The middle layer of a Christmas tree | Collaboration with different responsibilities | Middle leader |

| | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|---|---------------|
| Mediator | Cat | Demonstrating positional skills and characteristics | Teacher |
| | Watch dial | Playing dual roles in managing and implementing | Teacher |
| | Hand | Competent and capable in practise | Principal |
| | Peach pit | Should be responsible for both sides | Middle leader |
| | Flowerpot | Serving both sides | Middle leader |
| | The human waist | Receiving pressures from both sides | Teacher |
| | Biscuit filling | Mediating the transitioning from senior to teachers | Principal |
| | Airplane | Keep balance | Teacher |
| | Glue | Connecting both sides tightly | Middle leader |
| | Bridge | Communicating well | Principal |
| Teacher influencer | Scale | Balance to ensure information conveyed correctly | Teacher |
| | The string of a bracelet | Gathering teachers and communicating well | Teacher |
| | Sun | Encouraging teachers | Teacher |
| | Candy | Providing teachers happy feeling | Teacher |
| | Elder sister | Making teachers happy | Principal |
| Teacher's work controller | Elephant | Control own emotions | Middle leader |
| | Boat towrope | Control teachers' work direction | Middle leader |
| | Kite string | | Middle leader |
| Resource carrier | The trunk of a tree | Convey information from senior to teachers | Middle leader |

4.1.1. Teacher developer

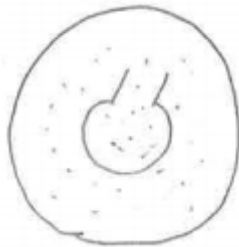
Middle leadership was primarily perceived as being 'teacher developers' who led and promoted teachers' learning and professional development. Various metaphors supported this role:

- The central circle of two circles
- Scaffolding
- Mama bird of a bird family

- The leading wild goose of a flock
- The leading sheep of a flock
- Brick
- Lighthouse
- Light bulb

The metaphor of the central circle of two circles

Middle leadership constituted of teachers who were more professional. Teacher X provided the metaphor of the two circles to indicate that middle leaders were in the internal circle and teachers were in the external circle, and teachers with more professional knowledge could enter the internal circle to become middle leaders. The picture she drew is as follows:



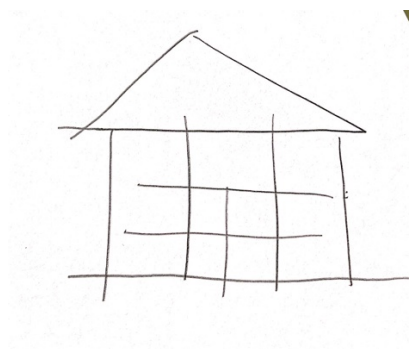
She explained that:

I drew two circles. One is large and the other is small. The large circle contains a small circle, which can connect with the other through the door. This means that middle leaders in the centre of teachers have more professional knowledge and experience.

Before they became middle leaders, they were teachers. [5-3-002]

The metaphor of the scaffolding

Middle leadership was portrayed as a scaffolding that guides and supports teachers in improving their professional development. The picture drawn by teacher F is as follows:



She explained that:

The middle leader is like a scaffolding of a building to support us in moving up at the professional level in kindergarten. She [the middle leader] supports our steps when moving up. [2-4-002]

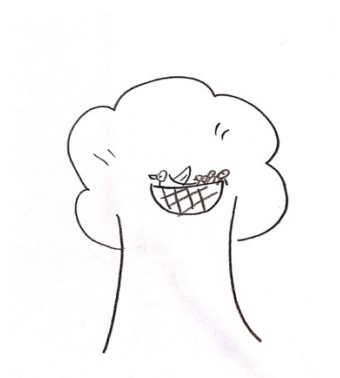
Interestingly, when Middle Leader C talked about her role in curriculum development, she also used the metaphor of scaffolding. She referred to curriculum development as a building, and she was the scaffolding that helped teachers climb up in professional development. She explained that:

I think I am like scaffolding. I go up and down to see how teachers climb up through scaffolding. Some teachers may drop down, or some teachers climb too fast, or some

teachers go in the wrong direction. I am the scaffolding that will help them in professional development. [2-2-006]

The metaphor of the mama bird

As ‘teacher developers’, middle leaders were expected to learn what they planned to teach the teachers. Principal A used the metaphor of the mama bird of a family to describe the role of middle leaders who learned the curriculum prior to teaching it. The picture that she drew is as follows:

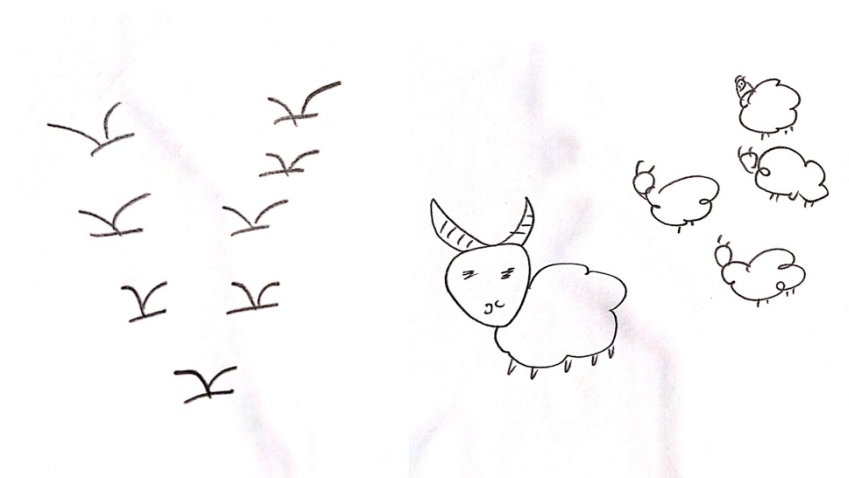


She said that:

Mama birds should take care of baby birds and fly out to find food, such as the curriculum, which fits the context of our kindergarten. After obtaining the ideal food, she should extract its essential parts, which are the key points of the new curriculum, and feed this essential food to our baby birds, our teachers. By doing so, the middle leader brings up teachers in professional development. [1-1-018]

The metaphors of the leading wild goose of a flock and the leading sheep of a flock

Middle leaders pass theories and knowledge of education philosophy to teachers and give their work a planned direction. Two participants provided metaphors for this idea. One is the leading goose of a wild flock, and the other is the leading sheep of a flock. The two pictures of these metaphors are as follows.



Teacher D used the metaphor of the leading wild goose of a flock to describe her perceptions of middle leaders, leading their professional development direction. She shared that:

Like a leader in a flock of wild geese, [middle leader] leads teachers in professional development. She started teaching us the macro stuff, such as educational philosophy and educational theories. The knowledge she taught provided a planned direction for professional development. [2-4-002]

Teacher E, who described middle leaders as the leading sheep of a flock, stated that the meaning of her metaphor was similar to that provided by Teacher D—the leading wild goose

of a flock—that middle leaders led teachers to move in a positive direction in professional development. She explained that:

I think she is taking the leading role, and we all follow her. She is like the leading sheep of a flock. It is similar to the leading wild goose of a flock that leads teachers to move in a professional, correct, and scientific direction. This role of leading us to promote professional knowledge and to the right is very important. [2-4-002]

The metaphor of a brick

In the process of developing teachers, middle leadership was perceived as inspiring teachers to have valuable opinions and ideas. The metaphor of a brick was given by Middle Leader I to describe the responsibility of middle leadership. The picture she drew is as follows:

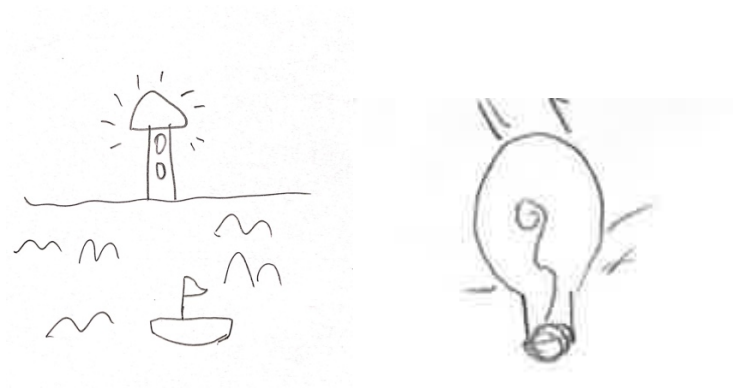


She explained that the metaphor of the brick came from the Chinese idiom, *paozhuan yinyu* [拋磚引玉], which means ‘throw away a brick in order to get a gem’. It is a polite expression referring to offering a few commonplace remarks by way of introduction in the hope that others may come up with valuable opinions. She claimed that:

I think I am like a brick and play the role of leading. There is a Chinese idiom that says ‘throw away a brick to get a gem’. To me, I should internalise my own ideas, experience, and knowledge to teach the teachers and direct their thinking, and then they produce many good ideas and practices. [5-2-002]

The metaphors of a lighthouse and a light bulb

Professional guidance for novice teachers was especially important, as they are inexperienced and need a clear direction and support. Teacher K and Teacher M gave the metaphors of a lighthouse and a light bulb, respectively, for middle leadership. The pictures of these two metaphors are as follows:



These two teachers shared the opinion that middle leadership functioned by illuminating teachers’ direction and guiding them in professional development. Teacher K explained the following:

Why did I draw a lighthouse? I am a novice and have just started to work. I have many things I need to learn...Middle leaders have taught me a lot and given me guidance in professional development. I am a little boat moving forward in the light. [3-4-003]

Similarly, Teacher M drew a light bulb as a metaphor to demonstrate that middle leadership cleared up her work-related confusion and led her professional development. She explained that:

I drew a light bulb. Because I am a novice teacher, our middle leaders can clear up my confusion. As I have gained experience as a teacher, I have a deep understanding of the confusion for a new teacher. I did not know what to do, and hoped there was someone to guide me in every aspect of my work. I think the middle leader is like this light bulb, to light my way and guide my professional development. [5-3-001]

The metaphors and explanations given by participants show that middle leadership was perceived as a ‘teacher developer’ to lead teachers’ on-site professional development. The middle leader’s role was to lead teachers to learn new curricula and inspire them to have valuable opinions and ideas in their work. More importantly, middle leaders guide teachers in a definite direction in professional development, which is especially important for novices.

4.1.2. Competent co-worker

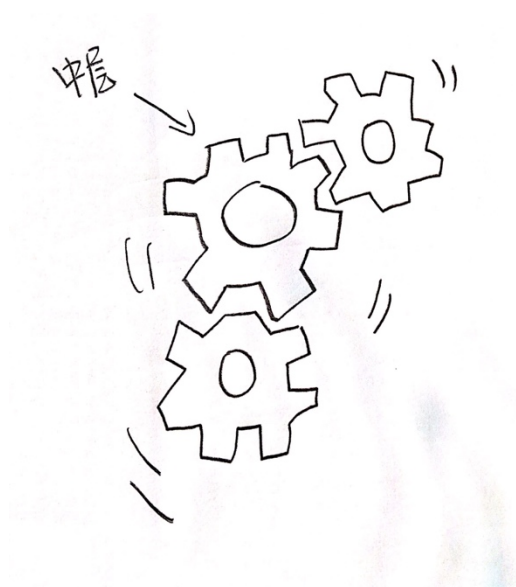
Through data analysis, middle leadership was perceived as a ‘competent co-worker’ for both senior leaders and teachers. The metaphors given by the participants for this perception were as follows:

- The central of three gears

- The middle layer of a Christmas tree
- Cat
- Watch dial
- Hand
- Peach pit
- Flowerpot
- The human waist

The metaphor of the central of three gears

Middle Leader J used gears to describe senior leaders, middle leaders, and teachers collaboratively work together to run the kindergarten. She provided the following picture to illustrate this idea:

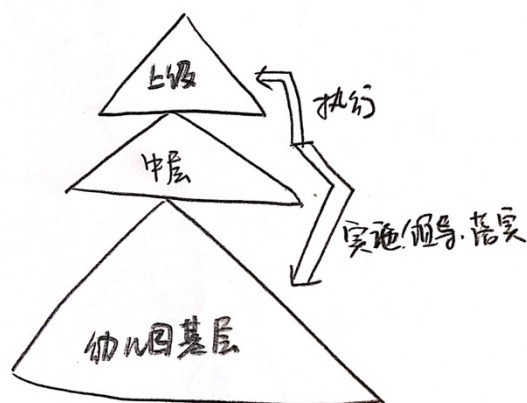


She explained that middle leaders are in the middle, and they need to connect and collaborate with senior leaders and teachers to operate kindergartens. She shared that:

I think my role is similar to the central gear in the three. The other two are senior leaders and teachers. We work together to operate the kindergarten. I am conducting logistics management between senior leaders and teachers. My position and work also make me feel that the middle leader is the gear to enable collaboration by connecting the other two gears to make the kindergarten operate smoothly. [5-4-001]

The metaphor of the middle layer of a Christmas tree

As co-workers, middle leaders worked with senior leaders and teachers with different responsibilities. Middle leader H drew a three-layer Christmas tree to explain this responsibility. The Christmas tree she drew is as follows:

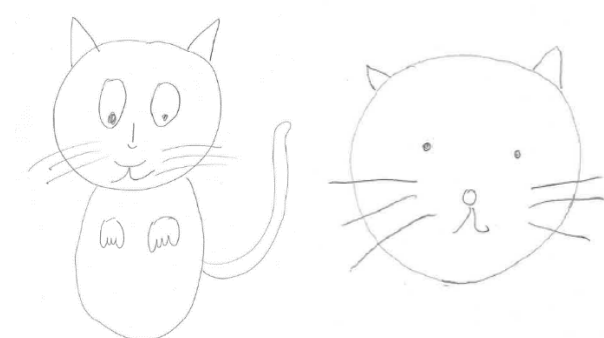


She explained that middle leaders, senior leaders, and teachers collaboratively worked together, with different responsibilities. Middle leaders must implement senior leaders' instructions and lead teachers in implementation. She said:

The responsibilities of senior leaders, teachers, and middle leaders are different. We [middle leaders] are in the middle layer, the senior leaders manage us and give us some requirements or instructions that we need to take action on, and we lead frontier staff to implement. [4-3-003]

Metaphor of the cat

Middle leaders are expected to demonstrate some positional characteristics, such as being gentle but firm with teachers, maintaining high job standards, and being good at observing the teachers. Two participants used a cat as a metaphor to represent middle leaders' characteristics. The pictures of the cats are as follows:



Teacher L and Teacher O explained that cats were gentle, which was the feeling that middle leaders gave them, although they would be strict in work. Teacher O shared that middle

leaders were very nice people, but maintained high job standards and tended to be strict at work. She said that:

I think middle leaders are sometimes very gentle and sometimes very strict with teachers. For example, in terms of professional knowledge, she helps novice teachers, but her requirements on professional knowledge for teachers are very strict. Therefore, I think that the middle leadership is a cat. [5-3-003]

Teacher L shared a similar view, that middle leaders could be gentle and docile but were not necessarily weak. She also mentioned that middle leaders were good at conducting secret observations, as cats did. She said that:

There are three reasons for this finding. First, cats are very gentle and docile. Second, if you make a cat angry, it will definitely scratch you. If you do not touch its bottom line, it stays in a gentle and docile situation. Third, cats are good at observing. All leaders possess the skills of secret observation. [4-4-004]

She explained the three reasons in a more detailed manner, saying:

When she points out mistakes in the work, she is very strict and critical. However, in private or when not talking about mistakes, she is very kind, gentle, and mild. Middle leaders should be gentle and docile to build good relationships with teachers. However, they should also keep a bottom line in work and indicate their authority by displaying angry, strict, and critical emotions. Teachers must obey their authority. In Chinese, this

demonstration of both gentleness and strictness is what we call *yanci xiangji*

[嚴慈相濟]. [4-4-005]

She also explained that middle leaders should have proficient secret-observation skills, like cats, as they should observe teachers' teaching and children's learning within the context of daily kindergarten life. She said:

All leaders are good at observing. Through this, they noticed our teachers' personal characteristics and professional levels. Then, when they distribute tasks, they know which teacher is appropriate to do that task. [4-4-005]

Metaphor of the watch dial

As a 'competent co-worker' to senior leaders and teachers, middle leadership should be equipped with dual roles in both management and practice. Teacher A used the dial of a watch to imply that middle leadership needed to be effective in management and practice. She drew the following picture:

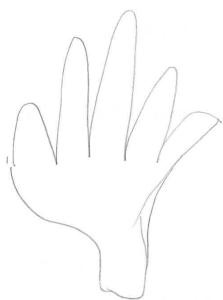


She explained that:

Middle leadership is the dial of a watch, which is the most important part. The watchbands represent the senior leaders and teachers. You know there were two gears inside the watch, and I think these represent middle leadership's dual roles: management and practice. These two gears need to work and rotate with each other, and the watch can tell us time. [1-4-002]

The metaphor of a hand

As a co-worker, middle leaders should be competent and capable of practicing. Principal B gave a metaphor of a hand to describe middle leadership's role of a 'competent co-worker'. The picture of the hand that she drew is as follows:



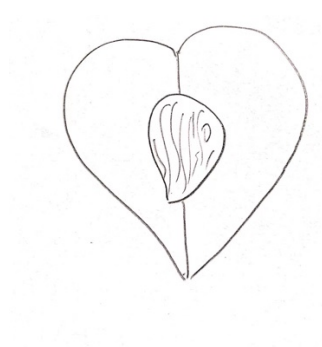
Principal B shared that:

I think middle leadership is like a hand. From my point of view, a middle leader's most important skill is the power of execution. She should manage everything and do almost everything in kindergarten. Just like a hand with five fingers, and every finger should be used for implementation....In our kindergarten, besides leadership and followership, there is more cooperation. Therefore, the principal is another hand, and the teacher is also a hand...Principal, middle leaders, and teachers are working

together. It is similar to friends shaking hands. The power of one hand is limited, but three hands are much more powerful if they work together. [2-1-002]

The metaphor of the peach pit

Middle Leader G used the metaphor of a peach pit to explain middle leadership as being responsible for the work of both senior leaders and teachers. She drew the following picture:



She said that:

I think that middle leaders are the peach pit; senior leaders and teachers are the two sides surrounding it. We should be responsible for senior leaders and teachers. That is why I think I am in the middle to support the kindergarten. [3-2-001]

The metaphor of the flowerpot

Collaborating with senior leaders and teachers, middle leadership was seen as being responsible for and providing service to both parties. Middle Leader B drew a flowerpot to represent middle leaders and two lines to represent senior leaders and teachers. The flowerpot is as follows.



Middle Leader B emphasised that middle leadership was, to some extent, positioned at the bottom to serve other parties. She said that:

I think [the middle leader is] at the bottom to serve teachers and leaders. Two lines can be observed. One represents senior leaders, such as the principal and vice principal, and the other line represents teachers. We middle leaders should assist leaders' work and lead teachers' work. To some extent, we assist teachers' work. Middle leaders should assist both leaders' and teachers' work as a way to serve them. [1-3-001]

The metaphor of the human waist

As a co-worker in the middle position, middle leaders receive pressure from both senior leaders and teachers. Teacher I provided the metaphor of the waist of a human body to describe the pressure of middle leadership. She drew the following picture:



She emphasised that the waist took pressure from the upper body and pressed the lower body.

She explained that:

Middle leadership is similar to the human waist. Even though the waist is not the most important part of the human body, it supports the upper body and controls the legs. They should meet the requirements of senior leaders to support senior leaders' work, and should be responsible for the teachers' work. They experience pressure from both sides. [3-4-003]

In summary, middle leadership was perceived as a 'competent co-worker' to senior leaders and teachers in keeping the kindergarten operational. It works alongside senior leaders and teachers, but with different responsibilities. Middle leaders are expected to demonstrate positional characteristics. They have roles in both management and practices, and are capable of implementing almost requirement in a kindergarten. Middle leaders should be responsible for the work of both senior leaders and teachers. Therefore, they were perceived as serving both groups, and shouldering pressures from both parties.

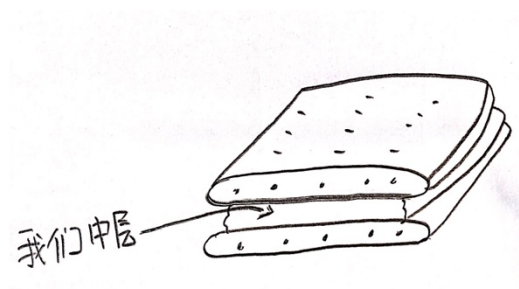
4.1.3. Mediator

Middle leadership was perceived as a 'mediator' between senior leaders and teachers. The metaphors used by the participants to support this role are as follows:

- Biscuit filling
- Airplane
- Glue
- Bridge
- Scale
- The string of a bracelet

The metaphor of the biscuit filling

Middle leaders mediated transitioning from senior leaders to teachers. Principal C described middle leadership as being like the filling of a biscuit that mediates the taste of the biscuit as a whole. She drew the following picture:

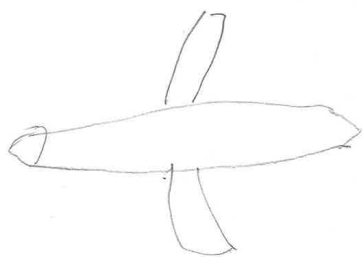


She explained the metaphor, saying:

It is appropriate to use this metaphor to describe middle leadership's function in flavours. Middle leadership connects and mediates the flow of work from the senior leaders to teachers. In fact, it acts like the filling that creates the taste of sandwich biscuits and makes them different from other biscuits. [3-1-001]

The metaphor of an airplane

Middle leaders balance the senior leader and teacher groups to encourage teachers to move forward. In a similar fashion, Teacher H used an airplane as a metaphor to explain that middle leaders should maintain balance and encourage teachers to move forward. He drew the following picture:

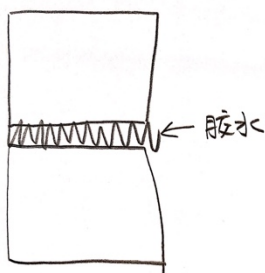


He said that:

This is similar to the balance scale. The two wings of the airplane represent transitioning and balance keeping. The airplane can change the imbalance between senior leaders and teachers into a balanced situation. They mediate the conflicts between senior leaders' expectations for implementation and the reality of our work. In the process of maintaining the balance between senior leaders and teachers, the airplane steadily needs to lead teachers forward. [3-4-002]

The metaphor of glue

As 'mediators', middle leaders closely connect senior leaders and teachers. Middle Leader X used the metaphor of glue to explain the tight connections middle leaders create between senior leaders and teachers. She drew the following picture:

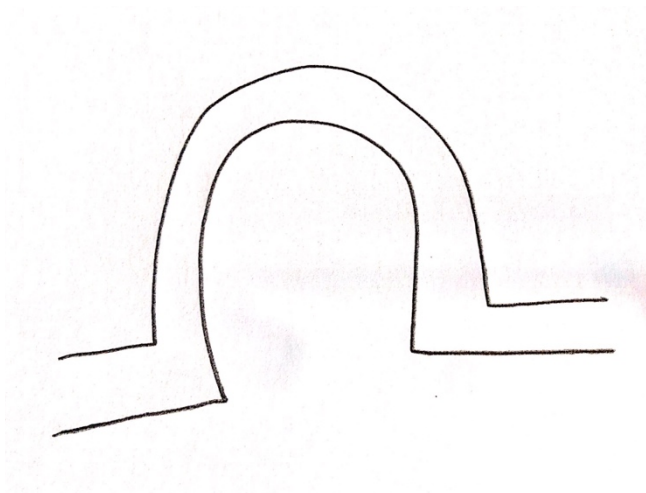


She explained that:

I think middle leadership is glue, because glue is adhesive and sticky. Middle leaders tightly connect the senior leader team, teachers, and my logistics team. The different teams are originally separate, with different functions and responsibilities. We middle leaders act like glue to stick the upper-level senior leader team and lower-level teachers and logistics team together and build tight relationships with them. [2-3-001]

The metaphor of a bridge

Through middle leadership's 'mediator' role, each party in the kindergarten communicated well. Principal D presented a bridge as a metaphor to describe middle leadership's function. She drew the following bridge:

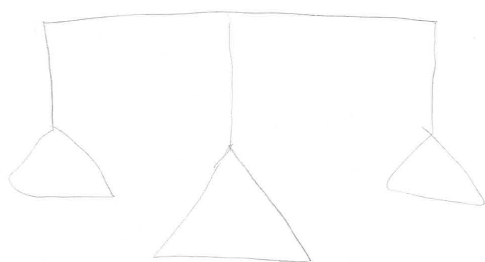


She explained the metaphor as follows:

I think a middle leader should connect senior leaders, teachers, parents, and others in kindergarten. Middle leadership is like a bridge to connect the two sides and enable good communication. [4-1-002]

The metaphor of a scale

In mediation, middle leaders should balance the senior leader and teacher groups to ensure that the correct information is conveyed. Teacher G highlighted that middle leadership should maintain balance, and not lean toward either side, through the metaphor of a scale. A picture of this scale is as follows:

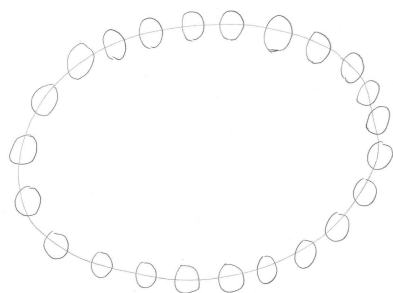


She said that:

This is a scale, and a middle leader is the middle. Only by keeping the scale in balance can she correctly convey information between the two sides. That is, the balanced scale refers to correctly conveying information between senior leaders and teachers, and not leaning on either side but transforming the imbalance to balance on both sides. [3-4-001]

The metaphor of the string in a bracelet

As ‘mediators’, middle leadership was perceived as gathering and representing teachers to communicate with senior leaders. Teacher X used the string of a bracelet to represent the way in which middle leadership united and represented teachers. She drew the following picture:



Teacher X shared her experience:

This bracelet strung with beads represents middle leaders gathering us, and being in the centre of the teachers. Middle leaders represent our teacher group to communicate with senior leaders. [1-4-004]

In summary, middle leadership was perceived as a ‘mediator’ between senior leaders and teachers. It mediated the workflow from the senior leaders to teachers and kept the two sides in balance to lead teachers forward. This function is enabled by closely connecting with both groups, maintaining effective communication, and correctly conveying information between senior leaders and teachers. Middle leadership also gathered teachers and represented them to communicate with senior leaders.

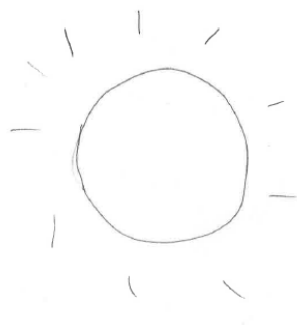
4.1.4 Teacher influencer

Some participants emphasised that middle leaders boost teachers' positive feelings as 'teacher influencers'. Middle leaders pay attention to teachers' emotional needs and provided them with encouragement, sweet feelings, and happiness. The metaphors given by the participants to describe this role are as follows:

- Sun
- Candy
- Elder sister
- Elephant

The metaphor of the sun

Middle leaders provided teachers with encouragement, similar to the sun bringing light. Teacher C used the image of sunshine as a metaphor to describe the warm and positive feelings induced by middle leaders. The picture she drew is as follows:

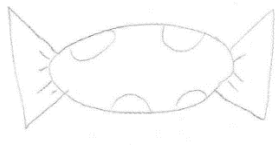


She explained:

I drew the sun because it brings us warmth and light, which is similar to leading us to become better educators; the sun diffusing sunshine means doing well and encouraging others to learn more. The sun brings us a feeling of warmth, which is a positive feeling. [1-4-003]

The metaphor of candy

Teachers felt happy when achieving a shared goal with middle leaders. Teacher J used candy as a metaphor to express her perceptions of middle leadership as bringing her sweet feelings after hard work. The picture she drew is as follows:



She explained that:

I think in teaching work, I sometimes feel very depressed and difficult. Many things are not as simple as parents think. Sometimes, when it was hard for me to deal with problems, middle leaders came to help and we discussed the problems together. When I conquered the difficulty and saw improvements in children's learning, I felt sweet and fulfilled. There was a process where I experienced a feeling of pain, but later felt sweet and happy. That is why I used the metaphor of candy to describe middle leadership. [4-4-002]

The metaphor of the elder sister

Middle leaders also provide personal care, which make teachers happy and feel that they can be relied on. Teacher X used the metaphor of an elder sister with younger sisters to describe the middle leader and teachers. The picture that she drew is as follows:

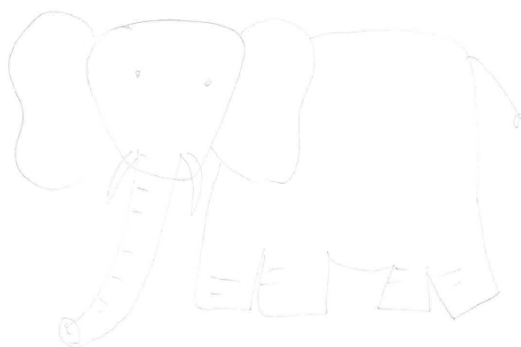


She explained that:

I think [middle leaders] are like elder sisters, but not traditional elder sisters—more like friends, sometimes. The teachers are younger sisters. Middle leaders should lead them, but also need to take care of them. Then, middle leaders make teachers feel happy and supported. [5-1-003]

The metaphor of an elephant

As ‘teacher influencers’, middle leaders are expected to have personal and prerational characteristics to control their own emotions. Middle Leader F used an elephant as a metaphor to describe their characteristics of being calm, steady, and down-to-earth. She drew the following picture:



She explained why she used an elephant, saying that middle leaders should stay calm, steady, and able to control emotions. She further explained that:

We middle leaders should be down-to-earth. If we meet difficulties, we cannot panic.

If we panic, we may even not know which senior leader we should report to. When

leaders give us tasks or guide teachers to implement tasks, we should stay calm,

steady, and able to control our emotions. I think this is like an elephant. [3-3-001]

She went further to explain why these traits and characteristics of middle leaders were important, saying:

As a middle leader, we should keep calm, and analyse and solve problems for teachers. We keep calm and steady to send teachers a positive signal, and then they can keep calm and focus on the problem. Meanwhile, an elephant is large and strong and can shoulder pressure. Middle leaders should also carry pressure while calmly leading teachers to walk in the right direction. [3-3-004]

To sum up, middle leadership was perceived as a ‘teacher influencer’ that provides encouragement and gives teachers warm, positive feelings. They also provide teachers with a feeling of sweetness after hard work and offer them personal care, which makes teachers

happy and feeling they could be relied on. As ‘teacher influencers’, middle leaders are also expected to control their own emotions.

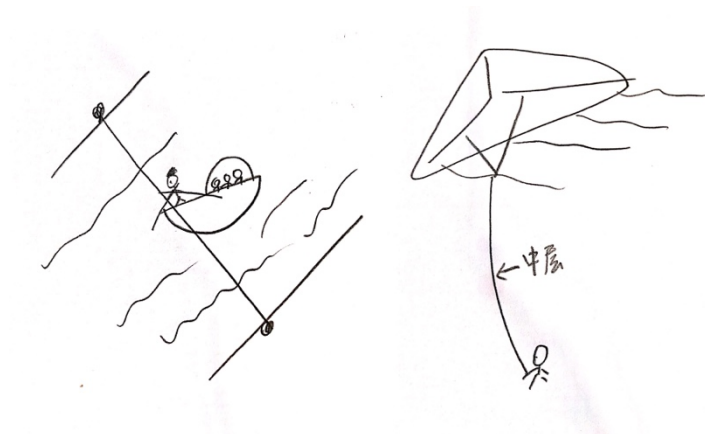
4.1.5. Teachers’ work controller

Participants’ perceptions included that middle leaders assisted the principal in controlling teacher’s work. The metaphors used by participants to support this role are as follows:

- Boat towrope
- Kite string

Metaphors of a boat towrope and kite string

Middle leader X and Middle leader Y used boat towropes and kite lines as metaphors, to describe the ways in which middle leadership controls teachers’ work. The pictures drawn by these two curriculum coordinators are as follows:



Middle Leader X used a boat towrope to explain that middle leaders controlled the direction of teachers’ work, saying:

When the boat crosses a river, it relies on a towrope. Therefore, it can directly turn to the other side of the river and avoid getting lost in heavy fog. I think my function is like the towrope of a boat. Teachers may lose their way in their work and not know how to do something. [2-2-002]

She explained that her role in controlling teachers' focus on work was needed by teachers, saying:

Front-line teachers may focus only on the things in front of them. They do not know the curriculum's rationale or the direction of kindergarten development. Therefore, they need to focus on their work. [2-2-003]

Middle Leader Y use the metaphor of a kite string to express that she directly adjusted the direction of teachers' work based on the principal's demands. She explained that:

I think the middle leader is like a kite string. For example, the kite runner is the senior leader, and the middle leader is the string controlling the kite's direction based on the kite runner's demands. If the kite runner wants to adjust the direction, the string is what guides the change. [3-2-001]

In summary, middle leadership was perceived as the 'controller of teachers' work'. They controlled the focus of teachers' work based on the principal's demands.

4.1.6. Resource carrier

Middle leadership was perceived managing the resources provided to teachers. The resources from the principal and external experts pass from the middle leaders to teachers. The trunk of a tree is a metaphor given by Middle Leader X to describe this role. She drew the following picture:



She said:

I think the middle leader is the tree trunk. As a middle leader, I need to provide resources and support to teachers. It is similar to the trunk of a tree that conveys nutrition from the roots, the principal and other external resources and supports, to the leaves, the teachers. [1-2-001]

4.1.7. Perceptions of middle leadership among participants in different positions

The perceptions of middle leadership among participants in different positions could be categorised into three groups: relationships with senior leaders and teachers, relationship with

teachers, and opinions toward other areas of work. The following table (Table 21) depicts these categories.

Table 21. *Perceptions of middle leadership by participants in different positions*

| | Relationships to senior leaders and teachers | Relationship to teachers | Work |
|----------------|---|--------------------------------|--|
| Principals | Mediation (function) | Caring for teachers | Practical |
| Middle leaders | Mediation (responsibility and importance) | Emotional value (self-control) | Inspiring teachers |
| Teachers | Mediation (representing teachers, dual roles) | Emotional value | Competence in leading teacher professional development |

Principals perceived middle leaders as teacher developers, competent co-workers, and mediators by using metaphors such as mama bird, hand, biscuit filling, bridge, and elder sister. They also perceived the important role of middle leadership in connecting and promoting communication between senior leaders and teachers, with one principal using ‘biscuit filling’ and another using ‘bridge’ as metaphors for middle leadership. These two metaphors describe principals’ perceptions of the relationships of middle leadership to senior leaders and teachers. They also perceived that middle leadership was characterised by caring teachers, using metaphors such as ‘mama bird’ and ‘elder sister’. These two metaphors refer to the relationship between middle leadership and teachers. Principals also believed that the work of middle

leaders should be practical, displaying their power of execution in collaborating with senior leaders and teachers by using the metaphor of a hand.

Middle leader participants in this study assumed that they play all the roles of middle leadership – as teacher developers, competent co-workers, mediators, teacher influencers, teacher’s work controllers, and resource carriers. They used the following metaphors to describe the features of the roles they perceived: the central of three gears, Christmas tree, peach pit, flowerpot, glue, boat towrope, kite string, the trunk of a tree, elephant, and brick. To describe the relationship between senior leaders and teachers, explain the importance of their position in the organisational structure, and highlight their responsibilities in connecting senior leaders and teachers, they used the following metaphors: the central of three gears, Christmas tree, peach pit, flowerpot, glue, boat towrope, kite string, and trunk of a tree. Their responsibilities included conveying information, serving each party, controlling teachers’ work, providing resources, and guiding teachers to implement plans to fulfil the instructions given by the principal. Due to these important responsibilities of middle leadership, which connects senior leaders with teachers, middle leaders perceived the importance of their roles as the ‘heart’ of the kindergarten operation by using metaphors such as central of three gears and peach pit. In terms of the relationship to teachers, middle leaders perceived they could provide teachers emotional value. A middle leader used the metaphor of elephant to express that middle leaders should have personal and positional characteristics to control their own emotions in order to provide teachers emotional value. In other areas of work, one middle leader perceived that they need to inspire teachers in leading teacher professional development.

Teachers perceived the roles of middle leadership as teacher developer, competent co-workers, mediators, and teacher influencers using the following metaphors: the central circle of two

circles, watch dial, the human waist, scale, the string of a bracelet, sun, candy, scaffolding, the leading goose of a flock, the leading sheep of a flock, lighthouse, lightbulb, and cat. Teachers recognised the dual roles of middle leadership in managing and guiding teachers about teaching as well as their mediating functions, using metaphors of watch dial, the human waist, and scale. With regard to mediations with senior leadership, teachers viewed middle leaders as representing teachers' benefits and interest by using the metaphor of the string of a bracelet. Teachers also admitted that middle leaders could add emotional value to them by using metaphors of sun and candy, which brought them feelings of warmth and sweetness. In terms of teacher professional development and other duties of middle leaders, teachers perceived that middle leaders should attend teacher group meetings and demonstrate professional competence and skills in leading teacher professional development, which comprises the core work of middle leadership.

To sum up, participants in different positions at kindergartens perceived different features of middle leadership in this study. Three parties – principals, middle leaders, and teachers – perceived the importance of the mediating position of middle leaders between senior leaders and teachers. The principals perceived the middle leaders' role as not only mediating the flow of work from senior leaders to teachers but also communicating between them. Middle leaders perceived the importance of their position in the organisational structure and their responsibilities in connecting senior leaders with teachers. These responsibilities included conveying information, serving each party, controlling teachers' work, providing resources, and guiding teachers to implement plans to fulfil the instructions given by the principal. Teachers perceived the dual roles of middle leaders as managing and guiding teaching, with middle leaders representing teachers in mediations with senior leaders. In terms of the relationship between senior leaders and teachers, principals perceived that middle leaders

should care for teachers, while middle leaders and teachers perceived that middle leaders should provide emotional value to teachers. Simultaneously, middle leaders should possess the ability to control their own emotions and exhibit emotional stability. Regarding other work-related areas of middle leaders, one principal stated that middle leadership should be practical, displaying their power of execution to effectively collaborate with senior leaders and teachers. Middle leaders perceived that they should inspire teachers by driving their professional development. Teachers perceived that middle leaders should be competent and capable to guide them in developing professional skills.

4.1.8. Summary

In this study, middle leadership was perceived as a teacher developer, competent co-worker, mediator, teacher influencer, teacher's work controller, and resource carrier in kindergartens in China.

Acting as a 'teacher developer', middle leaders led teachers via on-site professional development. The role involves leading teachers to learn new curricula and inspiring them to have valuable opinions and ideas in teaching. More importantly, middle leaders guide teachers in a definite direction in professional development, which is especially important for novice teachers. Middle leadership was perceived as a 'competent co-worker' for senior leaders and teachers in keeping the kindergarten operational. They worked with senior leaders and teachers, but with different responsibilities. They had dual roles, in management and practice, and were capable of implementing almost everything in the kindergarten. Middle leaders should be responsible for the work of both senior leaders and teachers.

Therefore, they were perceived as serving both senior leaders and teachers, and shouldered pressure from both parties. They were also perceived as a ‘mediator’ between senior leaders and teachers, facilitating the flow of work transitioning from the senior leaders to teachers and kept the two sides in balance to lead teachers forward. Mediation was enabled by maintaining close connections and effective communication, correctly conveying information between senior leaders and teachers. Middle leadership also gathered teachers and represented them to communicate with senior leaders. As ‘teacher influencers’, middle leaders were also perceived as playing an important role in kindergartens in China. They provided teachers with encouragement, warm feelings, and personal care, which made teachers happy and induced feelings of reliability. Acting as a ‘teacher’s work controller’, middle leadership controlled teachers’ work based on the principal’s demands. Acting as a ‘resource carrier’, middle leaders disseminated resources from the principal and external sources to teachers.

The data show that middle leadership was perceived through the lens of its organisational roles and responsibilities, and with the teacher group, leaders’ personal and positional characteristics.

Participants in different positions at kindergartens perceived different features of middle leadership in this study. As the leaders of middle leaders, principals perceived their function or role as not only mediating the flow of work from senior leaders to teachers but also communicating between senior leaders and teachers. Middle leaders perceived the importance of their own position in the organisational structure and their responsibilities in connecting senior leaders with teachers. As followers of middle leaders, teachers perceived the dual roles of middle leaders in managing and guiding teaching, with middle leaders representing teachers in mediations with senior leaders.

4.2 Effective Practices of Middle Leadership

Four themes involving effective middle-leadership practices emerged from the data analysis. These practices are *chengshang qixia*, understanding and developing teachers, building collegiality, and building a half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers. Among these four themes, *chengshang qixia* and building a half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers are distinctive in this study, and are rarely mentioned in effective school middle-leadership discourse. Table 22 provides an overview of the themes and sub-themes of the effective practices of middle leadership in Chinese kindergartens. The terms in bold are unique to this study, and the others are in line with previous literature.

Table 22. *The effective practices of middle leadership found in this study*

| Categories of practices | Effective practices |
|---|--|
| <i>Chengshang qixia</i> | <i>Chengshang Qixia</i> |
| Understanding and developing teachers | Developing deep knowledge of teachers' needs Emphasising teachers' moral development Tailoring individualized development plans for teachers Promoting teacher's self-esteem as professionals |
| Nurturing teacher leadership/collegiality | Establishing TRGs Granting teachers decision-making power Encouraging different opinions from teachers Co-learning with teachers |

**Building a half-mentor half-friend
relationship with teachers**

**Caring about teacher's work and life
matters
Understanding and accepting teachers'
emotional needs
Earning teachers' trust**

4.2.1. *Chengshang qixia*

Chengshang qixia [承上启下] is a Chinese idiom, which means a transitioning function of carrying on tasks from the upper party to lower party, and also inspiring the work of the lower party. In this study, participants claimed that *chengshang qixia* was middle leadership's most effective practice; it facilitated harmonious collaboration between senior leaders and teachers, rather than purely connecting the two groups. Teacher B said that *chengshang qixia* represented an effective practice because it enabled middle leaders to convey senior leaders' instructions and orders to teachers effectively, and transition those orders into practice with teachers. She said:

Chengshang qixia is the most important practice in middle leadership. It contains the meanings of relaying messages downward along the organisation from the principal to teachers and also the actions that middle leaders should take to lead teachers in implementation. Because there are many trifling matters in kindergarten work, there should be middle leaders to lead us in following the senior leaders' instructions.

Chengshang qixia can make senior leaders, middle leaders, and teachers work together closely. [1-4-015]

Based on data analysis, *chengshang qixia* consists of two dimensions. The first dimension is *a chengshang* and the second is *qixia*.

4.2.1.1. *Chengshang*

Chengshang [承上] means that middle leaders provide upward support to senior leaders. In the context of this study, middle leaders should first obey and accept the arrangements and instructions given by senior leaders to support their work. If middle leaders have a different view of the arrangements and instructions, they try to understand and accept the senior leaders' perspective. Middle leader C shared the following:

For senior leaders, the first thing we middle leaders need to do is to obey their arrangements and instructions...If I found their arrangements and instructions are different from my point of view, I would put myself in their shoes to try to understand their thoughts and from the view of the whole development of kindergarten. I will soon adjust my own view and persuade myself to accept their arrangements and instructions. [2-2-026]

Chengshang also means that middle leaders fulfil some of the functions of senior leaders. In this study, principals endow middle leadership with power and authority via formal titles, policies, and instructions. Middle leader C shared how she used that power and authority, saying that:

I have power and authority over teachers because I am a leader with a formal title. I seldom demonstrate my authority, but sometimes I would do so by strictly following kindergarten policies. Like today, we had an activity and I told the teachers to come to the meeting room at 11 o'clock. While teachers might have had issues to sort, none of them came on time. I organised the activity, and I had to seriously deal with the late arrivals, following our kindergarten policies. [1-2-026]

However, middle leaders' power and authority was limited. They only held power and authority in the task itself, such as arranging activities or who would participate in them. The financial and human resource management were still controlled by the principals. Middle Leader A shared the following:

We middle leaders have the power to make decisions in our own work or the definite tasks given by the principal. When there is a change in circumstances regarding curriculum implementation, I can make decisions on it. However, the power is limited, and excludes financial arrangements or human resource arrangements, which are still decided by the principal. [1-2-026]

4.2.1.2. *Qixia*

The other dimension of *chengshang qixia* is *qixia* [啟下]. This means that middle leaders should inspire subordinates. In this study, participants explained that *qixia* involved middle leaders leading teachers in implementation and being responsible for the results of their work. Given teachers' unsatisfactory level of professional development in kindergartens in China, *Qixia* is an especially important practice. There was a gap between the principal's expectations for the results of a task and the teachers' real outcome. As explained by Middle Leader A:

There is a gap between the principal's demands for task goals and implementing outcomes. This gap is huge because teachers lack the necessary skills and abilities; therefore, I need to guide them on how to implement the work. [1-2-017]

Due to this gap, middle leaders are deeply involved in and wholly control teachers' work in order to effectively *qixia*. Middle leaders guided teachers to make work plans by demonstrating the process in a systematic manner and closely monitoring the teachers' work.

Middle leader A shared how she guided teachers in making work plans, saying:

First, we make our semester plan for teachers, which scopes the content for teaching and learning for the whole semester. Then, I guide teachers to make their lesson plans based on the semester plan. [1-2-021]

In terms of *qixia*, middle leaders also controlled the quality of their work. Middle Leader C shared that they controlled the quality of curriculum implementation through daily observation and interaction, saying:

I control the whole process of curriculum implementation by daily checking, such as randomly entering into the classroom to observe teaching and talking to teachers to know their thoughts. [2-2-005]

Middle leader C explained that the regular monitoring was to ensure that teachers' work was on the right track, saying:

[Teachers] do not know how to divide whole school-year curriculum into daily activities. What I do is I lead teachers in dividing the curriculum aims and objectives for the year into blocks, to keep teachers' daily work on the right track. [2-2-004]

In summary, *chengshang qixia* transitions from senior leaders to teachers. Principals give middle leaders some authority and power over teachers, but it is limited only to tasks. This

practice is vital to filling the gap between senior leaders' expectations and teachers' real outcomes. Middle leaders wholly control the quality of teachers' work to satisfy senior leaders' expectations.

4.2.2. Understanding and developing teachers

Understanding and developing teachers is the second theme that emerged from the collected data. Practices that allow middle leaders to understand teachers effectively and develop their skills encompass developing a deep knowledge of teachers' needs, emphasising their moral development, tailoring individualised development plans, granting teachers some decision-making power, and promoting their self-esteem as professionals.

4.2.2.1. Developing deep knowledge of teachers' needs

Before providing professional development activities for teachers, middle leaders should first have a deep knowledge of their professional development needs. Though each kindergarten had systematic professional development plans for teachers, in line with governmental requirements for Band One Kindergartens, middle leaders still assessed teachers' professional development needs and revised and updated the professional development plans based on those needs.

Middle leaders employed self-reports, observations, and analyses to assess teachers' needs. Principal D stated that middle leaders in her kindergartens assessed teachers' needs through questionnaires, interviews, and observation of performance before launching professional development programmes. She said that:

They [middle leaders] understand teachers' needs through questionnaires and interviews. They also observe teachers' performance and then make a judgement. Middle leaders make an analysis of teachers' advantages and disadvantages and then arrange relevant training for them. [4-1-021]

Middle Leader C shared that she understood teachers' professional development needs by surveying and monitoring the curriculum implementation process. She shared her own experiences as follows:

I conducted research on teachers' understanding and perceptions of the curriculum through observation and communication. I found that they were not very familiar with the curriculum and did not understand it well. Therefore, I kept thinking about what may have left them confused. [2-2-004]

Having deep knowledge of teachers' needs and providing training based on those needs effectively motivates teachers. As the professional development plans were mainly revised based on teachers' self-reports and their willingness, teachers were encouraged and motivated by learning what they needed to learn. Teacher B shared that:

Trainings provided in this way are much more efficient than those provided in a prescribed and compulsory manner are. Teachers are willing to learn what we need, and we are motivated to learn. After we learn something new from training, we like to share it with other teachers. Once you share with others, you can review and internalise what you have learned. [1-4-022]

Middle leaders used diverse methods to identify teachers' needs for professional development, and revised school-based teacher professional development plans to reflect those needs. Having deep knowledge of teachers' needs and providing relevant training encourages and motivates teachers by teaching them what they need to learn.

4.2.2.2.Emphasising teachers' moral development

In the context of ECE in China (see Chapter 1), there have been some issues with kindergarten teachers being suspected of abusing children, which became a societal issue and caused a lot of public attention and parental worrying. Teachers' moral development has been prioritised in professional development in kindergartens in China. Middle leaders took responsibility for promoting teachers' moral development in the cases in this study.

Middle leaders met with teachers regularly to discuss how to promote teachers' moral standards. Principal E shared that middle leaders in her kindergarten held meetings every Monday to educate teachers about ethics and moral standards. She said:

Middle leaders set up regular meetings every Monday, to learn about governmental and kindergarten policies and documents on ethics and morality. In the meetings, we discuss how to behave ethically and morally in front of children. [4-3-025]

Middle Leader I added that middle leaders used these trainings and meetings to discuss with what teachers should do and what they could not do. She said:

In terms of moral development, we have been working on guiding teachers on what they should do and they cannot do. Usually, there is discussion about what kind of

guidance and moral behaviours we need to demonstrate in the front of the children and what behaviour or words may hurt children and should be absolutely forbidden.

[5-2-027]

In addition to direct training, middle leaders also selected related books and read them with teachers to promote teacher ethics and moral standards. Middle Leader H used an example to explain how she did this, saying:

For example, in the last year, we launched an activity called *We Are Reading the Same Book*. Middle leaders and teachers read the books together. The book was *Cuore (Heart)*. While reading the book, middle leaders and teachers were discussing how to respect and demonstrate our love for children. To middle leaders, this activity promoted teachers' moral development. [4-3-025]

Middle leadership emphasised teacher moral development not only because it is required by the government but also because teachers' moral standards influence the climate of a team. Principal D shared that promoting teacher moral development is an effective practice of middle leadership. She said:

I always say that moral education should be prioritised. We emphasise a person's moral standards. No matter whether she is a middle leader or teacher, she should have a high moral standard. Middle leaders with high moral standards are very convincing to teachers. Teachers with high moral standards can make the team a positive team. [4-1-025]

In order to promote teachers' moral standards, middle leaders conducted regular training and meetings to educate them and discuss how to behave morally. They also launched book-reading activities to educate teachers and improve their moral standards. Middle leaders' emphasis on teachers' moral development was not only because of governmental requirements but also because teachers with high moral standards contribute to a positive team climate.

4.2.2.3. Tailoring individualised development plans for teachers

The government of Chengdu requires Band One Kindergartens to prepare a professional portfolio recording each teacher's professional development. Middle leaders devised individualised professional development plans to create the portfolios. Teacher L shared that the middle leaders set different learning objectives and requirements for each teacher. She said:

She [the middle leader] has different requirements for us. It is like a tailored professional development plan for each of us. [4-4-024]

The individualised plans middle leaders considered teachers' working status and personal characteristics. Teacher K said:

This is more than a tailored professional development plan. I think she plans for us based on the course we teach, our different characteristics, titles, and experience working in the kindergarten. [4-4-026]

In addition to individualised plans, middle leaders also designed a system to select one teacher at a time and provide them with additional support and resources. Middle Leader C shared how she did this, saying:

I designed a system for professional teacher development. For a specific period, one teacher is selected as the key trainee, and I will ask TRG leaders and leaders of stages to follow up and to provide professional support. [2-2-019]

Teacher G claimed that individualised professional development plans not only effectively promoted teacher learning but also encouraged them and demonstrated that middle leaders were helping and supporting them. She said that:

I have been encouraged by an individualised professional development plan. It makes me feel that I learn for myself. I have more initiative, and I have learned and improved a lot. [3-4-033]

Teacher J shared that her individualised professional development plan were based on her career development track, which encouraged her to be devoted to learning and improving. She said:

The professional plan for each teacher was very people-oriented. She [the middle leader] makes a professional development plan for each teacher based on their career development track. This encouraged us teachers a lot, and we devote ourselves to learning and improving because we know we are learning for both ourselves and the children. [4-4-024]

In summary, following the requirements for Band One Kindergartens, middle leaders provided teachers with individualised professional support based on their working status and personal characteristics. In one case, one teacher was chosen as a key trainee and provided additional resources and support. Individualised professional support encouraged teachers, as they felt they were learning for their own career development.

4.2.2.4. Promoting teacher's self-esteem as professionals

As reported by middle leader participants in this study, due to having insufficient professional qualifications, kindergarten teachers usually had low professional self-confidence and are often held in low esteem. Therefore, middle leaders support teachers in achieving a higher standard of work to build their professional self-confidence. Middle Leader C gave an example of how she helped an art teacher in building self-confidence. She shared:

Last year, I asked the teacher to conduct an art demo class. She came to me in person and said that she could not do so. I asked her why she could not, but she did not reply. I felt that she was not sufficiently confident. I told her that our Arts TRG could support her, and I supported her as well. With that, she received good comments about her class, and her colleagues thought she improved a lot. After that, she became more confident. She became devoted to designing art activities and completing lesson plans for each activity, which she always happily shared with me. [2-2-010]

Supporting teachers' participation in professional competitions was also reported as an effective practice for building up teachers' professional self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Middle Leader C shared that, with her professional support, 26 teachers won prizes for

teaching project papers in competitions at the district, municipal, and even national levels.

She stated:

I teach teachers how to write up project papers and identify children's particular strengths, and help them take pictures. I encourage them to write down the teaching process as a case and submit it to teaching research competitions. Sometimes I encourage them to submit papers and sometimes I require them to submit papers. Through writing papers and winning prizes, teachers build up professional self-confidence and self-efficacy; these kinds of activities encourage them. I tell them it does not matter whether they win a prize; they should experience the process. After some teachers won prizes, they told me that writing teaching project papers was not as difficult as they thought. [2-2-021]

After competitions, middle leaders gave teachers rewards to encourage them to become more confident. Middle Leader I shared how she encouraged the teachers, saying:

Sometimes I design some competition activities to encourage teachers to work, or I give them titles to make them feel honoured...I also designed a bonus system to buy gifts for teachers after competitions, to encourage them. The outcome is that teachers become more confident in their profession. [5-2-011]

Middle leaders encouraged teachers to achieve higher professional standards and to participate in competitions to build their professional self-confidence. They also rewarded teachers after competitions.

In conclusion, given the unsatisfactory level of teachers' professional development, the middle-leadership practices that involve understanding and developing teachers are vital to kindergartens in China. In this study, effective practices identified under this theme are as follows:

- (1) Middle leaders develop a deep knowledge of teachers' professional development needs to provide training and professional support.
- (2) Middle leaders emphasise teachers' moral development and prioritise it in professional development.
- (3) Middle leaders provide teachers with individualised development plans.
- (4) Middle leaders promote teachers' professional confidence by encouraging them to reach higher standards in their work and participate in professional competitions.

4.2.3. Nurturing teacher leadership/collegiality

The data revealed that nurturing teacher leadership/collegiality was another theme in effective middle-leadership practice. In this theme, the effective practices are establishing TRGs, encouraging differing opinions from teachers, and co-learning with teachers.

4.2.3.1. Establishing TRGs

Middle leaders established TRGs and constructed a more hierarchical organisational structure for power and authority distribution in the teacher group. TRG leaders were selected from among the teachers; the middle leader distributed power and authority among other teachers tier by tier, and teachers shared power with middle leaders. Middle leader C shared how power and authority distribute through building TRGs. She said that:

[TRG leaders] are those I need to train. Through providing training for TRG leaders and then passing it down to teachers, my experience of being a middle leader and my authority and power are able to pass from the TRG leaders to the leaders of stages, and then to classroom teachers. [2-2-022]

However, due to the TRGs, teachers with leadership titles, power, and authority might be redistributed. Thus, the traditional method of identifying leaders by title might not work.

Teacher H explained the following:

In our kindergarten, I do not think of leaders by depending on their titles. With the traditional definition of leaders, the leaders in the teacher group should have formal titles, such as TRG leaders, leaders of the stages, and leaders of the classroom.

However, in our kindergarten, TRG leaders may not have formal titles and they also share some responsibilities for TRGs and act as leaders in those activities. In this circumstance, TRG leaders with formal titles should follow their lead. [3-4-010]

Principal C confirmed that teachers without formal titles could be leaders in TRG activities and hold some degree of authority to make decisions. The principal shared the following:

For example, when I participate in TRG activities, if there is one teacher who is leading the activity, I should follow her instructions. I handle the direction of the TRG activities, but the decisions about the details and activities should be made by teachers. [3-1-022]

From the information provided by the participants, middle leaders set up TRGs and selected leaders among them to distribute power and authority to lead TRG activities. Due to TRGs,

the organisational structure tended to be more tiered. Middle leaders distributed and shared power and authority among teachers.

4.2.3.2. Granting teachers decision-making power

The middle leaders established teacher leadership and built collegiality by involving teachers in making decisions for their work and even empowering them to lead teacher-learning activities in the implementation of the curriculum. Principal C said:

In every TRG meeting that discusses our curriculum arrangement, teachers are very motivated because they are able to participate in and lead discussions, and even make decisions about issues regarding the curriculum and teaching. Middle leaders empowered teachers to make such decisions. [3-1-015]

Granting teachers with decision-making power enabled them to reflect on their own work proactively and think about ways to improve it. Teacher B shared her experiences as follows:

Middle leaders always ask us to make decisions regarding our own work. This proactively encourages me to reflect how to do my work effectively, reduce similar problems, and decrease mistakes. I think this is a good practice for promoting teachers' professional development. [1-4-025]

Granting teachers with decision-making power demonstrated that middle leaders trusted their problem-solving abilities, and encouraged the teachers. Principal C shared the following:

I think she [the middle leader] trusts the teachers very much. Sometimes, she lets teachers make decisions in their own work, although she is responsible for the results of the work. For example, we have a school-based standardised curriculum, and when teachers encounter problems in choosing teaching methods, they turn to middle leaders to make decisions; she gives teachers the authority to make decisions and trusts that they can solve problems. Some teachers have told me that they are encouraged by having authority regarding problem-solving and decision-making in their work. [3-1-023]

Middle leaders granted teachers' decision-making power regarding their own work. Teachers with decision-making power in their work frequently self-reflect and think about ways to solve problems. Giving teachers the authority to make decisions for their work encouraged them.

4.2.3.3. Encouraging differing opinions from teachers

In this study, participants shared that teachers were encouraged to challenge the decisions middle or senior leaders made regarding their work. Principal D shared that teachers were encouraged to point out leaders' mistakes at the staff meeting. She said that:

We welcome different opinions, and teachers have different opinions. We have weekly staff meetings, and teachers always report what they saw or heard, or whether something needs to improve in a direct way...In our kindergarten, subordinates can always point out leaders' mistakes. We propose that all problems and mistakes be shared to improve our work. [4-1-002]

Leaders championed teachers challenging them. Teacher I shared that:

In fact, the leaders at this kindergarten have been telling us to learn to challenge their decisions. When our leaders give us instructions or comments, if we are unable to finish them, or their instructions are not suitable for the children in our classrooms, we need to pose our questions about those instructions. These questions challenge leaders, and it is a good way to rethink leaders' instructions and understand their intentions. When they give us instructions, our reactions and thoughts also help them to rethink. It is good to promote thoughts about instructions and implementation, rather than just doing what the leader says. In fact, this allows us to reflect and learn. [3-4-032]

Middle leaders should be open-minded about accepting teachers' work challenges. Teacher K shared that middle leaders in their kindergarten were open-minded and welcoming of teachers' challenges, saying:

When she [middle leader] makes aims and objectives, she always tells us that if we think they are not suitable for children in our classroom when we write up the lesson plan, we should just come and discuss it with her and we refine it together. Maybe someone thinks that, as a teacher, how could you dare to change the leaders' aims and objectives, and that it may challenge leaders' authority. However, she does not. She is open-minded and accepts others' challenges and confusion. [4-4-036]

Encouraging different opinions from teachers made teachers feel that they were colleagues working for the kindergarten with different responsibilities. Teacher G shared that:

We have enough freedom in our work, and we have the right to question leaders' decisions regarding our work. Middle leaders make us feel that every position is equal in the kindergarten, and different titles simply mean different responsibilities. [3-4-014]

They also had a sense of self-achievement and a sense of belonging to the kindergarten.

Teacher I added that:

Owning the freedom and power to question the decisions made by leaders makes me feel that they are willing to hear our voice and care about our opinions. It makes me have a sense of self-achievement and belonging to this kindergarten. [3-4-015]

The sense of belonging contributed to a decrease in teachers' turnover rate. Teacher H shared that she and her colleagues had been working in the kindergarten for over 10 years because it welcomed and respected teachers' opinions. They liked the democratic and equal atmosphere, and felt a sense of belonging. She said:

You can see from our background information that all three of us have been working in this kindergarten for over 10 years. This is my second job. We stayed to work in this kindergarten for such a long time because we really appreciate the management and leadership in this kindergarten. It welcomes and respects teachers' opinions and makes us feel that everyone in the kindergarten is equal, and the atmosphere is very democratic. We have a sense of belonging to this kindergarten. [3-4-014]

In such cases, leaders empowered teachers to challenge leaders' decisions, which gave teachers influence on the leaders. Middle leaders were expected to be open-minded about

accepting teachers' work-related challenges. This practice enabled teachers to have a sense of achievement and a sense of belonging to this kindergarten, which decreased teacher turnover.

4.2.3.4. Co-learning with teachers

Acting as co-learners, middle leaders learned with teachers. Middle leader C shared how she physically learned with teachers at work. She said that:

I found that teachers needed to learn and improve their skills in classroom decoration. Every time teachers decorated the classroom, I stayed with them and worked with them. We looked for ideas and discussed the plan for decoration. Sometimes we stayed at the kindergarten until 9 pm. In the whole process, I learned a lot and I feel the teachers and I grew together. [2-2-020]

Middle Leader D shared that middle leaders should learn with teachers to understand the problems teachers might encounter. It was easier for teachers to solve the problems they encountered in learning. She said:

Middle leaders should lead teachers to learn and learn together with them. When teachers encounter problems in learning, they can understand teachers' problems and it is easier to help teachers solve them because they had experienced the process of learning. [2-3-018]

Middle leaders also placed great importance on learning and self-improvement. Middle Leader H shared that middle leaders in her kindergarten placed great importance on learning

and self-improvement, and frequently participated in various learning programmes in and out of the kindergarten. She said:

I think middle leaders in our kindergarten are keen to learn, and they frequently lead teachers to learn together. In order to play a leading role in learning, they also grab every opportunity to participate in various learning programmes in and out of our kindergarten. [4-3-002]

To sum up, the middle leaders physically stayed with teachers to learn together in their work. They also placed great importance on their own learning and self-improvement. By co-learning with teachers, middle leaders could understand teachers' problems in learning and help them solve those problems.

In conclusion, middle-leadership practices under the theme of building collegiality are:

- (1) Middle leaders establish TRGs and distribute power and authority to teachers.
- (2) Middle leaders grant teachers decision-making power.
- (3) Middle leaders encourage teachers to voice differing opinions.
- (4) Middle leaders co-learn with teachers to help teachers solve problems.

4.2.4. Building a half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers

Building a half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers is the fourth theme that emerged related to middle-leadership practices. This theme includes caring for teachers' work and life matters, understanding and accepting their emotional needs, and developing teachers' trust.

Participants emphasised that these practices were key for middle leadership to motivate

teachers, while Western literature on middle leadership did not mention them. Moreover, the half-mentor half-friend relationship was a one-way street, from middle leaders to teachers, rather than reciprocal. The remainder of this section explains how these practices were used in the cases.

4.2.4.1. Caring about teacher's work and life matters

With the half-mentor half-friend relationship, middle leaders showed that they cared for all aspects of the teachers' lives, both personal and professional. Middle Leader I shared that she cared about all factors influencing teachers' work and even paid attention to teachers' family issues and relationship situations, as they might influence teachers' work. She said:

We manage anything to do with our teachers' concerns. We need to appease their emotions, consider whether their incomes can support their lives, and even consider the harmony between teachers in the classroom. We need to think and care about all of these things. Besides work matters, we even care about their life issues, because issues such as something happening in their families or having relationship issues since they are still young, may affect their work. Therefore, we need to pay attention to teachers' situations. [5-2-025]

In some cases, there is a teacher union to care for teachers' life issues. The middle leader acted as the leader of the union for the represented teachers. Principal C shared the following:

If there is something happening in teachers' families, like their parents are ill, our teacher union will visit their parents and provide care to that teacher. If the teacher gets married or gives birth to a baby or is ill, we all will visit her and send our best

wishes. Middle leaders are leaders of the teacher union, and they represent teachers.

[3-1-004]

Caring about teachers' life issues, rather than only caring about their work, made teachers feel warm and more accepting of middle leaders' work-related advice. Middle Leader G shared the following:

If there is something happening in the teachers' family, we will send messages to her at the earliest time and care about her like a sister. Providing personal care to teachers makes them know that we are sincerely doing things for them. When I give them advice at work, they accept it easily because they know I am doing things for them. [4-2-029]

Middle Leader A added that caring for teachers' life issues enabled open communication between middle leaders and teachers. She said:

To me, I would like to have good relationships with teachers, and I hope they treat me as a friend. I proactively care for their life issues...in a closer personal relationship, we can communicate without barriers. [1-2-018]

In summary, middle leaders built up a half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers by caring for both their work and life matters. They represent teachers in teacher unions to provide care around life issues. These practices make it easier for teachers to accept work-related advice and promotes open and free communication.

4.2.4.2. Understanding and addressing teachers' emotional needs

Middle leaders were also required to understand and care about teachers' emotions. Acting as a 'teacher influencer', Middle Leader C added that her own experience as a teacher helped her understand and address teachers' feelings and be patient with them. She said:

I am very concerned about their feelings. Because of my own experience as a front-line teacher (and I have over 10 years of experience as a teacher), I know the difficulties and problems teachers face. I do not have requirements of them from a leadership perspective; rather, I stand in their shoes to understand their emotions. [2-2-007]

Middle leaders understood that teachers sometimes might have negative emotions, and they helped teachers deal with those emotions. Middle Leader J shared her view as follows:

Sometimes, teachers may experience negative emotions. This is normal because everyone becomes tired sometimes. If we find that teachers have negative emotions or thoughts, we can understand them and help them deal with it. [5-3-021]

Middle Leader C used the following example to explain how she appeased to teachers' negative emotions:

I will anticipate whether an arrangement for teachers will bring them negative emotions and think about how to appease their emotions, or even try to discuss some change with senior leaders. If the arrangement is good for the kindergarten, I will think about how to help teachers accept it without negative emotions. [2-2-026]

Middle Leader C explained that understanding and addressing teachers' emotions contributed to a harmonious team climate. She said:

I must understand and accept their feelings and do something to appeal to their emotions. This is related to the harmony of the team. Harmony is important. I should first solve their emotional problems, and then focus on work and working well. [2-2-007]

There is always a risk that teachers in emotional distress might have a negative influence on the children. Principal E shared her worries. She said:

In kindergartens, every inappropriate behaviour may have a negative influence on the children. Middle leaders and I have discussed the topic many times, to provide teachers with emotional support. We hope our teachers can work in a peaceful, happy environment full of love and respect. Thus, our children can feel our love and respect. Otherwise, we are afraid that if teachers are unhappy, they may lose their temper and scold children. [5-1-025]

According to the participants, middle leaders should understand and address teachers' emotions, understanding that it is normal for teachers to have negative emotions and helping them deal with those emotions as a way to help them do their work well. This reduces the risk of having a bad influence on the children.

4.2.4.3. Earning teachers' trust

Earning teachers' trust, *xinfu* [信服] and *xinfu koufu* [心服口服], was frequently mentioned by all participants as an effective middle-leadership practice. In Chinese, *xinfu* and *xinfu koufu* mean that middle leaders should build trust with teachers and be sincerely convincing. The participants explained that because middle leaders were in the middle tier, they had less authority than senior leaders did. Their authority came partly from senior leaders but also from their own attributes, such as having a higher level of professional development than teachers. Teacher O explained:

In order to earn teachers' trust, I think middle leaders should have their advantages in work, such as being more professional. Maybe their abilities are less than those of senior leaders are; they should do what they are good at, attracting their subordinates to follow them. They have a lower position than senior leaders do, so they need to have something to convince followers. This is a big difference between the middle and senior leadership. [5-3-010]

To earn teachers' trust, middle leaders need to practice what they preach to set a good example for teachers. Principal D shared the following:

I think as a leader, regardless of whether a middle leader or senior leader, we should practice what we preach. For example, I always tell them that we should be doing what we require teachers to do first, and we should not be doing what teachers are required not to. We should practice what we preach and set a good example to influence them. [4-1-020]

Middle leaders' conduct should exceed the requirements for teachers. Middle Leader G added the following:

When you require followers to behave a certain way, you should demonstrate that you have behaved the same way. We middle leaders should practice what we preach and set an example for teachers. That is to say, as a middle leader, what I require teachers to do, I should do better. [4-2-022]

Middle leaders were expected to behave properly because their behaviours influenced teachers. Teacher L shared that:

This is because they lead the entire team. Middle leaders should behave properly and have their own trust, including how they treat others and deal with problems. Their behaviour and trust have influenced us teachers. [4-4-18]

Teacher K shared how middle leaders set an example of loving children and being responsible for the work. She provided an example as follows:

I remember that we served shrimp to the children for lunch. Our logistics coordinator required the purchasing staff to buy the freshest, high-quality ones, leading us to pick up each shrimp line. That showed us that our leaders care about the children. They did not purchase lesser shrimp at a lower price. From this very small thing, one can see how leaders influence us through their behaviours. [4-4-30]

Treating everyone in the kindergarten equally was also a vital way to earn teachers' trust. Principal C explained that teachers observe how middle leaders deal with issues with their colleagues, and shows of bias may undermine teachers' trust. She said:

Middle leaders must treat teachers both fairly and equally. If middle leaders have any bias for someone, for example, if one teacher made a mistake and middle leaders show bias, everyone sees it and knows about it. If a middle leader does not hold themselves and teachers accountable, it may have a negative influence on the team, which affects everyone's morale and builds distrust of the middle leaders. [3-1-021]

Middle Leader D explained the importance of equality in kindergartens, which is related to the teacher-turnover rate. She said:

Because most of our young teachers were born in '90s, they think equality is important in their work. If there are inequalities, teachers may not be convinced and be unhappy with work; they may quit their jobs, which puts our kindergarten in a messy situation. You know, it is very hard to hire qualified teachers, so we emphasise the equal climate and treat everyone equally. [2-3-026]

However, some participants shared that teachers' emotions should be considered when dealing with their mistakes. Sometimes, it was better to bend the rules and policies. Principal E shared that there should be 80% equality in dealing with teachers' issues rather than 100%, in order to build good relationships with teachers. She said:

I think there is 80% equality in dealing with teacher issues. Sometimes tiny mistakes are unavoidable, and it is not easy to deal with these tiny mistakes 100% equally

following the policies and rules of kindergarten. Strictly following rules and policies has some advantages, but in China, it is not feasible. You should consider the relationship; especially as a leader, you need to be able to earn teachers' trust, and you need to encourage them to work better... You need to tolerate teachers' tiny mistakes. [5-1-021]

Teachers also claimed that if middle leaders did not strictly follow the policy when teachers made tiny mistakes, the teachers were willing to make changes. One teacher said:

If she [middle leaders] does not reduce our performance scores, we are willing to accept her advice and improve our practices. [1-4-021]

Solving problems together strengthened the relationships between teachers and middle leaders, and increased teachers' trust in middle leadership's sincerity. Teachers recognised the importance of middle leaders' role as problem solvers. They said that they appreciated the way middle leaders helped them solve problems, which earned their trust. One of the teachers stated:

This curriculum coordinator is the most professional one we know in kindergarten. All of us teachers are believing her and greatly appreciate her. If there is a problem, in most situations, she will sit down with us and discuss how to solve the problem rather than just reporting to the leader. She never does things just for show. She even helps teachers implement and improve. She always gives us detailed advice and makes us feel that she does things for us. [2-4-010]

Collaborative problem solving gave teachers emotional support, which facilitated closer relationships between middle leaders and teachers. Middle Leader I related that she worked out teachers' problems with them, and that it improved their emotional connections. She said:

I always work with teachers, teaching them through demonstrations and hands-on practices. This is effective because it makes teachers feel less lonely. [5-2-018]

Teacher A explained her views that middle leaders and teachers facing challenges and solving problems together was a way to enhance teachers' trust in middle leaders because middle leaders made concerted efforts and built strong emotional connections, which contributed to a decrease in the teacher-turnover rate. The teacher explained:

Leadership is necessary for the leader; otherwise, the followers will not follow orders. The concerted efforts made by the leader and followers are important. No concerted efforts, no trust. If a task needs to be done well, just having the followers listen to the orders is insufficient. There need to be strategies to convince followers to devote themselves to work sincerely. Making concerted efforts together enables this trust. This is particularly important in education. If teachers are not sincerely convinced to devote themselves to their work, they may change jobs frequently and it may have a negative effect on the children. [1-4-011]

In summary, to earn teachers' trust, middle leaders were expected to build trust with teachers and demonstrate their sincerity through their behaviours. They need to practice what they preach and act as role models. Avoiding bias when dealing with teachers' issues was a way to earn teachers' trust, but sometimes, giving teachers a way out was equally effective.

Shared problem-solving and collaboration between teachers and middle leaders was effective for building strong emotional connections.

In conclusion, the theme of building a half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers is mainly about creating emotional connections with teachers. Effective practices include the following:

- (1) Middle leaders care about teachers' work and life matters.
- (2) Middle leaders understand and address teachers' emotional needs.
- (3) Middle leaders earn teachers' trust by practicing what they preach, being equal, and solving problems with teachers.

4.2.5. Summary of this section

The data analysis shows that there are four themes for effective middle-leadership practices found in this study: *chengshang qixia*, understanding and developing teachers, building collegiality, and building a half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers. Among these themes, *chengshang qixia* and building a half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers were new categories for effective middle-leadership practices in this study.

In *chengshang qixia*, middle leaders acted as a point of transition between senior leaders and teachers. In order to *chengshang*, middle leaders had a share of the principals' leadership in showing teachers' authority and power, but it was limited to tasks only. To *qixia*, middle leaders wholly controlled the quality of teachers' work in order to satisfy senior leaders'

expectations. This practice was important in filling the gap between senior leaders' expectations and the real level of outcomes.

In understanding and developing teachers, middle leaders developed a deep knowledge of teachers' professional development needs in order to provide training and professional support. Teachers' moral development was prioritised in teacher professional development. Middle leaders created individualised development plans for teachers and promoted teachers' professional esteem by encouraging them to achieve higher goals in their work and to participate in professional competitions.

In building collegiality, middle leaders established TRGs and distributed power and authority in them. Middle leaders granted teachers decision-making power regarding their work. They also encouraged differing opinions from teachers, and they co-learned with teachers to help teachers solve problems.

In building a half-mentor half-friend relationship, middle leaders cared for both teachers' work and life concerns. They paid attention to teachers' emotions, understood those that were negative, and helped teachers deal with them. They earn teachers' trust and built trust, which is called *xinfu* in Chinese. That is, they practiced what they preached and acted as role models. Dealing fairly with teachers' issues was a way to make teachers *xinfu*, but sometimes giving teachers a way out was also *xinfu*. Solving problems together and making concerted efforts with teachers also helped earn teachers' trust.

4.3 Contextual Factors

Data analysis showed that the main sociocultural contextual factors influenced the perceptions and practices of middle leadership in this study. These factors are educational reform in ECE, collectivism, the Golden Mean, and moral modelling. The following sections explain how these factors influence middle leadership's perceptions and practices.

4.3.1. Educational reform in ECE

With regard to educational reform in ECE, both central and local governments set standards to supervise and control kindergartens to achieve the agenda of quality-based ECE. At the kindergarten level, middle leaders are the driving force behind leading teacher professional development and curriculum development to achieve the goal of providing quality-based education. Based on this influence, the roles and effective practices of middle leadership perceived by the participants tended to be related to leading teacher professional development (i.e. teacher developer, teacher influencer, understanding and developing teachers) and driving curriculum development (i.e. teacher's work controller, competent co-worker, *chengshang qixia*). Therefore, educational reform influences their roles and working tasks and are related to effective practices.

Decentralisation also influences middle leadership at the kindergarten level. Due to different affiliations of kindergartens (public and private), the external resources that middle leaders could draw from and the distribution of power and authority in kindergartens could vary. In public kindergartens, middle leaders claimed that they had many external resources in driving curriculum development and teacher professional development. Middle Leader C (from a public kindergarten) shared that her kindergarten might be one of the few that received the most educational resources from the district and municipal governments in Chengdu City.

Therefore, both middle leaders and teachers frequently participated in school trainings programmes held outside the school and had several chances to inspect and learn from other kindergartens. She stated:

You know our kindergarten is affiliated to the District Education Bureau...we benefit from it. Because the governments have not only provided strong support to us – such as financial subsidies for children in our kindergarten but also educational facilities, equipment, and resources. Also, they gave our teachers lots of opportunities to study outside. I think I am satisfied with the resources provided by the governments. And we have received top-level resources and support in Chengdu City in terms of financial, cultural, and educational resources. [2-2-011]

Middle Leader D (from a public kindergarten) shared how the curriculum coordinator at her school was involved in external school trainings and used it to promote teacher learning and curriculum development. She stated:

The curriculum coordinator participates in external school trainings almost every month, and each time the training spans several days. Following these trainings, she brings some advanced contents to our kindergarten to discuss with teachers. In addition, our kindergarten belongs to the educational bureau of the government; there are lots of resources from the educational bureau, such as visits by experts and professional materials, to help us to solve problems at work. [2-3-023]

Middle Leader A (from a public kindergarten) also shared that she also invited external experts to provide professional service for curriculum development. She stated:

As a middle leader, I always invite experts from outside of the kindergarten to guide us regarding curriculum development. That is, experts will provide us professional

knowledge on helping teachers implement the curriculum and give us advice for curriculum evaluation. [1-2-034]

Comparatively, the external resources middle leaders from private kindergartens could use were limited, and they heavily relied on commercial ways to purchase external services. Principal C (from a private kindergarten) pointed out that compared to middle leaders in public kindergartens, middle leaders in her kindergarten need more resources, and it was a challenge for her to find appropriate resources for lead teachers to do their work. She stated:

If there is a challenge for middle leadership, I think that pertains to the limitation of resources we can use, especially external resources. Middle leaders need to learn better and creative ideas from outside...I know some principals and middle leaders from public kindergartens operate Master Teacher Studio, which is sponsored by the government. They have more resources to be shared in their networks. However, our private kindergarten depends more on commercial resources. Once, I wanted to buy a set of textbooks developed by a Master Teacher Studio in Shanghai. That set of textbooks was only shared in those member public kindergartens and were not for sale. [3-1-017]

With different affiliations, public kindergartens found it easier to obtain external resources from governments, which helped middle leaders to train teachers and lead curriculum development. Comparatively, private kindergartens needed to purchase external services and the middle leaders in private kindergartens had limited external resources in driving curriculum development and teacher learning.

Due to different affiliations, the power and authority distributed by the principal to middle leaders and teachers also differed. Participants from private kindergartens claimed that their organisational structure was much flatter and everyone held the same power and authority. The information provided by the participants revealed that there was a common slogan in a private kindergarten, ‘Everyone is a leader and everyone has leadership’. Under the principal and vice principal, everyone undertook equal leadership responsibilities. The only difference was their job responsibilities. Teacher H (from a private kindergarten) stated:

I think all the staff are equal. All teachers and staff in logistics with different positional responsibilities are at a level below the principal and vice principal. In this kindergarten, we don’t have hierarchical power and authority after the principal and the vice principal. So we feel equal and are happy to work here. [3-4-012]

One teacher added:

Actually, it can be understood that our kindergarten is a very equal kindergarten. Everyone in our kindergarten is everyone’s equal. Not that the cleaning helpers or carers are at the bottom of our organisation. We don’t treat it like this. [3-4-011]

Teacher K (from a private kindergarten) mentioned that, in her kindergarten, the organisational structure was flatter than in the public kindergarten where she used to work, and teachers in this private kindergarten could directly approach the principal. She said:

When I was working in a public kindergarten, it was over one year before I could talk directly to the principal. All that I wanted to report to the principal, I had to report to the middle leaders, who would then convey to me the response of the principal. Even if the principal saw my mistakes, she didn’t talk to me immediately and directly. She told the vice principal and the vice principal told the coordinator who then told the stage leader who told me. [4-4-015]

Another teacher added:

I have worked in three kindergartens and two of them were public kindergartens. It was indeed common for the principal not to distribute tasks to teachers directly but through middle leaders. In this private kindergarten, the principal sometimes gives us teachers tasks directly, and if I have problems at work, I can directly approach the principal. [4-4-016]

In short, due to different affiliations, middle leadership in private and public kindergartens had different levels of not only external resources but also power and authority distributed by the principals. Middle leaders in public kindergartens obtained more external resources to lead curriculum development and teacher learning, while those in private kindergartens had limited resources and relied on commercial services. The organisational structure tended to be flat in private kindergartens and teachers had more power and authority distributed by the principals.

The influence of educational reform on middle leadership is twofold. First, quality-based education influences the working contents of middle leaders. Therefore, the roles and effective practices of middle leaders were perceived to be related to driving curriculum development and teacher learning. Second, the decentralisation of power and authority with which kindergartens were affiliated to different institutions and companies resulted in middle leaders in public and private kindergartens having different levels of external resources to draw from and different levels of power and authority distributed by principals to teachers.

4.3.2. Collectivism

Data analysis reveals that collectivism influences the perceptions and practices of middle leadership in terms of the following four aspects: a sense of collective consciousness [*jiti*

yishi, 集體意識], majority votes for problem solving [*shaoshu fucong duoshu*, 少數服從多數], considering the overall situation [*guquan daju*, 顧全大局], and a collective sense of honour [*jiti rongyu gan*, 集體榮譽感].

4.3.2.1. A sense of collective consciousness [*jiti yishi*]

Collectivism influences middle leadership's perceptions, and participants asserted that middle leadership is group-based. This is supported by the participants' metaphors indicating that middle leaders were within the group of teachers, such as the leading wild goose of a flock and the leading sheep of a flock. Principal C claimed that there was a sense of collectivism in middle leadership, and that leadership appeared only in the team. She explained her view by using three Chinese characters: 人 [*ren*, people], 从 [*cong*, following], and 众 [*zong*, a group of people]. She said that:

As leadership leads a group of people, there is a sense of collectivism. Leadership exists because there is a team. If using Chinese characters to describe it, you would use ‘人’ (people), ‘从’ (following), and ‘众’ (a group of people). If only one person exists, there is no concept of leadership. Leadership starts with at least two people. In a group, the leader should build a team into a cohesive force, consider their collective interest, and make decisions for the group. It is called collectivism. [3-1-005]

4.3.2.2. Majority votes for problem solving [*shaoshu fucong duoshu*]

In terms of practices, data analysis indicated that collectivism influenced middle leadership with regard to how middle leaders dealt with different voices in the teacher group. When teachers had different opinions, middle leaders tended to use a majority vote to solve the problem, as the majority represented the group's willingness. Middle Leader A shared the following:

I always think about that we are in a group. If I should make decisions for teachers, I use a majority vote. I always respect teachers' decisions under the condition of not influencing the overall situation. I think the majority represents the willingness of the group. [1-2-018]

4.3.2.3. Considering the overall situation [*guquan daju*]

Collectivism also influenced middle leadership to examine the whole picture when dealing with the disagreements/conflicts of opinions between senior leaders and teachers. When middle leaders deal with the differing ideas and thoughts between senior leaders and teachers, they would first accept the senior leaders' instructions and requirements, and then think about how to persuade teachers to accept them; principals expect it. Principal D claimed the following:

Sometimes, there are different opinions or disputes. If it is something that senior leaders think middle leaders should lead teachers to do, middle leaders think about how to persuade teachers and require teachers to implement it. [4-1-019]

Middle leaders agreed with participating principals that they need to persuade teachers to accept senior leaders' decisions, as the principal holds the final decision-making power, and must look at the whole picture of kindergarten development if senior leaders and teachers have different opinions. As Middle Leader H claimed:

The principal holds the final decision-making power and always makes decisions from the whole picture of kindergarten development. If there are complaints from teachers on why I respect principals' opinions but do not accept opinions from teachers, as a middle leader, I will try to persuade teachers and explain why we need to do something through the whole picture of kindergarten development. [4-3-020]

4.3.2.4. A collective sense of honour [*jiti rongyu gan*]

More importantly, collectivism influenced middle leadership by motivating teachers. They tried to use a collective sense of honour to motivate teachers and to align their individual work goals with those of the team. Principal E shared how middle leaders in her kindergarten bonded teachers' collective sense of honour with their class. She said:

In kindergarten, the unit of a group is a class; therefore, the teachers are bonded to their classes. Teachers and their classes influence each other. Middle leaders tend to bond their collective sense of honour to their classes. For example, in the competition of the morning exercises, if a teacher wants to get a medal, he/she wants to do a lot of work and persuade other teachers in her class to practice constantly. Thus, the class

gets a medal. It can be said that a form of collectivism influences middle leadership practices. [5-1-021]

In summary, collectivism influenced both the perceptions and practices of middle leadership. With the influence of collectivism, middle leadership was perceived as being central within the teacher group. Collectivism influenced the way middle leaders solved conflicts among teachers and between senior leaders and teachers. They also tried to use a collective sense of honour to align teachers' individual work goals with team goals.

4.3.3. The Golden Mean

The Golden Mean influences the perceptions and practices of middle leadership through its two meanings: mediating [*tiaojie*, 調解] and taking carefully calibrated measures [*bawo du*, 把握度].

4.3.3.1. Mediating [*tiaojie*]

The Golden Mean was regarded as one sociocultural factor influencing middle leadership. The Golden Mean influenced middle leaders' concepts and practices involving the function of mediation. In terms of its influence on perceptions, participants perceived middle leadership as being like an airplane and a scale to mediate between and balance senior leaders and teachers. Participants claimed that middle leaders needed to find a balance between the two groups. As principal C explained,

While accepting different opinions, middle leaders can also integrate different voices. I think this is largely because of Chinese culture. This is what we call the Golden Mean. With the Golden Mean, everything can be done very well and impartially. It determines the rules of the balance, similar to walking a fine line. Therefore, with the influence of the Golden Mean, middle leaders can control certainty. This influence is important in this regard. [3-1-003]

As mentioned in Section 4.2.1, there were gaps between what kindergartens aspired to and what was presently being accomplished based on teachers' professional levels. Therefore, middle leaders played an important role in dealing with disagreements between senior leaders and teachers. Middle Leader C shared how she dealt with the implementation disagreements between senior leaders and teachers, saying:

You know, we need to obey the instructions and arrangements provided by senior leaders. If teachers report any obstacles or problems in implementing them or I think it might be difficult or unfeasible for teachers to do so, I will think about how to persuade senior leaders to accept my idea and to mediate. [2-2-027]

4.3.3.2. Taking carefully calibrated measures [*bawo du*]

Influenced by the Golden Mean, middle leaders consider diverse factors when dealing with teachers' mistakes, such as the relationship between the teacher and the middle leader, teachers' emotions, and further behaviours of teachers, rather than strictly following the kindergarten rules and policies. When middle leaders taking so many factors into

consideration, they needed to find the right position to balance the influence these factors. Principal E shared how middle leaders were influenced by the Golden Mean while dealing with teachers' mistakes and the consideration behind their behaviour. She said:

Our Chinese culture emphasises the Golden Mean. Middle leaders should find the right position to balance the influence of many factors. For example, you should consider the relationship, especially as a leader, and you need to earn teachers' trust and encourage them to improve their work. Additionally, as we are working in a kindergarten, if middle leaders deal with teachers' mistakes improperly, it may have a negative influence on the children...like when teachers lose their temper, they may scold the children. [5-1-021]

In summary, the Golden Mean influenced both the perceptions and practices of middle leadership. Influenced by the Golden Mean, middle leaders needed to mediate between senior leaders and teachers and keep them balanced. When dealing with teachers' mistakes, middle leaders need find the right position to balance various influential factors rather than strictly following kindergarten rules and policies.

4.3.4. Moral modelling

Moral modelling influences the perceptions and practices of middle leadership in three ways: convincing teachers to prioritise high morality [*yide furen*, 以德服人], demonstrating professional ethics and high morality to teachers [*shifeng shide*, 師風師德], and following traditional virtues [*chuangtong meide*, 傳統美德].

4.3.4.1. Convincing teachers to prioritise high morality [*yide furen*]

In Chinese culture, leaders should have high moral standards, and they should model those standards to their followers. Influenced by governmental requirements, middle leaders in this study used diverse methods to develop teachers' ethics and morality, such as regularly conducted training and meetings and launching related activities. As leader, middle leaders were expected to hold high moral standards and model them for teachers. They considered that middle leadership should prioritise morality. Teacher B used the Chinese idiom, *yide furen* [以德服人], to describe how middle leaders should convince teachers with their high morality. She said:

Middle leaders should convince teachers by their high morality [以德服人] and act as moral models for teachers. They should practice what they preach to influence and lead teachers. Before expecting teachers to have high moral standards, they should demonstrate those high moral standards themselves. [1-4-024]

This also echoes the idea that middle leaders should practice what they preach and act as role models for teachers in order to earn their trust.

4.3.4.2. Demonstrating professional ethics and high morality to teachers [*Shifeng shide*]

Morality [*de*, 德], based on the information provided by participants, referred to the basic ethics and integrity of character. Ethics refers to professional ethics. Because middle leaders had to guide the ethical and moral development of teachers, they need to set a good example for teachers to follow. One middle leader even pointed out that the ethical and moral

behaviours of middle leaders represented the standard rules and policies of kindergarten.

Middle Leader I explained:

Important social norms and cultural values influence middle leadership...I think it should influence professional ethics. We develop teachers' professional ethics and morality. We need to guide teachers regarding their behaviours. What kind of behaviours should they not exhibit and what words should they not speak to children. We need to set an example for them. It is a kind of behavioural interpretation of the rules and policies of the kindergarten. [5-2-027]

4.3.4.3. Following traditional virtues [*chuantong meide*]

Morality also refers to traditional virtues. The traditional virtues mentioned by the participants were etiquette and respecting others. Based on the information given by them, these traditional virtues guided middle leaders to build good relationships with senior leaders and teachers, which resulted in the kindergarten having a warm team atmosphere. Middle Leader D shared her view:

There are some traditional virtues we need to follow...we middle leaders are like a glue that helps stick the upper level with the lower level. This function of middle leaders requires us to have high-standard social skills. We need to be positive and know our traditional etiquette and know how to be polite to each party. For example, Ms. Betty (Middle Leader C) has done well in this aspect. She knows how to respect the principal and support teachers in an appropriate way. She also

supports my work and I, of course, support her work. Therefore, I think the team atmosphere of the kindergarten is warm and positive. [2-3-024]

Principal C added that traditional virtues also helped middle leaders have an open mind and accept the different voices and opinions of teachers. She said:

Our traditional virtues guide middle leaders on how to work with others and deal with work relationship with others. We need this to guide us, especially dealing with different voices. I think middle leaders should be open-minded to respect others' opinion and consider the different voices. [3-1-022]

To sum up, moral modelling influences the practices of middle leadership by paying attention to teachers' moral development and setting moral examples for teachers to *yide furen*. This morality includes both professional ethics and high moral standards among teachers, as well as traditional virtues. Moral modelling influences middle leadership to demonstrate high-standard behaviours of professional ethics for teachers to follow. The traditional virtues of morality guide middle leadership to build good relationships with senior leaders and teachers.

4.3.5. Summary of this section

The data analysis shows that four main sociocultural factors influenced the perceptions and practices of middle leadership in this study: educational reform in ECE, collectivism, the Golden Mean, and moral modelling.

The influence of educational reform on middle leadership had two folds. The first one is that the quality-based education influenced the working contents of middle leaders. Therefore, the roles and effective practices of middle leaders were perceived relating to leading curriculum development and teacher learning. The second one is that the decentralisation of power and authority with which kindergartens were affiliated to different institutions and companies. Due to the different affiliations of kindergartens, middle leaders in public kindergartens and private kindergartens had different levels of external resources to draw from and had different levels of power and authority distributed from principals to teachers.

Collectivism influenced middle leaderships' perceptions and practices. Under its influence, middle leadership was perceived as being central within the teacher group. Collectivism affected the way middle leaders resolved conflicts in the teacher group. They also tried to use a collective sense of honour to align teachers' individual work goals the team's goals.

The Golden Mean influenced the perceptions and practices of middle leadership, helping them mediate the work and relationships between senior leaders and teachers. When dealing with teachers' mistakes, middle leaders need to find the right position to balance influential factors rather than strictly following kindergarten rules and policies.

Moral modelling influenced middle-leadership practices. Middle leadership prioritised teachers' moral development and launched regular training, meetings, and relevant activities. More importantly, they acted as moral models for teachers, earning teachers' trust through their behaviour.



Chapter 5 Discussion

Chapter 4 presented and discussed the main findings of this study. It addressed three research questions exploring the perceptions and practices of middle leadership and the contextual factors shaping them. This chapter aims to interpret the findings as a more contextualised fabric to gain a more focused understanding of middle leadership in ECE in China.

This section has three subsections. The first subsection identifies three main features of middle leadership in the ECE in China. The second subsection discusses the effective practices of middle leadership in the eyes of ECE practitioners in China. Subsection three discusses the contextual factors shaping middle leadership in China's ECE. As such, these may contribute to the understanding of middle leadership in relation to context.

5.1. Features of Middle Leadership in ECE in China

Findings of the first research question (Section 4.1) show that middle leaders are **a group of leaders between senior leaders and teachers of the hierarchical structure, while mainly working with and for the teacher group and demonstrating strong professional competence**. Many studies conceptualise middle leadership as a group of people in the middle tier of the organisation (e.g. Busher, Hammersly-Fletcher & Turner, 2007; Caughron & Mumford, 2012; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Aubrey-Hopkins & James, 2002; Bryant, 2019), rather than just a title or position. The multiple roles and responsibilities of middle leadership uncovered in this study were in line with those found in Western studies: middle leaders had roles and responsibilities at both the organisational level and in the teacher group (Caughton & Mumford, 2012), while their roles and responsibilities were mainly perceived in the teacher group. They were also perceived as having positional characteristics and skills.

Principals, middle leaders, and teachers viewed middle leadership through downward, lateral, and upward angles. Principals recognised that middle leadership should functionally connect senior leaders and teachers and be caring and practical in guiding teachers to implement the principals' plans. It is a downward delegation of principal leadership. Principals expected that distributed power and authority to middle leadership would help guide teachers to implement their plans and instructions. Middle leaders views middle leadership through a lateral and self-reflecting angle. They perceived the importance of their leadership role in managing and guiding teachers. They also noticed the positional skills a middle leader should possess to provide teachers emotional value. Teachers perceived middle leadership through an upward angle. They recognised the leading role of middle leadership in driving their professional development and as their agent representing teachers' benefits. They also highlighted the emotional value of middle leadership. Teachers expected the style of middle leadership to be transformational leadership. Comparisons between the perceptions of participants in different positions revealed that the perceptions of principals on middle leadership focused more on the tasks, not on identifying the importance of the leadership role of middle leaders. Comparatively, both middle leaders and teachers recognised the leadership role of middle leaders in organisation and in the teacher group.

The key features of the middle leadership in ECE in China are as follows:

1. Middle leaders playing a key mediating role between the senior leaders and teachers in the hierarchical structure.
2. Middle leadership is positioned in the teacher group rather than in the organisation.
3. Middle leaders demonstrate strong professional competence.
4. Middle leadership is expected to be transformational leadership.

Feature 1: Middle leaders playing a key mediating role between the senior leaders and teachers in the hierarchical structure.

Middle leaders were perceived as being between senior leaders and teachers, and played significant functional roles, such as co-workers and mediators, in mediating between them. Participants' metaphors described middle leaders' role as competent co-workers in ensuring kindergarten operation as being the central of three gears, the dial of a watch, and a peach pit. These metaphors highlighted the central and important position middle leadership plays in kindergarten operations. Participants asserted that middle leaders play dual roles, in both management and practice, and are capable of implementing almost everything in the kindergarten. They mediated the work being passed from the senior leaders to teachers, and kept the two sides in balance to lead teachers forward. In the process of functional mediation, middle leaders employed both upward communication of teachers' feelings with the senior leaders and downward communication and mediation of senior leaders' demands with teachers, acting as both a buffer and a bridge (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 462).

The 'engine room of the school' (Toop, 2013, p.58) is more appropriate for describing the importance of middle leadership's role as a competent co-worker and mediator in leading educational reform in kindergartens in China. As described in Section 1.1.2, the aim of China's educational reform and development in ECE is to promote quality education (Liu, 2009) and focus on curriculum development at the school level (Liu & Dunne, 2009). As noted in Section 1.1.2.2., the teachers are the frontiers in the educational reform but the level of their professional development is low (18% of full-time teachers holding a bachelor's degree or above). Under such circumstances, whether the goal of quality early childhood education can be achieved is questionable. Therefore, there is a gap between what the

kindergartens are expected to achieve in the current education reform and what they have done. At the school level, this gap is reflected in the difference between the principal's expectations and the real outcomes teachers could achieve. The role played by middle leaders was to fill this gap by acting as a competent co-worker and mediator, taking dual roles in management and practice, and implementing almost all of the necessary changes. In this context, middle leadership's mediating role in kindergartens in China is much more significant than acting as a 'buffer and bridge'; it also acts as the 'engine' that drives kindergarten development.

Feature 2. Middle leadership is positioned in the teacher group.

This study found that participants tended to perceive middle leadership's roles and functions in relation to the teacher group, such as 'teacher developers', 'teacher influencers', 'teachers' work controllers', and 'resource carriers'. This can be explained by the influence of socialist collectivism. Socialist collectivism's core principle is to serve people and stick to the mass line (*qunzhong luxian*). The mass line method is that leaders should come 'from the masses, to the masses'; that is, leaders should sit in among followers and consult their opinions to understand their thoughts and extract their main ideas for how to better serve their followers (Xia, 2020). The metaphors used by participants, such as the central circle of two circles, leading wild goose of a flock, leading sheep of a flock, and string in a bracelet, showed that middle leaders were perceived as members of the teacher group.

Studies conducted in Western countries found that the concepts of middle leaders' roles lacked clarity, and managerial roles undermined leadership roles (Cranston, 2006; Javadi, 2012; Busher, & Ng, 2017; Wise, 2001). Participants' metaphors, such as the leading goose or sheep of a flock, a lighthouse, light bulb, and scaffolding, demonstrate that participants

were able to recognise and highlight middle leadership's 'leading' role for teachers in the teacher group. The core to the metaphors teachers proposed about middle leadership is the idea of moving teachers in the right direction, promoting their professional development, and boosting their positive feelings, all of which have been recognised as effective leadership practices (Jorgensen, 2016; LaPointe-McEwan, Deluca, & Klinger, 2017). That is, middle leadership's 'leading' role can be recognised through its practices with teachers in the teacher group.

However, some middle-leadership roles identified in Western studies, such as policy making and strategic planning (Ghamrawi, 2010; Lai & Pratt, 2004), were absent in the present findings. This is in line with a Chinese study conducted by Guo (2011), which showed that middle leaders (TRG leaders) in Chinese schools were weak in the areas of discipline planning ability and organisational ability because they were seldom involved in these areas. ECE uses the principal-responsibility system (Section 1.1.2.1.); the principal is responsible for kindergarten operation. Middle leadership demonstrates responsibility, power, and authority, which are distributed from principal leadership (Friedman, 2011; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017). As the participants shared, middle leaders only held power and authority over specific tasks, such as arranging activities or determining who could participate in them. Financial management and human resources are still controlled by the principals.

Feature 3: Middle leaders demonstrate strong professional competence

This study found that middle leaders were expected to have strong professional competence. That competence supports middle leaders' credibility in accomplishing the roles as 'teacher developer', 'competent co-worker', 'teacher influencer', and 'teacher's work controller' identified in this study. As Wang and Li (2014) claimed, middle leaders assist principals'

work in five areas, three of which are related to middle leaderships' professional competence. For example, middle leaders should assist principals in managing teaching activities and strictly follow the *guidelines*. Middle leaders assist the principal in caring for the children, such as by regular physical examination, disinfection at different times of a day, designing menus, and other management work related to the children's daily care. The principal also depends on middle leaders to promote professional development in teachers' daily work by launching diverse training activities. The State Council of China (2012) requires that in-service teachers must have at least 360 h of teacher professional development over a five-year training cycle. School-based professional development activities should be prioritised, and middle leaders take responsibility for promoting teachers' professional development. In Chengdu, kindergartens are required to prepare a professional development portfolio for each teacher, which are usually done by middle leaders. Therefore, middle leaders are expected to be highly competent to accomplish their work.

Middle leadership was perceived as the centre of teachers, and more professional. This is probably due to the unsatisfactory level of teacher development in ECE in China. In a mature professional organisation, if every member is supposed to be professional and competent, possession of strong professional competence is not deciding factor for a leader. However, in the ECE in China, given teachers' unsatisfactory level of professional development, a teacher can stand out by possessing strong professional competence, as suggested in the metaphor of the two circles that illustrated that middle leaders were from teachers, were more professional.

Feature 4: Middle leadership is expected to exhibit transformational leadership.

This study also revealed that participants in different positions had different role expectations of middle leaders. Principals perceived the function of mediators between senior leaders and teachers in connecting and promoting communication. Middle leaders perceived their important role as mediators in conveying information, serving each party, controlling teachers' work, providing resources, and guiding teachers to implement plans to achieve the goals set by the principal. They even regarded their roles between senior leaders and teachers as the 'heart' of kindergarten operations. While teachers perceived middle leaders were positioned between senior leaders and teachers, they tended to view them as representing teachers in mediations with senior leaders. To principals and middle leaders, the role of mediator is one of the most important, because principals need middle leaders to assist them, given not only the gap between senior leaders' expectations and demands and the outcomes teachers could reach, but also the unsatisfactory levels of professional development of teachers in ECE in China (Section, 1.1.2.2.). As teachers counted middle leaders as members of the teacher group and as teacher leaders, they expected them to represent teachers' benefits and to mediate with senior leaders.

In relation to teachers, principals expected middle leadership to assist them and provide care for teachers. Teachers expected middle leadership to provide emotional value and care. Middle leaders expected middle leadership to have the ability to control their own emotions in order to provide emotional value to teachers. Providing care and emotional value to subordinates is an important component of transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1989; Podsakoff et al., 1996). Therefore, middle leadership is expected to exhibit transformational leadership.

Regarding the work of middle leaders, principals perceived that middle leadership should be practical. Middle leaders highlighted that they should inspire teachers in their work and

teachers expected middle leadership to sit among them in the teacher group and demonstrate positional characteristics and skills in leading teacher professional development. A transformational leader ‘enhance intellectual atmosphere, model what it means to be professional educators, extend personal concern for colleagues, and inspire them to their best efforts.’ (Printy, Marks, & Bowers, 2009, p.505).

In summary, perceptions of middle leadership in this study were in line those identified in Western studies, while three key features of middle leadership in ECE in China have been unveiled and discussed. These features relate to the important roles and functions of leading school-level educational reform and expectations of the roles and functions of middle leadership.

5.2. Effective Practices of Middle Leadership in ECE

The findings related to the second research question show that there were four main categories of practices identified in the study: *chengshang qixia*, understanding and developing teachers, building collegiality, and building a half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers. This section will discuss why these categories and practices were perceived to be effective, as supported by previous studies in both Western and Chinese contexts.

5.2.1. *Chengshang qixia*

Chengshang qixia echoes the important role that middle leadership plays in mediating between senior leaders and teachers. As discussed earlier in this chapter, under the

circumstances that the professional development level of the kindergarten teachers is low in ECE in China, middle leaders play an important role in leading teachers to accomplish tasks given by the principal and fulfilling the task's requirements. In *chengshang qixia*, middle leaders strictly follow the principal's instructions and orders and have to control and ensure the quality of teachers' work with regard to satisfying senior leaders' expectations. Through *chengshang qixia*, middle leaders are involved in both upward communication with senior leaders and downward communication with teachers (Bennett et al., 2007), and thus are able to influence school improvement vertically (Dinham, 2007).

How middle leadership mediates the work relationships between senior leaders and teachers is central to *chengshang qixia*. The study conducted by Friedman in 2011 on the relationship between senior and middle-school leadership has indicated that middle leadership emulates principal leadership, but with limited amounts of authority distributed from the principal. In previous studies in the Western context, although the amount of authority distributed is limited at the department level, middle leadership still holds the authority to set departmental direction (Dinham, 2007; Koh et al., 2011). However, in this study, the power and authority distributed from the principal were mainly focused on curriculum development or limited to specific tasks. The principal retained most of the power and authority, and middle leaders were expected to absolutely obey them and be responsible for the tasks and demands they required. Yang (2017) argues that, in China, school principals intervene in middle-leadership decisions about the curriculum and leave middle leaders with titles, but without any power and authority. However, middle leaders in this study still tried to discuss the feasibility of the task and comments from teachers to mediate the principal's expectations.

In leading teachers, middle leaders tried to guide teachers to fill the gap between senior leaders' expectations and demands and the outcomes teachers could reach, given the

unsatisfactory levels of professional development of teachers in ECE in China (Section 1.1.2.2.). Therefore, as a compromise between expectation and reality, the nanny-care style of middle leadership practice of *qixia* was recognised: guiding teachers hand in hand to make work plans and controlling the quality of teaching. In this study, middle leaders worked as change agents to affect, suppress, and accelerate changes based on their deep understanding of the teacher group's professional and emotional needs and values (Ghamrawi, 2010). Therefore, they were the implementer in the teacher group to 'make it happen' (Briggs, 2005).

Chengshang qixia enables teachers' work to get on the right track and reach principals' expectations. Middle leaders' sharing of both teachers' and principals' responsibilities is what lies behind this practice. As the participants discussed, middle leaders should be responsible for the work of both senior leaders and teachers. At the same time, they shouldered pressure from both, in the form of the communication and mediation of the senior leaders' demands on the one hand and teachers' feelings on the other, which the participants described as being 'squeezed by the upper pressure side and the lower pressure side' [上擠下壓].

Chengshang qixia also can be found in middle leadership in other educational sections in China, such as primary and secondary education (Wu, 2012; Wang, 2012). However, due to the unsatisfactory professional development levels of kindergarten teachers, middle leaders tend to face more difficulties in leading teacher professional development than those in primary and secondary education. Therefore, the vast majority of middle leadership roles perceived by the participants were related to teacher leaders in leading teacher professional

development. In terms of effective practices, middle leaders need to engage in spoon-feeding to inspire teachers (*qixia*).

5.2.2. Understanding and developing teachers

Understanding and developing teachers has been acknowledged as an effective dimension of middle leadership in both the Western (Jorgensen, 2016) and Chinese contexts (Tam, 2010). Building teachers' capacity and increasing their self-efficacy are middle leaders' main responsibilities in a school. They are directly leading teachers (Leithwood et al., 2006), and self-efficacy has a powerful and direct influence on improving task performance (Bandura, 1986).

This study showed that middle leaders assessed each teacher's needs and created individualised professional development plans, providing development activities based on those needs. By setting specific difficult but attainable goals, which are more effective than easy, nonspecific, or no goals, middle leaders motivate teachers to improve their performance (Latham & Locke, 1991; Locke & Latham, 2002; DuBrin, 2012). Moreover, when middle leaders design departmental aims and plans, teachers' professional development is an important factor in making them achievable. In the two public kindergartens, the middle leaders even guided teachers in making achievable individual work plans. These practices used goal motivation to increase teachers' self-efficacy (van de Laar & van der Bijl, 2001) and improve their performance.

Middle-leader participants shared that they paid particular attention to building teachers' professional esteem by providing support in TRG activities and through professional competitions. For example, in this study, middle leaders encouraged teachers to participate in

project research paper competitions to increase teachers' self-efficacy, which they claimed motivated teachers and made them more proactive in learning and improving their teaching skills. Teachers said that facing challenges and solving problems with middle leaders helped teachers improve their self-efficacy. This is in line with Friedman's study (2011), which showed that teachers reported that their self-efficacy was enhanced when middle leaders participated in learning activities and leading learning with them.

In this regard, middle leaders act as a motivational figure for teachers' self-esteem and a source of their self-efficacy to arouse teachers' intrinsic motivation directly (Kavussanu & Roberts, 1996). This practice is especially important for ECE in China. As mentioned in Section 1.1.2, kindergarten teachers with low professional qualifications and lack of professional rank tended to have low professional self-efficacy. Many studies have provided evidence that teachers' self-efficacy is positively related to their commitment to the school and is found to predict school effectiveness (Blasé, 1986; Rosenholtz, 1991; Blasé & Blasé, 2004). Therefore, practices relating to building teachers' capacity and professional esteem are recognised as effective practices of middle leadership.

5.2.3. Nurturing teacher leadership and collegiality among teachers

Nurturing teacher leadership and collegiality among teachers is one of the main categories of effective middle leadership practices identified in this study. Establishing TRGs, granting teachers decision-making power, encouraging different opinions and co-learning with teachers all fall under this theme. Establishing TRGs changed the organisational structure, and middle leaders distributed power and authority downward to teachers. Teachers in TRGs could make decisions regarding the activities they participated in. Middle leaders also granted teachers autonomy in choosing and participating in professional development activities and

making decisions in their own work. Teachers were encouraged to challenge decisions made by leaders, which made teachers feel that they were working equally with middle leaders for the kindergarten. Co-learning with teachers was a way of showing equality and promoting communication to understand teachers' problems better in learning and work. Through these practices of nurturing teacher leadership and collegiality, professional learning communities (PLCs) (Lee & Ip, 2021) in which teachers learned with middle leaders and made decisions for PLCs and their work were built. Traditionally, teacher PLCs were formed to promote opportunities for teachers to learn together, as they improve student learning (Lee & Ip, 2021). As Lee and Ip pointed out, teacher participation in PLC-like activities in the Chinese context (Hong Kong schools) had likewise extended from their traditional roles in student learning to develop classroom teachers' informal leadership capabilities. The present study is in line with Lee and Ip's viewpoint that teachers were given autonomy in decision-making and to build collegiality in the PLCs.

Power motivation theory supports the effectiveness of nurturing teacher leadership/collegiality, since collegiality is the core of power sharing (Brown, Rutherford, & Boyle, 2000). Collegiality assumes that teachers have the right to share in the departmental decision-making process (Brown, Rutherford, & Boyle, 2000). To this extent, common values, common understanding, common priorities, and the micro-political structure are, therefore, integrative and exclusively held by team members. Further, organisational structure is redesigned by building TRGs to empower teachers (Kim, 2010). As Wise (2001) pointed out, collegiality often relates to school structures and coexists within a wider hierarchy. This views collegiality as a structure (Harvey, 1997; Tight, 2014) which contradicts to an increasing culture of line management, and it can be regarded as a means of defending middle leaders' individuality of the department (Bennett et al., 2007) and providing teachers with

power motivation (McClellan, 19887). Power motivates teachers' desire to influence others, acquire recognition, and gain social status (Chan & Drasgow, 2011; McClelland, 1975). It captures an individual's desire to get ahead (Luria & Berson, 2013) and to exercise informal teacher leadership to lead change beyond their classrooms when school leaders encourage and value their efforts (Angelle & DeHart, 2010). Teachers who have a high degree of power motivation also tend to take initiative, seek responsibilities, and are more eager to learn. Their satisfaction and commitment to school are relatively high (Chan & Drasgow, 2011; Hogan & Holland, 2003; McClelland, 1975; McClellan, 1987). In this study, teacher participants reported that encouraging teachers to express different opinions could their sense of belongings to a kindergarten and decrease teachers' turnover rate. Given the high teacher-turnover rate in ECE in China, these findings suggest that nurturing teacher leadership/collegiality is a way to motivate teachers and decrease the turnover rate.

5.2.4. Building half-mentor half-friend relationships with teachers

Half-mentor half-friend relationship is a phrase widely used to describe the relationship between a leader and followers in the Chinese context. Zhang (2014) explained that the half-mentor half-friend relationship referred to the situation wherein a leader demonstrates some characteristics of a mentor and some characteristics of a friend. As a mentor, a leader should (1) demonstrate a high level of morality and completely respect followers, (2) be knowledgeable and professional enough to be worthy to follow, and (3) know how to point out followers' mistakes in an appropriate and acceptable way. As a friend, a leader should (1) respect followers like they do friends, (2) appreciate followers' work strengths and the efforts they exert, and (3) be sincere to followers to gain their trust. The core of the half-mentor half-

friend relationship is the trust between leaders and followers. In this study, building a half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers encompasses caring for teachers' work and life concerns, understanding and accepting their emotional needs and earning teachers' trust. This category relates to relationship-building, and emotional connections between leaders and followers focus on the socio-emotional, showing consideration for teachers' feelings, being friendly and personally supportive of them, and being concerned for their welfare (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015). The effectiveness of these practices can be explained by trust building, individual consideration, and leaders' effective tactics.

According to Bligh's (2017) explanation of trust building, there might be two core principles for trust building in middle-leadership practice: (1) middle leadership must be able to demonstrate their ability and competence to lead what they require of teachers; and (2) they also demonstrate their integrity and benevolence toward those over whom they wield power.

To the first point, middle leaders in this study were expected to be role models and demonstrate better behaviours or higher moral standards to prove that they were capable, and that target behaviours were achievable for teachers. The second suggests that middle leaders should be benevolent to promote teachers' trust that middle leaders want to do well by them, and demonstrate integrity to show that middle leaders follow sound ethical and moral principles. This is demonstrated by the practices of caring for teachers' work and life concerns and understanding and accepting teachers' emotional needs. To this extent, middle leadership practices support and provide care for teachers by considering their needs and interests (Ertürk, 2010; Fairholm & Fairholm, 2000; Moye & Henkin, 2006; Blasé & Blasé, 1997). Studies in China have revealed the relationship between leaders' moral modelling and trust building (Chen et al., 2011; Li & Shi, 2008; Wong, 2001), which is critical for improving teacher performance in China's educational reforms. Wong (2001, p.371) found

that, in the Chinese context, ‘unless trusting relationships between school leaders and teacher are established, educational reforms in schools that require active support from teachers will be slow and difficult’.

In order to earn teachers’ trust, middle leaders should be role models and practice what they preach, especially with moral modelling for teachers. They should address teacher issues without bias, while sometimes giving teachers a way out if they make mistakes. Middle leaders building strong emotional connections with teachers through shared problem-solving and concerted collaboration. Participants of this study emphasised that these practices were key for middle leaders to motivate teachers, while previous literature on middle leadership has seldom mentioned them. Individual consideration is central to the building emotional connections between middle leaders and teachers, and is one important component of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985, 1990; Bass and Avolio, 1989; Podsakoff et al., 1996). By individualising consideration, the leader’s perceptions and subsequent behaviour is transformed so focus is not just on satisfying the followers’ needs and completing a task; rather, it is on knowing individual differences in needs and developing potential to achieve higher performance (Avolio & Bass, 1995). Thus, this is largely driven by middle leadership’s desire to consider teachers’ personal growth needs and the potential to improve performance.

Teachers were also transformed, in the sense that their needs were continuously addressed. Their perspective may shift from a short-term self-interested mutuality of rewards for performance to a perspective involving a more careful analysis of the contributions (Avolio & Bass, 1995). In practice, therefore, middle leaders display more frequent individualised consideration by showing general support for teachers’ efforts and by encouraging their

autonomy and empowering them to take on more responsibility in line with their growing expertise and interest.

Yukl and Tracey (1992) identified effective leadership tactics that are related to target task commitment and the leader's effectiveness. Among the effective tactics they identified, inspirational appeal, ingratiation, and pressure were used most in a downward direction from leader to followers. The tactics middle leaders in this study used included using emotions as a basis for gaining teachers' commitment and expressing their acceptance of teachers to increase positive regard and influence the teachers' work. Participants called this a 'utilitarian behaviour' that lies at the core of the half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers.

This section discussed how the four main categories of middle leadership practices work effectively. *Chengshang qixia* enables middle leadership to influence kindergarten improvement. Its effectiveness lies in middle leaders acting as change agents to accelerate changes in teachers' work. The effectiveness of practices related to understanding and developing teachers is based on increasing teachers' professional esteem, goal motivation, and power motivation. Building collegiality uses practices supported by power motivation. The core to building half-mentor half-friend relationships with teachers is building trust.

5.3. Contextual Factors

Leadership is a value-laden concept (Gronn, 2001; Sergiovani, 2001) influenced by sociocultural contexts (Bush & Qiang, 2000; Wang, 2007). Contextual factors lead to middle leaders having different roles and responsibilities (Gronn, 2009; Wise & Wright, 2012) and the ways in which they enact leadership practices (Leithwood et al., 2010). The sociocultural context comprises the common social norms, fabrics, and values of senior leaders, middle

leaders, and teachers, and it shapes the situation in which middle leaders control and influence the group process and group performance (Fielder, 1993). Middle leadership's perceptions and practices should be consistent with the sociocultural context to be effective. In this study, the sociocultural factors influencing the perceptions and practices of middle leadership were collectivism, the Golden Mean, and moral modelling in the educational reform and development.

5.3.1. Middle leadership in ECE in the educational reform

Based on the trend of educational reform, both perceptions and practices of middle leadership have been influenced by quality-based education and the decentralisation of power and authority. Given the issues hindering educational reform in ECE – such as the unsatisfactory teacher professional development level, high teacher turnover rate, and tensions between kindergarten and parents – the key to ensure quality-based education is to drive teacher professional development and curriculum development. The findings in this study revealed that one of the significant roles played by middle leaders was that of teacher developers and one of the key categories of effective practices was understanding and developing teachers. Curriculum development is another key agenda in educational reform in ECE in China, which shifted from the spoon-feeding teaching style to encourage children to explore and learn through play. The changing of the curriculum style increased middle leaders' difficulty in terms of guiding teachers to achieve the principals' expectations. Middle leaders were deeply involved in and wholly in control of teachers' work by playing diverse roles and employing effective practices in leading teacher professional development and curriculum development.

Through decentralisation, power and authority have been distributed from the central government to local governments, with the county- or district-level governments bearing the

responsibility for the outcomes of educational reform. At the kindergarten level, it is the principal who is responsible for the operation of the kindergarten. However, due to the diversification of school-operation groups and the co-existence of various funding systems, the principals' degree of power and authority varies. Therefore, in this study, there were some differences between private and public kindergartens in terms of the external resources middle leaders could draw from and the power and authority distribution across the organisation.

Both public kindergartens in this study were affiliated to the District Education Bureau and principals were civil servants who were managed by and directly reported to the Bureau. They could obtain many external resources from the District Education Bureau and the Municipal Education Bureau regarding curriculum development and teacher professional development. Comparatively, private kindergartens in this study were faced with limited external resources, which Principal C claimed was a 'challenge for middle leadership' (See Section 4.3.1). Resources and support gained from external organisations significantly positively influence transformational leadership and organisational innovation (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009).

With different affiliations, the power and authority distributed from the school-operation groups to the principal also differed. Therefore, the principal leadership style varies between public and private kindergartens. In both types of kindergartens, the main power and authority are held by the principal. The difference is in terms of the extent to which the principal distributes power and authority to subordinates. Principals from private kindergartens in this study tended to distribute more power and authority to middle leaders and teachers. The organisational structure was more flat and teachers, who were regarded as

leaders in their work areas, could easily approach the principal. As discussed earlier in this section (Section 5.2.3.), teachers with a high degree of power motivation tend to take initiative, seek responsibilities, and exhibit an eagerness to learn; moreover, their satisfaction and commitment to their schools are high (Chan & Drasgow, 2011).

5.3.2. Collectivism

These findings showed that collectivism influences both middle leadership's perceptions and practices. Middle leadership was perceived as group-based, with one member of the teacher group to leading the others. Middle leaders in this study tended to perceive their roles in the teacher group as 'serving teachers'. In socialist collectivism, the core principles for a leader are to stick to the mass line and serve the people (Ni, 2016). This means that leaders should sit among the followers and consult their opinions and comments to understand their thoughts, then use that information to serve them better (Xia, 2020). Therefore, middle leadership's roles and functions were identified in the teacher group, and included 'teacher developer', 'teacher influencer', 'teachers' work controller', and 'resource carrier'.

This study also revealed that collectivism influenced the way middle leaders dealt with conflicts. There are two levels of conflict that middle leadership must deal with. The first level is conflicts in the teacher group, and the second level is conflicts between senior leaders and the teacher group. Dealing with the conflicts in the teacher group, middle leadership uses majority votes to solve the problem. In dealing with the conflicts between senior leaders and teachers, middle leaders consider the 'whole picture' work to persuade teachers to accept leaders' decisions, which took the 'whole picture' of the kindergarten into consideration. Collectivism's most important property in an organisation is that the levels of decision-making power depend mostly on the interest of groups instead of individuals (Lin & Huang,

2012). As individual members of and leaders in the teacher group, middle leaders deal with different teachers' voices following the will of the majority. As only one component of the kindergarten, when middle leaders make decisions for the teacher group, they prioritise the overall benefits of the kindergarten. Therefore, the interest of every kindergarten member is aligned with the interest of the kindergarten as a whole (Lin, 2008).

This study also found that middle leaders tried to align individual teachers' goals with the team's goals by motivating teachers with group-honours. Collectivism's influence on the team values, goals, and norms contributes to the process of each team member's transformation from individual 'I' to group 'us'. This is supported by the psychological collectivism in which the group goals and norms guide team members' behaviours (Jackson, Colquitt, Wesson, & Zapata-Phelan, 2006). Members regarded themselves as part of the team and were highly dependent on the organisation. Members also show a high level of compliance and are willing to participate in teamwork or group work. Collectivists also believe that team goals take precedence over personal goals, so the members adjust their own behaviours according to the team situation, so they conform to the expectations of role norms and are motivated by group needs and goal orientation (Sluss, Klimchak, & Holmes, 2008).

5.3.3. The Golden Mean

Influenced by the Golden Mean, middle leadership was perceived as a mediator, as described by the metaphors of airplanes and scales, to find a balance of power in decision-making between senior leaders and teachers. As reported by Middle Leader C, middle leaders should mediate disagreements between senior leaders and teachers and keep the two parties in

balance. Influenced by the Golden Mean, middle leadership should first determine the rules and laws governing any conflict between multiple parties, and then act as a mediator who can maintain a balance, be impartial, and satisfy all stakeholders (Zhang, 2018). The difficulty of practicing the Golden Mean lies in handling the degree to which balance can be maintained and all stakeholders can be satisfied (Liu, 2017). Therefore, as reported by participants in this study, mediating the relationship between senior leaders and teachers was the first challenge in work to middle leaders.

The Golden Mean also influences the relationship between middle leadership and teachers. The relationship between middle leadership and teachers was described as being half-mentor half-friend. In Chinese culture, the mentor-mentee relationship is hierarchical (Wang, 2017). As mentors, middle leaders displayed professional skills and knowledge, which gave them prestige, and teachers held them in awe and veneration. Mentors have a very high social status and are respected by trainees, and they hold absolute authority in knowledge and skills. They were recognised as holding the same type of authority as the emperor in ancient China, and the relationship between mentors and mentees is hierarchical (Wang, 2017). As friends, middle leaders provided teachers with personal care, which made teachers feel warm, cared for, and more importantly, equal. This finding is in line with other leadership studies conducted in China that compared Chinese and Western leaders; Chinese leaders tend to care more about employees' personal lives and families (Li & Shi, 2008).

The key to the effectiveness of the half-mentor half-friend relationship is to control the degree to which either role's characteristics are shown. In the participants' view, the Golden Mean's influence on middle leadership was that they must walk a fine line, which guarantees that different parties or affairs coordinate effectively and develop steadily (Huang, 2015). Therefore, in adopting half-mentor half-friend relationship, middle leaders should find the

balance to demonstrate the right degree of the paradoxical characteristics of mentors and friends, and to keep steady and balanced to lead teachers on the right track.

This study uncovered a similar notion that was given to explain how middle leadership treated teacher mistakes equally. Many participants indicated that middle leaders should deal with teacher issues 100% equally and strictly follow the policies and rules, while the principal at Happy Baby Kindergarten claimed that, in the Chinese context, it was unfeasible to be 100% equal to everyone and sometimes giving teachers a way out was more effective in changing teachers' mistake behaviours. The principal explained that giving teachers a way out is influenced by the doctrine of the Golden Mean. Considering teachers' emotions and encouraging them to correct mistakes and change behaviours is more feasible than strictly following punitive rules and policies that might cause negative emotions, which could possibly be taken out on the children. In this regard, dealing with teacher issues 80% equally was considered a more efficient balance as provided by the participant (Section 4.2.4.3.). The Golden Mean helps middle leaders balance the degree of boundary-setting when establishing the school's rules, demonstrating strict or gentle personal characteristics to followers, building a family-like environment, and strictly following policies (Chang, 2020).

5.3.4. Moral modelling

This study revealed that middle leadership emphasised and prioritised teachers' moral development. Morality is at the core of Confucianism, and has long been advocated as the most important basic quality for being a teacher. In addition, given that some kindergarten teachers were accused of abuse, central and local governments issued policies requiring kindergartens to strengthen teachers' morality (Section 1.1.2.4.). The present findings

reported that middle leaders not only launched diverse meetings, trainings, and activities to promote teachers' morality, but also acted as moral models for teachers in professional ethics.

A common Confucian leadership practice is to be a role model for high moral virtue and lead by setting good examples. Confucian leaders lead followers with virtue and regulate them using rituals, rather than orders and penalties; moreover, they expect followers to have a sense of shame and a desire to be an upright citizen (Watson, 2007). Confucianism holds the view that if a leader sets a good example, everyone will behave likewise, and believes that leadership influences followers through their own behaviour; this is referred to as '*yanchuan shenjiao*' [言傳身教]. Therefore, middle leaders in this study behaved as moral models to promote teachers' moral development.

More importantly, the present findings support that moral modelling is an effective way for middle leaders to earn teachers' trust. Confucius believed that the cultivation of individual virtues was the foundation of society (Farh & Cheng, 2000). From the perspective of the government, moral principles, moral examples, and moral persuasion are used to educate and influence civilians (Li & Shi, 2008). Once middle leaders demonstrate moral principles and moral modelling, teachers can believe that middle leaders want to serve them well (Bligh, 2017), building trust, the core concept of morality (Gustafsson, 1998), between middle leaders and teachers (Mayer et al., 1995).

In summary, this section explains how collectivism, the Golden Mean, and moral modelling shape the perceptions and practices middle leaders employed to deal with issues and relationships with senior leaders and teachers. Influenced by collectivism, their perceptions and practices tend to be group-oriented to solve conflicts and motivate teachers. The Golden Mean influences the degree to which middle leaders mediate and keep the other two groups

in balance. Moral modelling both educates teachers on behavioural expectations and builds trust with them.

5.4. Revisiting the Conceptual Framework

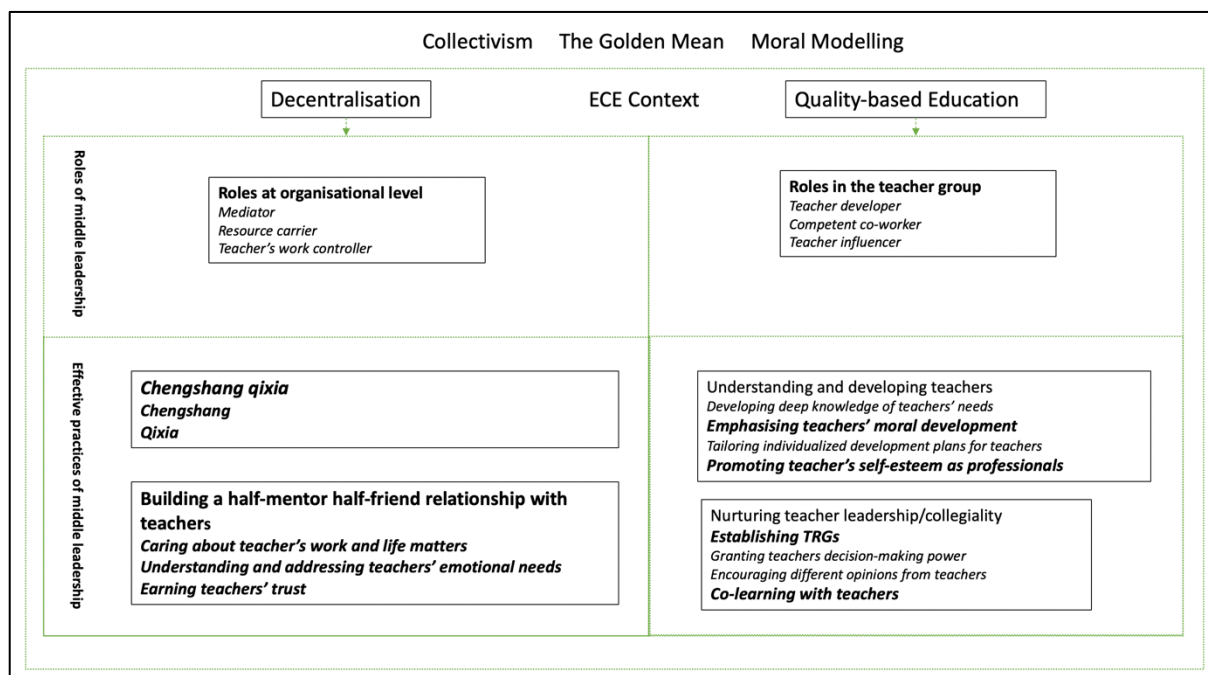


Figure 8. Main findings of this study

In this study, the roles of middle leadership were perceived in terms of its responsibilities between senior leaders and teachers in an organisation. Middle leaders acted as mediators, resource carriers, and teachers' work controllers to practice *chengshang qixia*, recognised based on their roles and practices with teachers in the teacher group. The power and authority of leading the organisation were retained by the principals due to the responsibilities they shouldered.

The role of middle leaders in controlling teachers' work was highlighted compared with the original conceptual framework. Middle leadership tried to guide teachers to fill the gap between senior leaders' expectations and demands and the outcomes teachers could reach,

given the unsatisfactory levels of professional development of teachers in ECE in China (Section 1.1.2.2.). Therefore, they led teacher professional development by step-by-step demonstrations, guidance about their work, and learning together with teachers.

Two categories of effective middle leaders differed from those in the original conceptual framework – *chengshangqixia* and building a half-mentor half-friend relationship with teachers. New effective practices appeared: *chengshang*, *qixia*, emphasising teachers' moral development, promoting teachers' self-esteem as professionals, establishing TRGs, co-learning with teachers, caring about teacher's work and life situations, understanding and addressing teachers' emotional needs, and earning teachers' trust. These new effective practices are components of transformational leadership, which provides individualised considerations to teachers, offering personal care and addressing their individual work-related needs (Zhao, 2019; Rao, 2003). In such practices, middle leaders expressed care for teachers' emotional needs and paid attention to their personal life and negative emotions to avoid their negative influence on children, because some kindergarten teachers were accused of abuse. These practices were also shaped by the contextual factors in educational reform and by developments in ECE in China, such as the decentralisation of power and authority and quality education, collectivism, moral modelling, and the Golden Mean.

Chapter 6 Conclusions and Implications

The final chapter has two purposes. One purpose is to revisit the research process and the major findings of this study briefly. This integrates the findings with the research objectives and research questions. Another purpose is to examine how this research sheds light on the knowledge base of Chinese middle leadership, directions for further research, and leadership development in China. The final chapter consists of three main sections: an overview of the research process, a summary of the major findings, and an examination of their implications.

6.1. An Overview of The Research Process

This research aimed to explore how effective middle leadership is understood and practiced in kindergartens in China and the sociocultural factors that influence educational practitioners' perceptions of middle leadership.

This study was initiated by gaps in understanding the perceptions and practices of middle leadership in early childhood education in the Chinese context. The change in knowledge- and skills-focused and subject-based modes to promote an integrated play curriculum for children's all-round development and a smaller child-to-teacher ratio require middle leaders to act as the force for leading school-based teacher professional development and curriculum development to achieve the goals of educational reform. Few empirical studies in middle leadership have explored the roles, responsibilities, and practices of middle leaders in the ECE in China. Meanwhile, cultural and social contexts shape how leaders enact leadership practices. It is unwise to seek an understanding of leadership concepts and practices based on Western theories (Bush & Qiang, 2000). Therefore, there is a need for empirical research

exploring middle leaders' experiences in educational reform and development in ECE in China.

This investigation was guided by the following research questions:

1. In the context of educational reforms in ECE, how is middle leadership perceived by educational practitioners in kindergartens in China?
2. What are the effective practices of middle leadership as identified by principals, curriculum leaders, logistics leaders, and classroom teachers?
3. In the context of educational reforms in ECE, what sociocultural factors shape the perceptions and practices of middle leadership in kindergartens in China?

The conceptual framework of this study was derived from the existing literature in middle-leadership studies and Chinese sociocultural studies. Using the synthesised framework, senior and middle leadership were understood through their leading roles in the organisation and in the teacher group. The practices of middle leadership were divided into four main categories: setting direction for the department, understanding and developing teachers, building collegiality, and managing the teaching and learning programme. Sociocultural factors influencing middle leadership in China included collectivism, the Golden Mean, and moral modelling.

A qualitative research methodology was used in this study. Metaphors and interviews were mainly used to collect data, and a pilot study was conducted to refine the instruments that were used. Five case-study schools participated in this research through purposive sampling. All of them had been nominated as a Band One kindergarten that was excellent in all aspects of operation, especially in school leadership, curriculum development, and teacher professional development. Multiple perspectives were collected from 30 participants,

including 5 principals, 10 middle leaders (5 curriculum leaders and 5 logistic leaders), and 15 classroom teachers. Participants' personal and professional backgrounds were collected, and particular attention was given to their leadership experience and professional and working background. The data were collected in meeting rooms and offices at the case-study schools. Each school's principal recommended two middle leaders, one for curriculum development and the other for logistics management, and three teachers were randomly selected from the staff roster from each stage. Participants were asked to give a metaphor for middle leadership and to draw a picture of its role in the kindergarten. After explaining the metaphors, the participants were interviewed. Principals and middle leaders had one-on-one semi-structured interviews, while three teachers from each case-study school participated in focus group interviews.

Data management and data analysis in this study were guided by Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework. Both concept-driven coding and data-driven coding were used to reveal the predefined codes and discover any local factors not found in the predefined codes. NVivo software (version 12.0) was used to code the data.

The data analysis revealed that middle leaders were perceived as 'teacher developers', 'competent co-workers', 'mediators', 'teacher influencers', 'teacher's work controllers', and 'resource carriers'. Four categories of effective middle-leadership practices were identified. These categories were *chengshang qixia*, understanding and developing teachers, nurturing teacher leadership/collegiality, and building half-mentor half-friend relationships with teachers. Contextual factors influencing the perceptions and practices of middle leadership were collectivism, the Golden Mean, and moral modelling. The next section summarises the major findings of this study.

6.2 Summary of The Major Findings

This study revealed that middle leadership was perceived to have six different roles in these five kindergartens in China. As ‘teacher developers’, middle leaders led teachers in on-site professional development to learn new curricula and inspired teachers to have valuable opinions and ideas about teaching. More importantly, middle leaders guided teachers in a definite direction in professional development, which is especially important for new teachers. Middle leadership was perceived as ‘competent co-workers’ for both senior leaders and teachers in operating the kindergarten. Middle leaders worked along with senior leaders and teachers, but had different responsibilities. They had dual roles in management and practice, and were capable of implementing nearly every change in the kindergarten. Middle leaders should be responsible for the work of both senior leaders and teachers; therefore, they were perceived as serving both senior leaders and teachers, and shouldered pressure from both groups. Middle leaders were also perceived as ‘mediators’ between senior leaders and teachers, mediating the work transitioning from the senior leaders to teachers and keeping the two sides in balance to lead teachers to move forward. This function was enabled by creating close connections and communicating well, and correctly conveying information between senior leaders and teachers. Middle leadership also gathered and represented teachers to communicate with senior leaders. ‘Teacher influencer’ was also perceived as an important role in middle leadership in kindergartens in China. This role was demonstrated by providing teachers with encouragement, warm feelings, and personal care that made teachers happy and feel they could depend on middle leaders. Acting as ‘teachers work controller’, middle leadership controlled teachers’ work based on the principals’ demands. As ‘resource carrier’, middle leaders provided resources to teachers from the principal and external resources.

This study found that there were four categories of effective middle-leadership practices for leading educational reform at the school level. These four categories were *chengshang qixia*, understanding and developing teachers, building collegiality, and building half-mentor half-friend relationships with teachers. In *chengshang qixia*, middle leaders demonstrated the principals' leadership in sharing some authority and power, although it was limited to certain tasks. Middle leaders wholly controlled the quality of teachers' work to satisfy senior leaders' expectations. In understanding and developing teachers, middle leaders developed deep knowledge of teachers' professional development needs in order to provide training and professional support, prioritising teachers' moral development. Middle leaders individualised development plans based on teachers' needs. They also promoted teachers' professional confidence by encouraging them to achieve higher goals in their work and to participate in professional competitions. In nurturing teacher leadership and collegiality, middle leaders established TRGs and distributed power among TRG members. They also encouraged different opinions from teachers. Middle leaders granted teachers decision-making power regarding their own work and co-learned with them to help them solve problems. In building half-mentor half-friend relationships, middle leaders cared about both teachers' work and life concerns. They paid attention to teachers' feelings, understood negative emotions, and helped teachers deal with them. They built trust and earned teachers' trust, which is called *xinfu* in Chinese. Specifically, they practiced what they preached and acted as role models for teachers. Dealing with teachers' issues equally was a way to make teachers *xinfu*, but sometimes giving teachers a way out was also effective. Sharing problem-solving and concerted effort with teachers could also help earn their trust.

The study also found that the perceptions and practices of middle leadership were influenced by three main sociocultural factors: collectivism, the Golden Mean, and moral modelling.

With the influence of collectivism, middle leadership was perceived as being group-based within the teacher group. Collectivism influenced the way middle leaders solved conflicts in the teacher group, and they also tried to use a collective sense of honour to align teachers' individual work goals with the team's goal. With the influence of the Golden Mean, middle leaders needed to mediate the work and relationships between senior leaders and teachers. When dealing with teachers' mistakes, middle leaders should find the right position to balance relevant influential factors rather than always strictly following kindergarten rules and policies. Middle leadership prioritised teachers' moral development and launched regular training, meetings, and relevant activities. More importantly, they also acted as role models, demonstrating highly moral behaviour.

Thus, this study identified six perceived roles of middle leadership and four categories of effective practices in ECE within the sociocultural context influences of collectivism, the Golden Mean, and moral modelling.

6.3 Implications

In this section, we discuss implications for practice and its implications for research. The implications for practice are intended to provide educational practitioners, such as educational policy-makers, principals, middle leaders, and teachers with practical guidance. The implications for research propose a direction for further research on middle leadership in ECE in China.

6.3.1. Implication for practice

This study aimed to explore the concepts and effective practices of middle leadership in kindergartens in China. In the study, all participants acknowledged the importance of middle leadership in promoting kindergarten development in educational reform in China.

Paradoxically, however, this study also revealed that the vast majority of power and authority were still held by the principal, and middle leaders just took action to the principal's instructions rather than participating in the decision-making process. A study conducted by Lárusdóttir and O'Connor (2017) found that principals did not provide enough autonomy for middle leadership to fully take leadership roles and trust was difficult to build between middle and senior leaders. However, many studies have found that trust is essential for effective leadership (Day et al., 2001). Under this circumstance, more authority and power might be distributed from the principal to middle leaders. As the middle leaders in this study face the tensions of the gap between the principal's demands and real implementing outcomes, middle leaders can be invited to become involved in the decision-making process with senior leaders. They may provide insights from a perspective that enables the decision to be more feasible. Meanwhile, middle leaders who are accountable for outcomes in the implementation process should be empowered with more autonomy and provide more resources.

Middle-leadership capacity building is another crucial issue (Asera, 2017; Brown, Boyle, & Boyle, 2002). In each case, middle leaders played multiple roles and shouldered diverse responsibilities in both the management team and the teacher group, facing pressure from both senior leaders and teachers. Meanwhile, they are also expected to be more professional than teachers and lead teachers' professional development. How can they deal with these

multiple roles and pressures and be capable of taking responsibility in leading teachers? In this study, only one private school said that they provided systematic professional development programmes for middle leaders. Middle-leadership capacity building and professional development have long been ignored in ECE in China, compared with that for principals and teachers. Therefore, middle-leadership capacity building and professional development can be an agenda for educational practitioners to improve school development. A study conducted in China by Guo (2011) showed that middle leaders (TRG leaders) are weak in discipline planning ability, scientific research ability, and organisational ability. In this study, the abilities Guo identified were related to effective middle-leadership practices. Middle leaders were only empowered in curriculum areas, and they lacked practice in human resources and financial management, which are important skill sets for senior leaders. In order to pave the way for middle leaders to climb the career ladder and improve their abilities, all-round capacity building and professional development programmes should be introduced.

This study found that middle leaders faced the difficulties caused by unsatisfactory teacher professional development level and the imperative of needing to lead teachers in educational reform. In order to improve teachers' professional abilities, the State Council of China (2012) requires in-service teachers to have at least 360 hours of professional development over a five-year training cycle. School-based professional development activities should be prioritised, and middle leaders take the responsibility for promoting it. Effective teacher professional development activities are not limited to schools, and teachers should be involved in a wider learning context, including the classrooms they work in, kindergartens, and district institutes (Garet et al., 2001). On the one hand, middle leaders, acting as resource carriers, need to build alliances with multiple stakeholders to bring resources to lead teacher

professional development. On the other hand, the district education bureau needs to build platforms, and create policies for middle leaders to cooperate with outside school stakeholders to enable teacher learning in a wider context. This is vital for kindergartens to build networks in which outside school resources are available for middle leaders to draw on.

6.3.2. Directions for future research

In addition to the practical issues addressed above, the findings of this study highlight a number of implications worthy of further empirical research. The questions requiring further research relate to (1) the extent to which principals are willing to empower and distribute authority to middle leaders, (2) the long-term influence of effective middle-leadership practices on kindergarten development, (3) the degree to which middle leaders, particularly those who have teaching duties, can actually affect children's learning through their leadership practices, and (4) the differences of role expectations between middle leaders in different kindergarten departments, such as curriculum leaders and logistics leaders.

The primary focus of this study is to explore the concepts and practices of effective middle leadership. Each of the participating principals at the case-study schools expressed interest in having middle leaders play multiple important roles in their kindergarten. However, they had taken very little action toward empowering middle leaders and providing them with enough authority to make decisions for their work. When talking about the decentralisation of power and authority, they emphasised empowering teachers and establishing teacher leadership, and admitted that the power and authority they distributed to middle leaders were mainly restricted in specific activities, such as the range of teacher participation in curriculum activity. Although middle leaders play roles in both the management team and the teacher group and their work content is not only in professional areas but also related to budgetary,

personnel management, and resource allocation (Lai & Pratt, 2004), they follow the principals' instructions and lack sufficient autonomy and authority in department management. Given this situation, a question arises here: to what extent are principals willing to empower and distribute authority to middle leaders?

Another question left unanswered by this study, but in need of further exploration, relates to how effective middle-leadership practices influence school development in the long term. That is, now that effective practices have been identified and the participants in this study claimed that they were effective in promoting kindergarten development. Will they change along with the evolving sociocultural context? To what extent are these practices effective in promoting kindergarten development? To what extent do organisational contextual factors shape effectiveness of middle leadership? If the influence of the contextual factors shaping these practices is weaker than participants in this study believe, it is worth exploring whether these practices can be applied to other educational settings, such as primary and secondary schools? This study also revealed that middle leadership in private and public kindergartens tend to differ in some practices, such as *chengshang*, teacher training resources, and teacher leadership nurturing. Further studies should explore how organisational contextual factors – such as kindergarten size, band level, organisational culture/values, and organisational structure – influence the styles of middle leadership.

Another question that arose from this research was the degree to which middle leaders, particularly those who have teaching duties, such as leaders of stage, actually affect children's learning through their practices. Grootenboer and Larkin (2019) found that principals and other senior leaders influenced student learning indirectly through middle leaders. The evidence presented in the present study highlighted key middle leadership responsibilities involved in teachers' work in the classroom, such as monitoring individuals'

teaching and solving teaching difficulties. However, this research does not reflect middle leadership's influence on children's learning, which is the core of educational reform and development in ECE in China. Further studies are recommended to explore the influence of middle-leadership practices on children's learning.

This study considered the middle leaders in kindergartens as a whole. Because curriculum and logistics coordinators are in two different departments, their working areas and tasks tend to differ. Are there some differences that exist in their role expectations? Is there any difference that exists in guiding teachers and guiding a logistics team in a kindergarten? Future studies should further explore the roles and practices of different positions of middle leaders in kindergarten.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

This study aimed to uncover the perceptions and effective practices of middle leadership and its influencing socio-cultural factors in kindergartens in the current context of educational reform and development in China. The findings help to address partly the lack of empirical studies on middle leadership in ECE in China.

- Middle leadership played multiple leading roles in both management teams, at the organisational level, and teacher groups at the department level.
- Effective middle-leadership practices were found in four categories: *chengshang qixia*, understanding and developing teachers, building collegiality and building half-mentor half-friend relationships with teachers.
- Middle leadership was influenced by four sociocultural contextual factors: educational reform in ECE, collectivism, the Golden Mean and moral modelling.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

The Interview Guide 访谈纲要

A. Metaphor 比喻 (准备好 A4 白纸、铅笔、橡皮擦)

指示：

1. 请在白纸上画出一个事物，来形容中层领导在领导教师进行课程发展方面的角色。【研究参与者画出图画】
2. 您能解释您为什么用这个比喻来形容中层领导？(probe:请参与者依据画中的特点进行解释)
3. 请另在白纸上画出一个事物或者在之前事物上进行延伸，来形容中层领导在带领教师进行课程提升的时候对教师的影响。【研究参与者画出图画】
4. 您能解释为什么用这个比喻来形容中层领导对教师的影响？(Probe:画中特点进行解释)
5. 您能解释一下您画的这几幅图(中层领导在课程发展方面的角色、对教师的影响、中国文化、中国文化价值)之间的关系？

B. Semi-structured Interview 半结构式访谈

- 1.您认为什么是领导力？
- 2.您认为在您工作的幼儿园中，哪些职位是有领导力的？
- 3.您认为什么是有效的领导力？(如何有效？)
- 4.您认为什么是中层领导力？
- 5.您认为在您工作的幼儿园中，哪些职位是属于中层领导？
- 6.您认为这些中层领导，他们有领导力吗？(Probe:对领导力的理解)
- 7.您认为什么是有效的中层领导力？(如何有效？)
- 8.您认为什么是课程？
- 9.您认为什么是课程发展？
- 10.在这些中层领导职位中，哪些是属于课程领导？
- 11.您认为这位中层领导在课程发展方面担任的角色是什么？(Probe:中层领导扮演的角色和为什么他们这么看待这些角色)
- 12.这位中层领导在课程发展方面担任的责任是什么？(Probe：责任和能力，例如，您作为/认为中层领导所面对的这些责任，哪些是最具有挑战性的？)
- 13.您能不能描述一下，负责课程发展的中层领导跟她的下属之间的关系是怎样的？(Probe:在教师中的位置、同事共权、团队文化的建立等)
- 14.负责课程发展的中层领导是如何影响教师在学校和在教室的工作？(Probe:中层领导对教师的工作的影响，如何引导教师专业发展)
- 15.负责课程发展的中层领导是怎样提升课程的？(Probe:领导课程的实践:核心理念、教育内容和要求、组织和实施、评估和评核)
- 16.您认为负责课程发展的中层领导在课程发展方面，面临哪些挑战？
- 17.负责课程发展的中层领导者是怎么克服挑战的？(Probe：支持、资源、策略)

- 18.您觉得负责课程发展的中层领导在工作方面，需要具备怎样的价值观？（Probe：对工作的态度、个人目标与团队目标）
- 19.您认为负责课程发展的中层领导遵守着什么样的社会和文化规则？（Probe:中国文化价值观）
- 20.您认为社会文化价值观是怎样影响中层领导在课程发展上面的实践？（Probe:文化价值的理解和它们对中层领导力的影响）

C. Questions by positions 分职位问题：

园长：

- 1.请问您认为中层领导力对您担任的园长工作有什么影响？（Probe: 对上级影响）
- 2.您认为中层领导力中的那些有效的策略，对您的工作是有帮助的？这些有效的策略是如何帮助到您的工作的？
- 3.中国文化价值对您和中层领导对于课程发展之间的关系有什么影响？

后勤主任：

- 1.请问您认为中层领导力于课程提升对您担任的后勤主任工作有什么影响？（Probe: 平级影响）
- 2.您认为中层领导力中的那些有效的策略，对您的工作是有帮助的？这些有效的策略是如何帮助到您的工作的？
- 3.中国文化价值对您的工作有什么影响？

课程主任：

- 1.请问您认为您怎么评价您的中层领导力在课程提升方面的作用（Probe:自我评价）
- 2.您认为中层领导力中的那些有效的策略，对您的工作是有帮助的？这些有效的策略是如何帮助到您的工作的？
- 3.中国文化价值对您的工作有什么影响？

教师：

- 1.请问您认为中层领导力于课程提升对您担任的教学工作有什么影响？（Probe: 对下级影响）
- 2.您认为中层领导力中的那些有效的策略，对您的工作是有帮助的？这些有效的策略是如何帮助到您的工作的？
- 3.中国文化价值对您和中层领导对于课程发展之间的关系有什么影响？

Appendix B: Letter of Invitation

Letter of Invitation

You are invited to participate in a project conducted by Ms. Pan He, who is a PhD Candidate at The Education University of Hong Kong.

The aims of this study are to explore how middle leadership is understood and practised in kindergartens in Chengdu, China, from multiple perspectives (principals, curriculum leaders, logistics leaders, and classroom teachers) and to understand how cultural values influence the practices of middle leadership within Early Childhood Education in the Chinese context.

There will be 5 case kindergartens. In each case kindergarten, there will be 6 participants. Total 30 participants in this study to achieve data saturation. The researcher will contact them for accessibility based on the open information.

The methods for data collection in this study are documents, metaphors, and interviews. To collect data from documents, the researcher will ask for documents about kindergarten introductions, graphs of the organizational structures, job descriptions of the curriculum leaders, and curriculum booklets. Before collecting data from metaphors and interviews, the researcher will ask the principal to recommend the curriculum leader and logistics leader to participate in the study. The researcher will also randomly select 3 classroom teachers from staff roster. The 3 teachers selected are working in Junior Class, Middle Class, and Senior Class respectively. These 6 participants will have metaphors and one-to-one interviews individually. The metaphor section costs about 30 minutes. After the metaphor section, each participant will have about 60-90 minutes interview. With permissions of the participant, the interview will be audio-recorded. Subsequently, the researcher will ask the principal to provide any relevant documents mentioned during the interviews.

The participants will be de-identified in all materials which will be published and their names or identifiers will be replaced with pseudonyms or codes in a way that minimizes the possibility of participants being identifiable. Once the data has been collected, the data, such as audio-records, documents, papers, interviews, interview transcripts, etc. will be stored in my personal USB stick which will be encrypted. In order to avoid the risk of losing USB stick, all the data will be backed up by University's online drive which is password protected and reliable for storage. Hard copies of documents, papers, interview transcripts, etc. will be kept under lock and key. Only the researchers in this study can access to the data. After writing up the report, the researchers will secure the data and relevant materials by usage of password protected electronic files. All the materials will be stored for five years. Only researchers in this study know the password. Five years later, all the materials will be destroyed.

Your participation in the project is voluntary. You have every right to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. The results of this research will be reported in the PhD thesis, presented at professional academic conferences and published in professional and academic journals. All the information published will be de-identified with pseudonyms or codes.

If you would like to obtain more information about this study, please contact Ms. Pan HE at telephone number

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research study, please do not hesitate to contact the Human Research Ethics Committee by email at hrec@eduhk.hk or by mail to Research and Development Office, The Education University of Hong Kong.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study.

Pan HE

研究項目邀請函

誠邀閣下參加何畔女士負責執行的研究。她是香港教育大學的博士候選人。

本研究的目的是從多角度（園長、課程領導、後勤領導和教師）來探討中國成都的幼兒園中層領導是如何被理解和實踐課程發展的，並且來理解文化價值是如何影響中層領導在中國幼兒教育中的實踐。

一共有5間幼兒園參與到這個研究中，每間幼兒園有6個研究參與者，一共有30個研究參與者。所有案例幼兒園的聯絡資料在成都教育局的官網上有公示，研究者會通過公開的聯絡資料聯絡幼兒園，得到園長的同意后，進入幼兒園中，讓園長推薦參與者。

數據收集主要是通過檔案收集、比喻和訪談法收集。在通過檔案收集數據的時候，研究者會向幼兒園收集關於幼兒園的介紹、組織結構圖、課程領導的崗位介紹、以及課程介紹手冊等與研究相關的公開資料。在通過比喻和訪談法收集數據之前，研究者會讓園長推薦課程領導和後勤領導參與到研究中。研究者會從教師花名冊中隨機在各年段抽取各一名主班教師參與到研究中。所有的這6名參與者將會與研究者一對一地參加到比喻和訪談中。用比喻收集數據將會持續約30分鐘，其後將會有60-90分鐘的訪談。在獲得閣下的許可之後，訪談將會進行錄音。之後，研究者會請園長提供參與者在訪談中提到的與課程發展和領導相關的重要文件。

凡有關個人身份有關的資料，都將在發表的文章中進行去身份化，用假名或編碼代替以降低被識別的可能性。一旦這些數據被收集，例如錄音、文檔、文章、訪談、訪談逐字稿等，會被儲存在研究者的加密的個人移動硬盤上。為了防止個人移動硬盤丟失的風險，所有數據也會在學校的雲盤上進行備份。文檔、文章、訪談逐字稿等，也會被嚴格上鎖。只有研究者才能查閱這些數據。研究報告撰寫后，與研究相關的所有資料都會被電子硬盤存儲五年，只有是次研究的研究員知道密碼。五年之後，與研究有關的所有資料將被銷毀。

是次研究並不為閣下提供個人利益，但所搜集數據將對研究學習動機的問題提供寶貴的資料。閣下的參與純屬自願性質。閣下享有充分的權利在任何時候決定退出這項研究，更不會因此引致任何不良後果。

這項研究的成果將寫成博士論文，在專業學術會議或者期刊上進行發表。在博士論文和發表的論文中，學校的資料和參與者的信息將會用假名或編碼代替，以去身份化。

如閣下想獲得更多有關這項研究的資料，請與何畔女士聯絡，電話
如閣下對這項研究的操守有任何意見，可隨時與香港教育大學人類實驗對象操守委員會聯絡（電郵：hrec@eduhk.hk；地址：香港教育大學研究與發展事務處）。

謝謝閣下有興趣參與這項研究。

何畔

Appendix C: Consent Form**THE EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION****CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH****Exploring Effective Middle Leadership for Curriculum
Development: Case Studies in Early Childhood Education in
Chengdu, China**

I _____ hereby consent to participate in the captioned research conducted by Ms. Pan He, who is a PhD Candidate at in The Education University of Hong Kong.

I understand that information obtained from this research may be used in future research and may be published. However, my right to privacy will be retained, i.e., my personal details will not be revealed.

The procedure as set out in the **attached** information sheet has been fully explained. I understand the benefits and risks involved. My participation in the project is voluntary.

I acknowledge that I have the right to question any part of the procedure and can withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

Name of participant _____

Signature of participant _____

Date _____



香港教育大學
幼兒教育學系

參與研究同意書

探究有效的中層領導力對於課程發展：中國成都的幼兒教育案例

本人_____同意參加由何畔女士執行的研究項目。她是香港教育大學博士候選人。

本人理解此研究所獲得的資料可用於未來的研究和學術發表。然而本人有權保護自己的隱私，本人的個人資料將不能洩漏。

研究者已將所附資料的有關步驟向本人作了充分的解釋。本人理解可能會出現的風險。本人是自願參與這項研究。

本人理解我有權在研究過程中提出問題，並在任何時候決定退出研究，更不會因此而對研究工作產生的影響負有任何責任。

參加者姓名:

參加者簽名:

日期:

Appendix D: Research papers in school middle leadership

| No. | Author | Year | Title | Description |
|-----|---------------------------|------|---|--|
| 1. | Adey | 2000 | Professional Development Priorities: The Views of Middle Managers in Secondary Schools | Development needs/Empirical |
| 2. | Asera | 2017 | What Do We Mean When We Talk about Middle Leadership? Insights from an Evaluation of the 2016 Leading from the Middle Academy | Middle leadership development programme/ Empirical |
| 3. | Asera | 2019 | The Power of Middle Leaders in California Community Colleges: Why Now is the Time to Foster Middle Leadership: A Call to Action | Middle leadership development programme/ Empirical |
| 4. | Aubrey-Hopkins & James | 2010 | Improving practice in subject departments: the experience of secondary school subject leaders in Wales | Subject leaders' practices/ Empirical |
| 5. | Bassett & Robson | 2017 | The Two Towers: The Quest for Appraisal and Leadership Development of Middle Leaders Online | Role of middle leaders, leadership appraisal and development/ Theoretical |
| 6. | Bennett, Woods & Newton | 2007 | Understandings of middle leadership in secondary schools: a review of empirical research | Middle leaders' responsibilities, effective middle leadership, leadership development/ Theoretical |
| 7. | Branson, Franken & Penney | 2016 | Middle leadership in higher education: A relational analysis | Understanding of middle leadership through relational leadership/ Theoretical |
| 8. | Briggs | 2005 | Middle Managers in English Further Education Colleges: Understanding and Modelling the Role | Responsibilities of middle leaders/ Empirical |

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| 9. | Briggs | 2003 | Finding the Balance: Exploring the Organic and Mechanical Dimensions of Middle Manager Roles in English Further Education Colleges | Roles of middle leaders/ Empirical |
| 10. | Briggs | 2007 | Exploring professional identities: middle leadership in further education colleges | Middle leaders' professional identities/ Empirical |
| 11. | Brown, Boyle, & Boyle | 2002 | Professional development and management training needs for heads of department in UK secondary schools | Middle leadership development/Empirical |
| 12. | Brown, Rutherford & Boyle | 2000 | Leadership for school improvement: the role of the head of department in UK secondary schools | Role of the Head of Department/Empirical |
| 13. | Bryant | 2019 | Conditions that support middle leaders' work in organisational and system leadership: Hong Kong case studies | Opportunities and conditions of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 14. | Bryant, D. A., Wong, Y. L., & Adames, A. (2020) | 2020 | How middle leaders support in-service teachers' on-site professional learning | Practices of middle leadership / Empirical |
| 15. | Busher | 2005 | Being a middle leader: exploring professional identities | Middle leader's professional identities/ Empirical |
| 16. | Busher & Harris | 1999 | Leadership of school subject areas: Tensions and dimensions of managing in the middle | Roles of the head of department, departmental cultural and structure influence on middle leadership / Theoretical |
| 17. | Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher & Turner | 2007 | Making sense of middle leadership: community, power and practice | social and political contexts influence on middle leadership actions/ Theoretical |
| 18. | Cardno & Bassett | 2015 | Multiple perspectives of leadership development for middle-level pedagogical leaders in New Zealand secondary schools. | Leadership development/ Empirical |

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| 19. | Carter | 2012 | Empowering middle leaders – trends in school leadership research on the principal's impact on school effectiveness | Effective middle leaders/ Theoretical |
| 20. | Caughron & Mumford | 2012 | Embedded leadership: How do a leader's superiors impact middle-management performance? | Middle leaders' superiors influence / Empirical |
| 21. | Celikten | 2001 | The instructional leadership tasks of high school assistant principals | Instructional leadership of assistant principal/ Empirical |
| 22. | Choi | 2013 | Gender identities and career aspirations of middle leaders Cases in Hong Kong secondary schools | Gender identities of middle leaders /Empirical |
| 23. | Cranston | 2006 | Leading from the middle or locked in the middle? Exploring the world of the middle-level non-state school leader | Roles of middle leaders/ Empirical |
| 24. | Dinham | 2007 | The secondary head of department and the achievement of exceptional student outcomes | Roles of head of department/ Empirical |
| 25. | Ebbers, Conover, & Samuels | 2010 | Leading from the Middle: Preparing Leaders for New Roles | Leadership preparation/ Theoretical |
| 26. | Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer & Ronnerman | 2016 | Facilitating a culture of relational trust in schoolbased action research: recognising the role of middle leaders | Relational trust as a practise of middle leadership/ Empirical ECE |
| 27. | Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, Hardy & Rönnerman | 2019 | Driving change from 'the middle': middle leading for site based educational development | Practices of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 28. | Farchi & Tubin | 2019 | Middle leaders in successful and less successful schools | practices of subject leaders to school success/ Empirical |

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| 29. | Fitzgerald | 2009 | The Tyranny of Bureaucracy Continuing Challenges of Leading and Managing from the Middle | practices and challenges of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 30. | Fitzgerald & Gunter | 2006 | Leading Learning: middle leadership in schools in England and New Zealand | Middle leaders' role in leading learning/ Empirical |
| 31. | Forde et al. | 2019 | Evolving policy paradigms of middle leadership in Scottish and Irish education: implications for middle leadership professional development | Middle leadership development/ Empirical |
| 32. | Franken, Penney, & Branson | 2015 | Middle leaders' learning in a university context | Learning opportunities for middle leaders /Empirical |
| 33. | Friedman | 2011 | The myth behind the subject leader as a school key player | Real-life role of middle leaders/ Empirical |
| 34. | Gallos | 2002 | The Myths and Realities of Academic Leadership in the Middle | |
| 35. | Ghamrawi | 2010 | No teacher left behind: subject leadership that promotes teacher leadership | Roles of subject leaders in establishing and nourishing teacher leadership/ Empirical |
| 36. | Gjerde & Alvesson | 2020 | Sandwiched: Exploring role and identity of middle managers in the genuine middle | Roles of middle leaders/ Empirical |
| 37. | Gleeson & Knights | 2008 | Reluctant Leaders: An Analysis of Middle Managers' Perceptions of Leadership in Further Education in England | Middle leaders' perceptions of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 38. | Grootenboer & Larkin | 2019 | Middle leading small-scale school projects | Practices of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 39. | Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman | 2015 | Leading practice development: voices from the middle | Practices of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 40. | Gurr | 2019 | School middle leaders in Australia, Chile and Singapore | Roles of curriculum coordinator/ Empirical |

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| 41. | Gurr&Drysdale | 2013 | Middle-level secondary school leaders: Potential, constraints and implications for leadership preparation and development | Roles of middle leaders/ Empirical |
| 42. | Hadfield | 2007 | Co-leaders and middle leaders: the dynamic between leaders and followers in networks of schools | network as a practices of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 43. | Hadfield | 2005 | Middle Leaders and the Nature of Distributed Leadership in Networks | Middle leadership within networks of schools/ Empirical |
| 44. | Hall | 2018 | The performative shift: middle leadership ‘in the line of fire | School inspection report |
| 45. | Hammersley-Fletcher & Brundrett | 2005 | Leaders on leadership: the impressions of primary school head teachers and subject leaders | Practices of head teachers and subject leaders/ Empirical |
| 46. | Hammersley-Fletcher& Kirkham | 2007 | Middle leadership in primary school communities of practice: distribution or deception | Conceptually construct the middle leadership in primary schools/ Theoretical |
| 47. | Hammersley-Fletcher& Strain | 2011 | Power, agency and middle leadership in English primary schools | middle leadership as agency/ Theoretical |
| 48. | Harris & Jones | 2017 | Middle leaders matter: reflections, recognition, and renaissance | Brefly review middle leadership research/ theoretcal |
| 49. | Harris, Jones, Ismail & Nguyen | 2019 | Middle leaders and middle leadership in schools: exploring the knowledge base (2003–2017) | Systematic review of middle leadership research/ theoretical |
| 50. | Heng&Marsh | 2009 | Understanding middle leaders: a closer look at middle leadership in primary schools in Singapore | Middle leadership leading learning/ Empirical |
| 51. | Hirsh & Bergmo-Prvulovic | 2019 | Teachers leading teachers – understanding middle-leaders’ role and thoughts about career in the context of a changed division of labour | maintaining middle leadership role/ Empirical |
| 52. | Hobbs | 2006 | Rethinking middle leadership roles in secondary schools | Middle leadership roles/ Empirical |
| 53. | Hung et al. | 2018 | Educational change for the 21st century: “Leadership from the Middle” | School improvement/Empirical |

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| 54. | Inman | 2009 | Learning to lead: development for middle-level leaders in higher education in England and Wales | Leadership development/ Empirical |
| 55. | Irvine & Brundrett | 2019 | Negotiating the next step: The part that experience plays with middle leaders' development as they move into their new role | Leadership capabilities/ Empirical |
| 56. | Irvine & Brundrett | 2016 | Middle leadership and its challenges: a case study in the secondary independent sector | Leadership skills/ Empirical |
| 57. | James & Hopkins | 2003 | The Leadership Authority of Educational 'Middle Mangers': The Case of Subject Leaders in Secondary Schools in Wales | Authority of subject leaders/ Empirical |
| 58. | Jarvis | 2012 | The Necessity for Collegiality: Power, Authority and Influence in the Middle | Collegiality of subject leaders/ Empirical |
| 59. | Javadi, Bush,& Ng | 2017 | Middle leadership in international schools: evidence from Malaysia | roles, responsibilities, role relationships, instructional engagement of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 60. | Jorgensen | 2016 | Middle leadership: A key role of numeracy reform | Roles of middle leaders/ Empirical |
| 61. | Jorgensen, Lamb, & Larkin | 2016 | Middle Leadership: Critical Variables in Building and Implementing Digital Reforms in Primary Mathematics Education | Roles and practices of middle leaders/ Theoretical |
| 62. | Kedian | 2006 | The Case for Middle Leadership! | Importance of middle leadership/ Theoretical |
| 63. | Kerry | 2005 | The evolving role of the Head of Department | Boundary management, roles of subject leaders, and places and roles of heads of departments in school hierarchies/ Empirical |
| 64. | Kirkham | 2005 | Leading and achieving a learning school through developing middle leaders | Leadership development/ Empirical |
| 65. | Koh, Gurr, Drysdale, & Ang | 2011 | How school leaders perceive the leadership role of middle leaders in Singapore primary schools? | Roles of middle leaders/ Empirical |

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| 66. | Lai & Pratt | 2004 | Information and communication technology (ICT) in secondary schools: the role of the computer coordinator | Roles of middle leaders and obstacles to effective leadership/ Empirical |
| 67. | LaPointe-McEwan, DeLuca & Klinger | 2017 | Supporting evidence use in networked professional learning: the role of the middle leader | Roles of middle leaders/ Empirical |
| 68. | Lárusdóttir & O'Connor | 2017 | Distributed leadership and middle leadership practice in schools: a disconnect? | Roles of middle leaders/ Empirical |
| 69. | Leader | 2004 | Further Education Middle Managers: Their Contribution to the Strategic Decision-Making Process | Roles of middle leaders/ Theoretical |
| 70. | Leithwood | 2016 | Department-Head Leadership for School Improvement | Importance of department heads/ Theoretical |
| 71. | Li, Poon, Lai, & Tam | 2021 | Does middle leadership matter? Evidence from a study of system-wide reform on English language curriculum | Middle leadership and teachers' receptivity and teacher professional development/ Empirical |
| 72. | Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford, & Grootenboer | 2019 | Middle leading and influence in two Australian schools | Practices and influence of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 73. | Mampane | 2017 | Training Middle Managers of South African Public Schools in Leadership and Management Skills | Middle leadership development/ Theoretical |
| 74. | Marshall | 2012 | Educational middle change leadership in New Zealand: the meat in the sandwich | Roles of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 75. | McGarr & McDonagh | 2012 | Examining the role of the ICT coordinator in Irish post-primary schools | Roles and attitudes of ICT coordinators/ Empirical |
| 76. | Mercer & Ri | 2006 | Closing the gap: the role of head of department in Chinese secondary schools | Roles of heads of department/ Empirical |
| 77. | Murphy | 2019 | The practices of school middle leadership. Leading professional learning | Practices of middle leadership/ Theoretical |

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| 78. | Naylor, Gkolia, & Brundrett | 2006 | Leading from the Middle: an initial study of impact | A leadership development programme/ Empirical |
| 79. | Nealey & Fiedler | 1968 | LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS OF MIDDLE MANAGERS | Roles and functions of different levels of middle managers/ Theoretical |
| 80. | Ng | 2014 | What is quality education? How can it be achieved? The perspectives of school middle leaders in Singapore | Middle leaders' perceptions on quality education/ Empirical |
| 81. | Ng & Chan | 2014 | Continuing professional development for middle leaders in primary schools in Hong Kong | Middle leadership development/ Empirical |
| 82. | Nguyen | 2012 | Middle-level academic management: a case study on the roles of the heads of department at a vietnamese university | Roles of heads of departments/ Empirical |
| 83. | Nobile | 2018 | Towards a theoretical model of middle leadership in schools | A model of factors influencing middle leadership/ Theoretical |
| 84. | Nobile | 2018 | The 'state of the art' of research into middle leadership in schools | Middle leadership research/ Theoretical |
| 85. | Poultney | 2007 | The role of the effective Subject Leader: perspectives from practitioners in secondary schools | Roles of middle leaders / Theoretical |
| 86. | Razzak | 2015 | The lived-through experience of the senior teacher: A closer look at a middle management and leadership position in Bahraini public schools | Senior teachers' (HoDs) perceptions on their roles as professional leaders and professional identity/ Empirical |
| 87. | Ribbins | 2007 | Middle leadership in schools in the UK: improving design—a subject leader's history | practices of a subject leader/ Empirical |
| 88. | Rice | 2005 | Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Head Teachers: their changing role | Worklife and roles of head teachers/ Empirical |
| 89. | Robson & Bassett | 2017 | Middle Leadership Matters | Practices of middle leadership/ Theoretical |

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| 90. | Rönnerman, Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer | 2015 | Opening up communicative spaces for discussion 'quality practices' in early childhood education through middle leadership | Practices of middle leadership and PLC/ Empirical |
| 91. | Rönnerman, Grootenboer & Edwards-Groves | 2017 | The practice architectures of middle leading in early childhood education | Practices of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 92. | Shaked & Schechter | 2017 | Systems thinking among school middle leaders | Systems thinking among school middle leaders/ Empirical |
| 93. | Shibru, Bibiso, & Ousman | 2017 | Middle Level Managers' Quality of Leadership and Good Governance, and Organizational Performance of Wolaita Sodo University | Importance of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 94. | Simkins et al. | 2006 | Coaching as an in-school leadership development strategy: experiences from Leading from the Middle | Middle leadership development/ Empirical |
| 95. | Smith | 2005 | Departmental Leadership and Management in Chartered and Statutory Universities: A Case of Diversity | Comparing middle leadership of HoDs of two universities/ Empirical |
| 96. | Smith & Winter-Irving | 2009 | Factors Impacting on the Role of Middle-level Managers at an Australian University | Factors influencing roles of HoDs/ Empirical |
| 97. | Szwed | 2015 | Managing from the middle? Tensions and dilemmas in the role of the primary school special educational needs coordinator | Leadership role of special educational needs coordinators/ Empirical |
| 98. | Tam | 2010 | Understanding the leadership qualities of a head of department coping with curriculum changes in a Hong Kong secondary school | Leadership quality of HoDs/ Empirical |
| 99. | Tapala, T. T., Van Niekerk, M. P., & Mentz, K. (2020). | 2020 | Curriculum leadership barriers experienced by heads of department: a look at South African secondary schools | Barriers experienced by HODs in executing curriculum leadership roles/ Empirical |

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| 100. | Tay et al. | 2020 | Middle leaders' perceptions and actions on assessment: the technical, tactical and ethical | Assessment leadership role of middle leaders/ Empirical |
| 101. | Thomas-Gregory | 2014 | Professional identities of middle managers: A case study in the faculty of health and social care | Professional identity of middle managers/ Empirical |
| 102. | Thornton, Walton, Wilson, & Jones | 2018 | Middle leadership roles in universities: Holy Grail or poisoned chalice | Responsibilities, skills and competencies, and support required for heads of school/ Empirical |
| 103. | Thorpe & Bennett-Powell | 2014 | The perceptions of secondary school middle leaders regarding their needs following a middle leadership development programme | Professional development needs of middle leaders/ Empirical |
| 104. | Turner | 2003 | A critical review of research on subject leaders in secondary schools | Roles of subject teachers/ Theoretical |
| 105. | Turner & Sykes | 2007 | Researching the transition from middle leadership to senior leadership in secondary schools: some emerging themes | Transition from middle leadership role to senior leadership role/ Empirical |
| 106. | Turner & Bolam | 2010 | Analysing the role of the subject head of department in secondary schools in England and Wales: towards a theoretical framework | Work of subject heads/ Theoretical |
| 107. | Wang | 2010 | Translating policies into practice: the role of middle-level administrators in language curriculum implementation | Role of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 108. | Warhurst | 2012 | Leadership development as identity formation: middle managers' leadership learning from MBA study | Leadership development/ Empirical |
| 109. | Wei | 2018 | The Department Chair's Troubles: Leadership Role of Middle Managers | Role of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 110. | White | 2002 | Towards an Understanding of Middle-Level Leadership in Secondary School Subject Departments | Role of subject departmental leader/ Theoretical |

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| 111. | Williams | 2017 | The language of performativity? A content analysis concerning differing constructions of leadership for secondary school PE departments | Language used by departmental leader/ Empirical |
| 112. | Willis et al. | 2019 | Mentors for beginning teachers as middle leaders: the messy work of recontextualising | work of mentor/ Empirical |
| 113. | Wise | 2001 | The Monitoring Role of the Academic Middle Manager in Secondary Schools | Role of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 114. | Wong, Wong, & Peng | 2010 | Effect of Middle-level Leader and Teacher Emotional Intelligence on School Teachers' Job Satisfaction: The Case of Hong Kong | Effect of middle leadership/ Empirical |
| 115. | Zhang, Wong & Wang | 2021 | How do the leadership strategies of middle leaders affect teachers' learning in schools? A case study from China | Leadership strategies/ Empirical |