

Developing middle-level leadership capacity through an adapted weekly five-star meeting framework; An action research.

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Abstract: This study examined the influence of an adapted Weekly Five-Star Meeting Framework on the leadership capacity and instructional leadership practices of newly appointed middle-level leaders in a government higher secondary school in Chukha, Bhutan. An action research design with a convergent mixed-methods approach was employed over eight weeks. Six middle-level leaders participated in pre- and post-intervention surveys and a post-intervention focus group discussion, while department teachers provided complementary feedback. The intervention integrated six practical leadership and management tools into a structured cycle of review, problem identification, collaborative discussion, action planning, follow-up, and reflection. Findings showed a substantial increase in leaders' perceived leadership capacity, with the composite mean increasing from 3.26 to 4.35. The strongest improvements were found in establishing a clear way forward, strategic direction, structured responsibility, conflict management, peer support, and job-embedded professional growth. Teacher ratings remained relatively stable. Qualitative findings reinforced these improvements while highlighting challenges related to workload, time, documentation, resources, and higher-level support.

Index Terms- middle-level leaders, instructional leadership, leadership self-efficacy, and job-embedded professional learning.

INTRODUCTION

School improvement is increasingly understood as a shared organisational responsibility in which leadership extends beyond the principal to include middle-level leaders such as heads of department (HODs) and academic coordinators. These leaders occupy an important position between senior management and classroom teachers, translating school priorities into curriculum coordination, professional support, monitoring, communication, and day-to-day problem solving. Their close engagement with teachers places them in a strategic position to influence professional learning and instructional practice (Leithwood et al., 2020; Lipscombe et al., 2020; Lipscombe et al., 2023).

However, assuming leadership responsibilities does not necessarily result in the development of effective leadership capacity. Middle leaders are often expected to coordinate colleagues, monitor curriculum implementation, manage conflict, communicate expectations, and support instructional improvement while continuing with their teaching responsibilities. These overlapping responsibilities can create challenges related to time, workload, authority, relational trust, and competing demands (Bush, 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). Research therefore increasingly emphasises leadership development that is sustained, collaborative, practice-focused, and embedded in leaders' everyday work rather than separated from workplace responsibilities (Bryant & Walker, 2024; Harris et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2023).

This issue is particularly relevant in Bhutan, where schools operate within public-sector structures and where leadership development must be responsive to local organisational conditions. The present study was conducted in a government higher secondary school in Chukha Dzongkhag, where an existing Weekly Five-Star Meeting was already used to review achievements, discuss challenges, share practices, and plan actions. However, the meeting had not been systematically structured as a mechanism for developing the leadership capacity of newly appointed middle-level leaders. Rather than introducing a separate leadership training programme, the study adapted this existing organisational routine by integrating six practical leadership and management tools into an eight-week cycle of review, problem identification, collaborative deliberation, action planning, follow-up, and reflection.

Although middle leadership has received increasing international research attention, there remains limited empirical evidence on how newly appointed middle-level leaders develop leadership capacity through authentic, school-based practices in Bhutan. Existing Bhutanese research has highlighted the value of context-sensitive and iterative professional inquiry, including action research, but comparatively little attention has been given to structured, job-embedded approaches specifically designed to support middle leaders in their existing roles (Dorji et al., 2024). This study addresses this gap by examining the use of an adapted Weekly Five-Star Meeting Framework as a workplace-based approach to leadership development.

The study was guided by two research questions:

1. To what extent does the adapted Weekly Five-Star Meeting Framework influence the leadership self-efficacy and instructional leadership practices of newly appointed middle-level leaders?
2. How do newly appointed middle-level leaders experience the adapted framework, and what challenges do they encounter during its eight-week implementation?

The study used a convergent mixed-methods action research design, integrating pre- and post-intervention leader surveys, teacher feedback, and qualitative accounts from participating middle-level leaders. This triangulation enabled the study to examine changes in leaders' perceived capacity alongside teachers' perceptions and leaders' experiences of implementing the framework. The study

therefore contributes both practical and contextual evidence on how an existing school-management routine can be used to support the development of middle-level leadership capacity in a Bhutanese school setting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

School improvement is increasingly understood as a shared organisational process in which leadership is distributed across different levels of the school rather than concentrated solely in the principal. Middle leaders, including heads of department, academic coordinators, and other teachers with leadership responsibilities, play an important role in connecting school-level priorities with classroom practice. Their responsibilities commonly include curriculum coordination, professional support, communication, monitoring, problem solving, and facilitating teacher learning (Spillane, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2020; Lipscombe et al., 2023). Because they work closely with teachers and instructional practice, middle leaders are strategically positioned to support professional learning and school improvement.

Research further suggests that middle-leadership development is most effective when it is connected to leaders' everyday work. Job-embedded professional learning enables leaders to engage with authentic problems, collaborate with colleagues, apply new approaches, and reflect on their practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hunzicker, 2012). Similarly, middle leaders can support teacher learning by creating opportunities for professional dialogue, collaborative inquiry, and school-based problem solving (Lipscombe et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2023). Such approaches are particularly relevant where leadership responsibilities are combined with teaching duties, as middle leaders may experience tensions related to workload, time, authority, and competing responsibilities (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Zydziunaite et al., 2020).

The Bhutanese education context also places increasing emphasis on instructional leadership, continuous professional development, collaboration, and distributed responsibility. Bhutan's education policies have promoted professional learning communities, continuous professional development, collaborative planning, delegation of responsibilities, and strengthened leadership capacity within schools (Ministry of Education, 2014). More recently, the Ministry of Education and Skills Development has continued to institutionalise professional learning communities and professional development programmes for teachers and educational leaders. Bhutanese research also indicates the importance of school-level leadership in supporting teacher professional learning through coaching, monitoring, teamwork, and teacher participation in planning and decision-making (Choeda, 2023). In addition, the national School Leaders Development Programme has focused on instructional leadership, communication, mentoring, coaching, organisational culture, and school improvement, demonstrating continued policy attention to leadership capacity development in Bhutan.

Despite this growing emphasis, there remains limited empirical research examining how newly appointed middle leaders in Bhutan develop leadership capacity through everyday school-based practices. Existing Bhutanese research has examined teacher professional development and school leadership more broadly, but comparatively less attention has been given to structured, job-embedded approaches that support middle leaders while they perform their existing responsibilities. This study therefore examines an adapted Weekly Five-Star Meeting Framework as a workplace-based approach to strengthening the leadership capacity and practice of middle-level leaders in a Bhutanese school context.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study employed an action research design using a convergent mixed-methods approach. Action research was selected because the study addressed a practical leadership-development issue within an authentic school setting while seeking to improve leadership practice through systematic inquiry (Kemmis et al., 2014). The intervention was implemented over eight weeks through a cycle of baseline assessment, structured action, reflection, follow-up, post-intervention assessment, and qualitative reflection.

The mixed-methods approach enabled the study to examine the intervention from complementary perspectives. Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-intervention surveys to assess changes in perceived leadership capacity, while qualitative data from a post-intervention Focus Group Discussion (FGD) explored participants' experiences and implementation challenges. The leader and teacher survey data were analysed separately and subsequently integrated with the FGD findings to identify convergence, complementarity, and divergence across the data sources (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; O'Cathain et al., 2010).

Setting and participants

The study was conducted in a government higher secondary school in Chukha Dzongkhag, Bhutan. The school had an established leadership structure consisting of the principal, vice principals, academic secretary, and Heads of Departments (HoDs). Six newly appointed middle-level leaders, including the academic secretary and HoDs, participated directly in the intervention. Department teachers provided an additional perspective on changes in leadership practice.

A total of 40 participants were involved in the study. All six middle-level leaders completed both the pre- and post-intervention surveys and participated in the post-intervention FGD. The teacher feedback survey produced 34 responses at baseline and 31 responses after the intervention. Because teacher responses were not matched at the individual level, the pre- and post-intervention teacher data were treated as group-level comparisons rather than individual change scores.

Purposive sampling was used because participants were selected based on their direct relevance to the intervention and research questions. The six middle leaders occupied the positions targeted by the intervention, while the participating teachers worked within departments led by these middle leaders and were therefore able to provide feedback on communication, support, accountability, and collaboration. The bounded sample was appropriate for an action research study but limited the transferability and statistical generalisability of the findings.

Intervention

The intervention adapted the Five-Star Weekly approach from the Sustainability Accelerator aOS Toolkit. Rather than implementing the complete aOS programme, the study adapted its meeting structure as a workplace-based leadership-development framework. The approach provided a consistent process for reviewing progress, identifying issues, discussing possible solutions, assigning responsibilities, and monitoring follow-up.

Six practical leadership and management tools were incorporated into the weekly meeting process to support planning, monitoring, accountability, problem solving, communication, and professional growth. The content remained flexible and was based on authentic academic and administrative issues arising from participants' daily responsibilities, while the meeting process remained consistent throughout the eight-week intervention.

The intervention followed a recurring cycle of review, identify, deliberate, decide, act, follow up, and reflect. Weekly meetings began with a review of achievements, announcements, responsibilities, and previously agreed actions. Participants then identified priority academic, departmental, or administrative challenges, discussed their causes and possible responses, agreed on actions and responsibilities, and reviewed progress in subsequent meetings. This structure transformed an existing management meeting into a repeated opportunity for leadership practice, collaborative problem solving, accountability, and professional learning.

Data collection instruments

Three instruments were used to collect the study data.

Middle-Level Leader Pre- and Post-Intervention Survey.

A five-point Likert-scale questionnaire was administered before and after the intervention to assess perceived leadership self-efficacy and instructional leadership capacity across 12 indicators: structured responsibility and tools; curriculum tracking; strategic direction; autonomous leadership; conflict management; establishing a clear way forward; peer support; teaching-administration balance; communication; systemic accountability; transparency and collaboration; and job-embedded professional growth. Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Department Teacher Feedback Survey.

A teacher questionnaire assessed comparable domains from the perspective of departmental staff, including organisation, curriculum monitoring, strategic direction, independent leadership, conflict management, support, administrative balance, communication, accountability, collaboration, and professional growth. The survey provided an external perspective on leadership practice rather than replicating the leaders' self-assessments.

Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion.

A 60–75-minute FGD was conducted with all six middle-level leaders after the intervention. The discussion explored changes in leadership confidence and practice, curriculum and instructional responsibilities, peer support, workload and dual responsibilities, usefulness of the intervention tools, implementation challenges, sustainability, and perceived changes in proactive and responsive leadership. The FGD primarily served to explain and contextualise the quantitative findings.

Validity, reliability, and qualitative trustworthiness

Content validity was established through expert review by three individuals with relevant expertise in educational leadership, research methodology, and school administration. The experts reviewed the instruments for relevance, clarity, and appropriateness in relation to the study objectives. The instruments were also pilot tested to identify ambiguous items and improve their clarity and usability. The same core indicators were retained in the pre- and post-intervention surveys to support consistency and comparability. The reliability of the quantitative instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The Middle-Level Leader Pre- and Post-Intervention Survey produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.80, while the Department Teacher Feedback Survey produced a value of 0.85, indicating good internal consistency for both instruments. Consistent administration, expert review, and pilot testing further strengthened the methodological quality of the quantitative component.

Trustworthiness of the qualitative data was supported through systematic documentation, reflexive field notes, an audit trail of methodological decisions, thematic analysis, and comparison of FGD evidence with survey findings. Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation, while dependability was supported through clear documentation of the research procedures. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive attention to the researcher's position and by grounding interpretations in participants' accounts rather than researcher assumptions. These procedures were guided by the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, percentages, and pre- to post-intervention mean differences. Because all six middle-level leaders completed both surveys, their data were analysed as a complete six-person pre- and post-intervention group. Teacher data were analysed as two independent group-level datasets, comprising 34 responses at baseline and 31 responses after the intervention, because individual responses were not matched.

The report recorded an overall p value of .006 for the leader comparison; however, the statistical test used was not specified. Therefore, this inferential result was not used as a basis for causal inference. Given the small sample size and the absence of a comparison group, the analysis focused primarily on descriptive changes and triangulation across data sources.

The FGD data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. The analysis involved familiarisation with the data, initial coding, development and review of candidate themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final analytical account. Particular attention was given to recurring patterns related to structured reflection, leadership confidence, peer support, accountability, problem solving, instructional leadership, workload, role balance, and sustainability.

Finally, the leader survey, teacher survey, and FGD findings were triangulated to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence. This integration strengthened the credibility of the findings and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the intervention's influence and implementation challenges.

Ethical considerations

Ethical procedures were followed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and their rights before data collection, and written informed consent was obtained. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to decline or withdraw without penalty.

Confidentiality was maintained through aggregate reporting and participant codes when individual accounts were presented. Participation in the research was kept separate from staff appraisal, promotion, and employment evaluation. Data were stored securely and access was restricted to authorised persons. The researcher also maintained reflexivity regarding the potential influence of professional hierarchy. Finally, the intervention was embedded within an existing meeting structure to minimise disruption to school activities and avoid unnecessary additional burden on participants.

RESULTS

The findings were integrated across three sources of evidence: (a) the pre- and post-intervention survey of the six middle-level leaders, (b) baseline and post-intervention feedback from department teachers, and (c) the post-intervention focus group discussion with the six participating leaders. The purpose of the integration was to enhance the credibility of the findings. Accordingly, the findings were presented through the two central themes emerging from the study: (1) impact of the intervention on leadership capacity and practice, and (2) challenges experienced during implementation.

Theme 1: Impact of the Intervention on Leadership Capacity and Practice

The quantitative findings indicated an increase in the participating middle-level leaders' perceived leadership capacity following the eight-week intervention. The overall leader composite mean increased from 3.26 at pre-intervention to 4.35 at post-intervention, representing a mean increase of 1.08 points (see table 1). The largest improvements were observed in establishing a clear way forward (+1.67), strategic direction and outcomes (+1.50), structured responsibility and tools (+1.33), conflict and friction management (+1.33), peer support (+1.33), and job-embedded professional growth (+1.33). These changes revealed that the intervention was particularly associated with leaders' perceptions of greater structure, clarity, confidence, collaborative support, and reflective learning.

Table 1

Pre- and Post-Intervention Mean Ratings by Leadership Indicator

Leadership indicator	Leaders Pre	Leaders Post	Mean change	Teachers Pre	Teachers Post	Mean change
Structured responsibility & tools	3.17	4.50	+1.33	4.44	4.42	−0.02
Curriculum tracking frameworks	3.33	4.50	+1.17	4.26	4.29	+0.03
Strategic direction & outcomes	3.00	4.50	+1.50	4.18	4.26	+0.08
Autonomous & independent leadership	3.00	3.83	+0.83	4.32	4.39	+0.06
Conflict & friction management	2.67	4.00	+1.33	4.18	4.23	+0.05
Clear “Way Forward”	2.50	4.17	+1.67	4.26	4.19	−0.07
Peer support & reduced isolation	3.17	4.50	+1.33	4.26	4.35	+0.09
Teaching & administration balance	3.33	4.33	+1.00	4.35	4.19	−0.16
Communication of achievements/expectations	3.83	4.17	+0.33	4.18	4.13	−0.05
Systemic team accountability	4.00	4.67	+0.67	4.35	4.42	+0.07
Transparency & collaboration	4.00	4.50	+0.50	4.26	4.29	+0.03
Job-embedded professional growth	3.17	4.50	+1.33	4.29	4.26	−0.04
Overall composite mean	3.26	4.35	+1.08	4.28	4.29	+0.01

The qualitative findings further supported the quantitative results. Participants did not describe the intervention as a separate training activity; instead, they viewed it as a practical structure that supported them in organising and reflecting on their day-to-day leadership responsibilities. Leader 2 described the intervention as being “connected directly to my daily work” and explained that participants brought “our actual problems to the meeting and discussed them.” This revealed that the intervention was closely integrated with participants' existing leadership responsibilities and provided opportunities to address workplace issues through discussion and reflection. The findings therefore suggested that the improvement in leaders' ratings was associated with the practical and job-embedded nature of the intervention, rather than with theoretical leadership learning alone.

Structured responsibility, strategic direction, and establishing a clear way forward

The strongest quantitative improvement was observed in establishing a clear way forward (+1.67), followed by strategic direction and outcomes (+1.50) and structured responsibility and tools (+1.33). These three indicators were closely aligned with the central processes of the adapted Weekly Five-Star Meeting Framework, which involved reviewing issues, identifying priorities, agreeing on actions, assigning responsibilities, and monitoring follow-up.

The interview findings provided further insight into these quantitative changes. Leader 1 described a shift from working without a consistent follow-up structure to using the weekly process to review completed and outstanding responsibilities. The participant identified the “clear way forward” component as “probably the most useful part” and explained that the process had moved beyond discussing problems to determining what needed to be done, assigning responsibility, and reviewing progress during subsequent meetings. Similarly, Leader 6 reported becoming “more deliberate” in prioritising issues, identifying expected outcomes, and determining the actions required to address them.

The quantitative and qualitative findings were therefore consistent in relation to strategic direction and clarity of action. The quantitative data showed the extent of the perceived improvement, while the interview accounts illustrated how this change had been experienced in practice. The recurring meeting structure had enabled participants to move from broad discussion of issues towards prioritised actions, clearly assigned responsibilities, and systematic follow-up.

Leader 2 similarly reported that the framework had helped distinguish important issues from the numerous activities that appeared urgent. The participant explained that the process had encouraged leaders to consider “which issue was important and what outcome we wanted.” This finding further supported the observed improvement in strategic direction and suggested that the intervention had influenced not only task completion but also the processes of prioritisation, decision-making, and outcome-oriented leadership.

Curriculum tracking and instructional leadership

The quantitative results also indicated improvement in areas related to curriculum tracking and instructional leadership. Although the largest numerical gains were found in strategic and organisational indicators, the qualitative evidence indicates that the intervention also influenced how leaders approached curriculum monitoring and teaching-related responsibilities.

Leader 1 explained that the framework made the participant “more conscious of checking whether activities were progressing according to our plans” and encouraged more systematic follow-up. Leader 5 similarly stated that the intervention shifted attention toward teaching and learning rather than administrative duties alone. The participant reported that curriculum progress, teacher support, and departmental issues became more explicit topics of leadership attention and that curriculum monitoring became more regular and systematic.

The findings from survey also recorded improvement in leadership capacity, whereas the interviews showed how that capacity was expressed through more deliberate curriculum monitoring, teacher support, and follow-up. This suggests that the framework operated not only as an administrative coordination mechanism but also as a structure through which leaders could engage more intentionally with instructional responsibilities.

Autonomous leadership, confidence, and problem solving

The quantitative findings showed improvement in autonomous leadership and conflict-management-related indicators. The qualitative evidence helps explain these changes through participants’ descriptions of increased confidence in making decisions and addressing difficult issues.

Leader 1 reported becoming more confident in decision-making because discussions with other leaders allowed different perspectives to be considered, reducing the sense that problems had to be solved individually. Leader 3 similarly described a gradual increase in confidence, explaining that the tools provided a structure for identifying an issue, considering possible causes, deciding on an action, and reviewing the outcome.

The same pattern appeared in relation to conflict management. Leader 2 stated that the participant became more comfortable discussing difficult issues and recognised that problems should be addressed rather than avoided. Leader 6 similarly explained that the framework encouraged discussion of problems and increased comfort with difficult conversations.

These suggested that the intervention may have supported confidence by giving leaders a repeatable process for approaching uncertain or difficult situations.

Peer support, communication, transparency, and collaboration

Peer support was another area showing substantial quantitative improvement (+1.33). This finding is strongly supported by the qualitative evidence. Participants consistently described the opportunity to share difficulties, compare experiences, and obtain practical suggestions from other leaders.

Leader 1 stated that leaders were able to “share our difficulties openly” and benefit when another leader had experienced a similar problem. Leader 4 described peer support as “one of the strongest aspects” of the intervention, noting that even a simple suggestion from another leader could help address a difficult situation. Leader 3 likewise explained that hearing about similar problems experienced by other leaders contributed to increased confidence.

The qualitative evidence also extends the quantitative findings on communication and collaboration. Leader 2 reported that communication improved partly because leaders had a regular opportunity to share information and because the participant became more careful about explaining expectations rather than simply giving instructions. Leader 5 similarly described communication as involving not only the transmission of information but also listening to teachers and understanding their difficulties.

Leader 4 further reported that more issues were discussed openly across departments, allowing leaders to understand the experiences of other departments and receive suggestions. These revealed that intervention was useful in promoting communication and collaboration in decision making process.

Accountability, follow-up, and reflective practice

Another important pattern emerging from the integrated findings concerns accountability and follow-through. The quantitative findings showed improvement in systemic accountability, while the qualitative data repeatedly identified follow-up as an important feature of the intervention.

Leader 1 explained that the participant became “more organised and more accountable” and began thinking not only about completing a task but also about whether the action produced the expected result. Leader 4 described accountability as becoming more visible because agreed actions were reviewed during subsequent meetings. According to the participant, knowing that progress would be reviewed encouraged completion of responsibilities.

Leader 6 similarly described follow-up as “very important” because it created continuity between meetings and required leaders to look back at what had previously been agreed.

These findings revealed that accountability was not experienced primarily as external control, but as a consequence of the repeated cycle of action and review.

Job-embedded professional growth and reflective leadership

The quantitative increase in job-embedded professional growth (+1.33) is particularly consistent with the qualitative findings. Participants repeatedly described learning through actual school problems rather than through separate training sessions.

Leader 3 explained that the participant learned “from actual situations rather than only from theory” and that problems themselves became opportunities for learning and reflection. Leader 6 similarly concluded that leadership development could occur through everyday work when leaders had a structured opportunity to “reflect, discuss problems, take action and review our actions.”

This convergence is important because it identifies a possible explanation for the overall increase in leader self-efficacy. The intervention did not remove leaders from their normal work; instead, it created a recurring structure through which their everyday leadership experiences became opportunities for reflection, peer learning, action, and review.

Theme 2: Challenges experienced during implementation

Although the quantitative results showed substantial improvement in perceived leadership capacity, the qualitative data identified several contextual factors that constrained the implementation of the framework as follows:

Workload and the dual role of teacher and leader

The most consistently reported challenge was the difficulty of balancing teaching responsibilities with leadership and administrative responsibilities. Leader 1 identified time as the main challenge because leaders had to manage teaching, administrative work, and other urgent tasks simultaneously. Leader 3 similarly reported that the intervention helped organise work but did not reduce the amount of work, meaning that leadership responsibilities could still arise when the participant was already occupied with teaching. Leader 5 described balancing administrative responsibilities with teaching as the “biggest difficulty,” particularly when departmental follow-up coincided with classes or other academic responsibilities. Leader 6 likewise reported that the dual role was challenging and that leadership tasks sometimes had to be completed outside teaching hours.

These explained an important tension within the quantitative findings. Although leaders reported increased confidence and stronger organisational routines, the implementation environment continued to constrain the amount of time available to enact those routines.

Documentation and administrative burden

A further challenge concerned documentation. Leader 5 reported that the intervention initially felt like an additional workload because of preparation and documentation, although the participant later recognised that the structure could save time when used effectively. Leader 2 similarly recommended retaining the structure while simplifying documentation because excessive paperwork could make the meeting feel like another administrative responsibility.

This finding creates a useful connection with the intervention's emphasis on structured responsibility and accountability. The same documentation mechanisms that supported clarity and follow-up could potentially become burdensome if they were expanded unnecessarily. The qualitative data therefore suggest that sustainability depends partly on maintaining the structure while keeping the associated administrative requirements manageable.

Resource constraints and higher-level support

The qualitative findings also showed that not all issues were within the direct control of middle leaders. Leader 4 noted that some problems could not be resolved immediately because they required decisions or support from higher management. This indicates that middle-level leadership development is influenced not only by individual capability but also by organisational authority, resources, and decision-making structures.

Consequently, the intervention appears to have strengthened leaders' ability to identify, discuss, prioritise, and follow up on problems, but it could not independently remove structural constraints affecting implementation.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of an eight-week Weekly Five-Star Meeting Framework on the leadership capacity and practice of six middle-level leaders. The integrated findings provide evidence of substantial improvement in leaders' self-reported leadership capacity, while teacher ratings remained relatively stable at a high level. The leader composite mean increased from 3.26 before the intervention to 4.35 after the intervention, whereas the teacher composite mean changed only marginally from 4.28 to 4.29. Likewise, the qualitative findings provide an explanation for this difference: leaders described changes in how they organised priorities, followed up responsibilities, addressed problems, communicated with colleagues, and reflected on their practice. The findings therefore suggest that the intervention was experienced primarily as a leadership-development and practice-structuring process rather than as a short-term training event.

The strongest improvements occurred in establishing a clear way forward, strategic direction and outcomes, structured responsibility and tools, conflict and friction management, peer support, and job-embedded professional growth. This pattern is consistent with the contemporary understanding of middle leadership as a complex role requiring leaders to operate between organisational expectations and classroom-level practice. A recent systematic review emphasises that middle leaders function as important “bridges” between different organisational levels and require professional learning that addresses the relational, organisational, and instructional complexity of their roles (Lipscombe et al., 2025). Earlier evidence similarly indicates that middle leadership has potential to influence teacher practice, professional learning, and school improvement, although middle leaders are often insufficiently prepared for the complexity of their responsibilities (Lipscombe et al., 2023).

The large gains in clear way forward (+1.67), strategic direction and outcomes (+1.50), and structured responsibility and tools (+1.33) can be understood in relation to the intervention's repeated cycle of identifying issues, prioritising actions, assigning responsibility, and reviewing progress. The qualitative findings strongly support this interpretation. Leaders described moving from general discussion towards explicit decisions about what needed to be done, who was responsible, and what would be reviewed subsequently. This suggests that the intervention may have strengthened process clarity rather than merely increasing leaders' knowledge of leadership concepts. This is consistent with past findings that effective professional learning is more likely to influence practice when learning is connected to authentic professional problems and involves active collaboration and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hunzicker, 2012).

The findings concerning curriculum tracking and instructional leadership are also significant. Although the numerical improvement in curriculum tracking was smaller than that observed for strategic direction, participants reported becoming more systematic in monitoring curriculum progress, supporting teachers, and following up instructional responsibilities. This finding reinforces research identifying middle leaders as strategically positioned to influence teacher learning because of their proximity to classroom practice. Of particular relevance, recent evidence indicates that middle leaders can support teacher learning through job-embedded professional learning, school-based inquiry, professional dialogue, and organisational structures that facilitate teacher development (Gao et al., 2023). Thus, the intervention showed connection between connected organisational coordination with instructional leadership rather than treating these as separate leadership functions.

The improvement in autonomous leadership and conflict management can similarly be interpreted through the intervention's collaborative problem-solving process. Participants reported greater confidence in considering alternative perspectives, identifying causes of problems, selecting actions, and addressing difficult issues. Rather than suggesting that the intervention eliminated leadership uncertainty, the qualitative evidence indicates that it provided a repeatable structure through which uncertainty could be managed. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that teacher leadership develops through increasing self-efficacy, professional experience, and job-embedded collaboration (Hunzicker, 2012).

A particularly strong area of convergence was peer support. The quantitative increase of 1.33 points was reinforced by repeated descriptions of leaders sharing difficulties, learning from colleagues, and receiving practical suggestions. This finding is consistent with research on teacher communities, which identifies collaboration, supportive leadership, trust, and respectful group relationships as important conditions for professional learning (Vangrieken et al., 2017). It also aligns with evidence that functioning professional learning communities can strengthen collective teacher efficacy and professional collaboration (Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). The intervention therefore reinforced to have created a small professional learning community among middle leaders in which individual problems became shared learning opportunities.

The findings on accountability and reflective practice further suggest that the intervention influenced the *process* of leadership. Leaders described becoming more conscious of whether agreed actions were completed and whether actions produced the intended outcomes. The follow-up cycle therefore demonstrated to have transformed accountability from a predominantly compliance-oriented concept into a process of reflection and review. This is imperative because professional learning literature indicates that opportunities embedded within everyday work can provide stronger conditions for reflective practice than professional development detached from workplace realities (Camburn, 2010).

However, the findings also reveal an important distinction between increased leadership capacity and improved organisational conditions. Teacher ratings remained high and largely stable, while leaders reported substantial improvement. This does not indicate inconsistency between the two sources. Teachers may already have perceived leadership practices relatively positively at baseline, leaving limited room for measurable improvement, whereas leaders may have had greater scope to recognise changes in their own confidence, organisation, and reflective practice. Moreover, the intervention lasted only eight weeks, making it difficult to expect immediate changes in broader organisational outcomes. Existing research similarly cautions that evidence concerning middle leadership impact remains context-dependent and that changes in leadership practice do not automatically translate into immediate changes in wider school outcomes (Lipscombe et al., 2023, 2025).

The second theme, implementation challenges provide an important qualification to the positive findings. Workload, competing teaching responsibilities, limited time, documentation, resource constraints, and dependence on higher-level decisions restricted implementation. These challenges are consistent with research identifying workload and time allocation as significant constraints on teacher leadership (Zydzianaite et al., 2020). The findings therefore suggest that leadership-development interventions cannot be considered independently of organisational structures. A framework may strengthen leaders' capacity to identify and follow up actions, but it cannot by itself create additional time, resources, or decision-making authority.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of an eight-week Weekly Five-Star Meeting Framework on the leadership capacity and practice of six middle-level leaders. The integrated quantitative and qualitative findings indicate a substantial improvement in leaders' perceived leadership capacity, with the overall composite mean increasing from 3.26 to 4.35. The strongest changes were associated with establishing a clear way forward, strategic direction and outcomes, structured responsibility, conflict management, peer support, and job-embedded professional growth. The qualitative evidence converged with these findings by showing that leaders experienced greater clarity in prioritising issues, assigning responsibility, following up actions, communicating with colleagues,

solving problems, and reflecting on their practice. Teacher ratings, however, remained relatively stable at a high level, suggesting that the intervention's most immediate effects were more evident in leaders' perceived capacity and leadership processes than in teachers' overall perceptions.

The study also identified important implementation challenges. Leaders continued to experience workload pressures, competing teaching and leadership responsibilities, limited time, documentation demands, resource constraints, and dependence on higher-level decisions. These findings demonstrate that leadership-development interventions require organisational conditions that enable leaders to apply what they learn. Strengthening individual leadership capacity alone is unlikely to remove structural barriers to implementation.

However, this research also entailed several limitations. First, the study involved only six middle-level leaders within a specific institutional context, limiting the transferability of the findings to other settings. Second, the intervention was limited to eight weeks, so the findings primarily demonstrate short-term changes rather than sustained leadership or organisational outcomes. Third, much of the quantitative evidence was based on self-reported perceptions, which may be influenced by participants' awareness of the intervention. Finally, the study did not include a comparison group, meaning that changes cannot be attributed exclusively to the intervention with the same confidence possible in a controlled experimental design.

Future implementation should therefore retain the core features of the framework, regular prioritisation, shared problem solving, explicit responsibility, follow-up, peer support, and reflection. While reducing unnecessary documentation and protecting adequate time for leadership activities. School management should also provide appropriate authority, resources, and follow-up support where issues extend beyond middle leaders' control. Longer-term research should involve larger and more diverse samples, multiple schools, comparison groups where feasible, and follow-up measurements to determine whether improvements in leadership capacity are sustained and whether they subsequently influence teacher practice, instructional quality, and student-related outcomes. Such research would provide stronger evidence regarding the long-term contribution of structured, job-embedded middle-leadership development.

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