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The Fit Between Principal Leadership Styles and Middle Leaders' Role Identity and Its Association With Leadership Effectiveness

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Abstract: Middle leaders connect school-level strategy with departmental, grade-level, and classroom practice, yet their effectiveness may depend on whether principal leadership practices are compatible with how they understand their professional roles. Drawing on person–environment fit theory, this study examines the relationship between perceived principal leadership style–middle leader role identity alignment and self-reported middle leadership effectiveness, with role clarity and leadership self-efficacy tested as parallel mediators. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was developed for formally appointed middle leaders at a private nine-year school in Henan Province, China. Descriptive statistics, analysis of variance, hierarchical regression, and bootstrap mediation analysis were conducted. Perceived alignment differed significantly across school divisions and leadership-position categories and was positively associated with cumulative leadership tenure. After controlling for school division, position type, and tenure, perceived alignment significantly predicted self-reported leadership effectiveness and explained an additional 12.8% of the variance. Bootstrap results indicated significant indirect effects through both role clarity and leadership self-efficacy, with role clarity producing the larger indirect effect. The remaining direct relationship between alignment and effectiveness became nonsignificant after the mediators were included. These findings support a model in which leadership practices are associated with middle leadership effectiveness partly by clarifying responsibilities and strengthening confidence in leadership capability. The study highlights the importance of matching delegation, support, supervision, and decision-making practices with middle leaders' responsibilities and professional identities.

Keywords: middle leadership, principal leadership, role identity, perceived alignment, role clarity, leadership self-efficacy, leadership effectiveness

I. Introduction

1.1 Middle Leadership as an Organizational Linkage Mechanism

School leadership is understood as a shared organizational process rather than the responsibility of the principal alone. Middle leaders connect senior leadership with classroom practice. They translate school-wide priorities into departmental, grade-level, subject-based, and instructional activities while communicating teachers' concerns and implementation challenges upward. Middle leaders usually hold formal leadership responsibilities while continuing to teach [1], which distinguishes them from both senior administrators and informal teacher leaders. Their work is multidimensional. Middle leaders may coordinate curriculum implementation, oversee routine administration, support teacher development, manage student-related work, lead teams, and introduce new practices. These responsibilities cannot be reduced to a single role [2]. Middle leaders may identify as administrative executors, instructional leaders, team coordinators, and agents of change, with the importance of each identity varying by position, experience, school division, and relationship with senior leaders. Their location within the hierarchy also creates competing expectations. Principals may emphasize implementation, accountability, and compliance, while teachers may expect professional support, fairness, representation, and protection from unrealistic demands. Middle leaders must therefore balance expectations from both directions. Their effectiveness depends partly on whether they can turn broad strategies into practices that teachers find meaningful and workable. This boundary-spanning role makes them central to school improvement but may also create role ambiguity, limited autonomy, and tension between administrative and professional responsibilities [1], [3].

1.2 Principal Leadership Styles and Perceived Alignment

The principal shapes the environment in which middle leaders understand and perform their roles. Principal leadership, however, includes several distinct approaches. Instructional leadership focuses on school goals, curriculum, teaching quality, teacher development, and student learning [4]. Transformational leadership emphasizes shared vision, professional commitment, intellectual stimulation, and organizational change [5]. Empowering leadership provides information, participation, discretion, and support for independent decision-making [6]. Directive leadership stresses clear standards, procedures, responsibilities, supervision, and expected actions, particularly when tasks are urgent, structured, or risky [7]. The value of each style depends on context. Instructional leadership may support curriculum improvement, transformational leadership may strengthen commitment to reform, empowering leadership may benefit experienced middle leaders seeking autonomy, and directive leadership may be necessary in safety, discipline, compliance, or crisis situations. Research suggests that directive and empowering leadership may vary in effectiveness according to task demands and stages of team development [7].

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This study focuses on alignment between principal leadership and middle leaders' role identity. Alignment exists when the principal's expectations, authority allocation, support, supervision, and decision-making practices are consistent with how a middle leader understands the role. For example, an instructional leader may experience high alignment when given access to teaching information, support for professional development, and influence over curriculum decisions. Alignment may be lower when the role is dominated by administrative reporting or repeated approval procedures.

This concept draws on person–environment fit theory, which proposes that attitudes and behavior are shaped by compatibility between individuals and their work environments [8]. Perceived alignment is measured directly rather than through difference scores because subtracting leadership-style and role-identity scores may hide their separate contributions and create ambiguous interpretations [9].

The four principal leadership styles and four role identities are not treated as fixed one-to-one pairs. Rather, they provide descriptive profiles of the leadership environment and middle leaders' professional self-understanding. Illustratively, instructional leadership may be especially compatible with an instructional-leader identity, directive leadership with an administrative-executor identity, transformational leadership with a change-agent identity, and empowering leadership with team-coordinator or change-agent identities. These are theoretically plausible correspondences, not scoring rules, because several leadership practices and role identities can coexist for the same respondent. The six-item alignment scale therefore captures a direct, overall judgment of compatibility across expectations, authority allocation, support, supervision, decision-making, and evaluation. Alignment is also conceptually distinct from role clarity: alignment concerns compatibility between the external leadership environment and a middle leader's professional self-understanding, whereas role clarity concerns how clearly responsibilities, authority boundaries, reporting relationships, and performance expectations are understood.

1.3 Role Identity, Role Clarity, and Leadership Self-Efficacy

Role identity refers to how individuals understand who they are within an organizational position. School leaders may identify with several professional roles, and these identities develop through experience, responsibility, relationships, and beliefs about leadership capacity [10]. This study examines four identities: administrative executor, instructional leader, team coordinator, and change agent. These identities are not mutually exclusive, and one middle leader may identify strongly with several roles.

Perceived alignment may influence effectiveness through role clarity. Role clarity concerns understanding responsibilities, authority, expected outcomes, reporting relationships, and evaluation criteria. Uncertainty about duties and authority can weaken organizational functioning [11]. When leadership expectations match role identity, middle leaders may find it easier to understand decision boundaries, prioritize tasks, and communicate consistently.

Leadership self-efficacy provides a second mechanism. It refers to confidence in performing leadership tasks, including setting direction, coordinating people, expressing professional judgment, and overcoming resistance [12]. Appropriate authority, information, support, and feedback may strengthen this confidence, whereas accountability without sufficient discretion may weaken it. Educational research suggests that self-efficacy helps explain how principal leadership relates to professional learning and work behavior [13]. Accordingly, this study expects perceived alignment to strengthen role clarity and leadership self-efficacy, which are then associated with greater middle leadership effectiveness.

1.4 Research Gap and Questions

First, educational leadership research has largely focused on the direct effects of principal leadership on teacher attitudes, instructional practices, and student outcomes, while paying less attention to how formally appointed middle leaders interpret principal leadership and translate school-level priorities into team-level practice. Second, existing studies often examine middle leaders' responsibilities, professional development, or identity formation without quantitatively assessing whether the principal's leadership approach is compatible with middle leaders' professional self-understanding. Third, the mechanisms linking such alignment to leadership effectiveness remain insufficiently explained, particularly because role clarity and leadership self-efficacy, although theoretically relevant, are rarely examined together in a model centered on middle leaders. In Chinese schools, leadership reflects both international school-improvement ideas and context-specific expectations concerning hierarchy, collective responsibility, professional development, and principal–teacher relationships [14]. The development of the Chinese Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale further demonstrates the need to adapt leadership constructs to local cultural and organizational conditions [15]. Although Chinese research has linked principal instructional leadership with teacher self-efficacy and professional learning [13], the intermediary role of middle leaders between principal leadership and classroom practice remains underexplored.

This study investigates middle leaders at XXX School, which is a private, full-time boarding school located in Gongyi, a county-level city administered by Zhengzhou in Henan Province, China. Founded in 2017, the school provides nine years of compulsory education through integrated primary and junior secondary divisions. According to official municipal information published in June 2025, the campus covers approximately 104 mu and accommodates 48 classes, 1,947 students, and 227 staff members, indicating a relatively large and organizationally complex school setting. In addition to its two academic divisions, the school operates several cross-divisional administrative and professional units and appoints middle leaders responsible for curriculum and instruction, educational research, teacher development, student affairs, grade and subject coordination, residential services, and operational support.

The study addresses the following questions:

- RQ1: What is the overall level of perceived principal leadership–role identity alignment among middle leaders, and does it differ by school division and leadership-position type or vary with leadership tenure?
- RQ2: To what extent is perceived principal leadership–role identity alignment associated with self-reported middle

leadership effectiveness after controlling for school division, leadership-position type, and leadership tenure?

- RQ3: Are role clarity and leadership self-efficacy statistically significant indirect pathways in the association between perceived principal leadership–role identity alignment and self-reported middle leadership effectiveness?

The corresponding hypotheses are:

- H1: Perceived alignment differs significantly across school divisions and leadership-position types and is positively associated with cumulative leadership tenure.
- H2: Perceived alignment positively predicts middle leadership effectiveness after the control variables are considered.
- H3: Perceived alignment shows positive statistical indirect associations with self-reported middle leadership effectiveness through role clarity and leadership self-efficacy.

This study contributes by shifting attention from separate leadership styles to their compatibility with middle leaders' role identities. It integrates person–environment fit with middle-leadership research and examines two theoretically distinct statistical indirect pathways. Hierarchical regression is used to assess the additional explanatory value of alignment, while bootstrap analysis estimates indirect associations through role clarity and leadership self-efficacy [17], [18]. Because all variables were collected through a single cross-sectional questionnaire, the results are interpreted as associations, statistical prediction, and indirect effects rather than temporal or causal relationships [16].

II. Literature Review

A. School Middle Leadership

School middle leadership refers to formally recognized leadership work located between senior school leadership and classroom-level practice. Middle leaders commonly include department heads, grade leaders, curriculum coordinators, subject leaders, research-group leaders, and leaders responsible for student development, professional learning, or operational functions. Although job titles vary across school systems, middle leaders are generally distinguished by two features: they hold continuing responsibility for leading a defined area of school activity, and they exercise influence over the work of other teachers while often retaining substantial teaching responsibilities [1]. Their organizational position is therefore neither equivalent to that of senior administrators nor reducible to informal teacher leadership.

The work of middle leaders is multidimensional. Recent empirical research identifies several interconnected functions, including managing organizational routines, leading teaching and curriculum, developing teachers, coordinating teams, managing change, and representing staff perspectives [2]. These responsibilities suggest that middle leadership cannot be assessed solely through administrative task completion. Effective middle leadership also involves professional judgment, relational influence, problem diagnosis, communication across organizational levels, and the capacity to sustain improvement. In this study, middle leadership is therefore examined through four broad domains: task execution, instructional and professional leadership, team coordination, and reform-oriented improvement.

The location of middle leaders within the school hierarchy creates both opportunities and tensions. They may be expected by principals to ensure policy implementation, accountability, and organizational consistency, while teachers may expect professional support, representation, fairness, and sensitivity to workload. These expectations are not always compatible. Middle leaders may experience pressure to act simultaneously as agents of senior management and as members of the teaching community. Their effectiveness thus depends not only on formal authority but also on whether they are regarded as legitimate leaders by colleagues and whether the principal provides sufficient discretion, information, resources, and institutional support.

Principal–middle leader relationships are particularly important because principals influence the scope and meaning of middle-leadership work. Principals determine whether middle leaders participate in decision-making, whether their roles are primarily administrative or instructional, how much autonomy they receive, and whether their professional recommendations are taken seriously. Research indicates that principals can strengthen middle leadership by clarifying expectations, allocating meaningful responsibilities, supporting professional growth, and recognizing middle leaders as contributors to school improvement rather than merely as implementers of instructions [3]. Conversely, middle leaders may experience role conflict when they are held responsible for outcomes but lack decision authority or when the principal's expectations differ from their own understanding of the role.

This study therefore treats middle leadership as a relational and context-dependent process. The same formal position may produce different levels of effectiveness depending on the principal's leadership practices, the middle leader's role identity, and the perceived correspondence between them. A middle leader who identifies strongly as an instructional leader may function effectively when the principal emphasizes teaching improvement, provides access to relevant information, and supports professional decision-making. The same leader may experience reduced clarity and confidence when the role is dominated by routine reporting or tightly controlled administrative tasks. Alternatively, a middle leader who primarily identifies as an administrative executor may experience stronger alignment in a structured environment characterized by explicit procedures and close monitoring.

The concept of perceived alignment is consistent with person–environment fit theory, which proposes that individual attitudes and behavior are influenced by the compatibility between personal characteristics and environmental demands or provisions [8]. Applied to school leadership, alignment concerns whether the principal's expectations, delegation practices, supervision, and support correspond with the middle leader's understanding of what the role should involve. This perspective extends existing middle-leadership research by moving beyond the question of which principal leadership style is most effective. It instead asks whether a particular leadership approach enables middle leaders to enact roles they regard as professionally meaningful and organizationally appropriate.

Alignment may be especially relevant in schools containing multiple divisions and leadership functions. Middle leaders in primary education, junior secondary education, student management, curriculum leadership, and administrative support may face different task demands. They may therefore require different combinations of guidance, autonomy, professional support, and monitoring. Examining differences by school division, leadership-position type, and leadership tenure can clarify whether perceived alignment reflects a uniform organizational condition or varies according to leaders' professional and structural locations.

III. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected through a single anonymous questionnaire completed by school middle leaders. The design examined associations among perceived principal leadership style–role identity alignment, role clarity, leadership self-efficacy, and self-reported middle leadership effectiveness. Because all variables were measured at one time point, the analyses assessed statistical relationships, prediction, and indirect effects rather than causal processes.

3.2 Research Context

The research site was anonymized as XXX School, a private nine-year school with primary, junior secondary, and cross-divisional functions. Its organizational structure includes middle leaders responsible for curriculum, teaching, research, student development, grade management, teacher development, residential services, and operational support.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised all formally appointed middle leaders at XXX School. Eligible participants included division leaders, instructional leaders, research and teacher-development leaders, student-development leaders, grade leaders, subject leaders, lesson-preparation group leaders, and other personnel with continuing responsibility for coordinating or supervising teachers.

Participants were required to have served in a middle-leadership role for at least one semester. Principals, senior leaders with final school-wide authority, temporary coordinators, and clerical staff were excluded. A census approach was adopted because the eligible population within the school was limited. The final analytic sample of 72 therefore represents this institutional population rather than a probability sample of Chinese schools, and the findings are restricted to this single-school context.

3.4 Instrument

Data were collected using the Middle Leaders' Role Identity, Alignment, and Leadership Effectiveness Questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of background questions and measures of principal leadership, middle-leader role identity, perceived leadership–role identity alignment, role clarity, leadership self-efficacy, and self-reported leadership effectiveness. All substantive items were rated on five-point Likert-type scales, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of the corresponding construct.

Principal leadership was assessed through four dimensions: transformational, instructional, empowering, and directive leadership. Each dimension contained three items, producing a total of 12 principal-leadership items. The dimensions were informed by established conceptualizations of transformational leadership, instructional leadership, empowering leadership, and directive leadership [4]–[7]. The purpose of including the four dimensions was not to identify a universally superior leadership style but to characterize the different leadership behaviors experienced by middle leaders. A representative empowering-leadership item was, “The principal gives middle leaders sufficient authority to make decisions within their areas of responsibility,” whereas an instructional-leadership item focused on the principal's attention to teaching quality, curriculum implementation, and professional development.

Middle-leader role identity was also represented by four dimensions: administrative executor, instructional leader, team coordinator, and change agent. Each dimension contained three items, for a total of 12 role-identity items. These dimensions reflected the multidimensional nature of middle leadership identified in previous research [1], [2], [10]. Respondents could identify strongly with more than one role; the dimensions were therefore treated as complementary rather than mutually exclusive categories. A representative instructional-leader identity item was, “I see myself as an instructional leader who contributes directly to improving teaching and learning,” while the other dimensions addressed responsibility for organizational implementation, team coordination, and improvement-oriented change.

Perceived alignment was assessed with six items addressing the compatibility between the principal's leadership practices and the respondent's understanding of the middle-leader role. The items covered principal expectations, delegation of authority, professional support, supervision, participation in decision-making, and evaluation expectations. A representative item was, “The way the principal delegates authority is consistent with how I understand my middle-leadership role.” The alignment score therefore represented an overall subjective fit judgment rather than a mathematical difference score or a series of one-to-one pairings between the four leadership-style dimensions and the four role-identity dimensions. This approach is consistent with research on subjective person–environment fit, which emphasizes individuals' direct evaluations of compatibility between themselves and their organizational environments [8], [9].

Alignment concerns whether the leadership environment provided by the principal is compatible with the middle leader's professional understanding of the role. Role clarity concerns whether the individual understands what the role requires. The four-item role-clarity scale therefore focused on duties, authority boundaries, reporting relationships, expected outcomes, and evaluation standards. A representative item was, “I clearly understand the decisions that I am authorized to

make in my leadership position." Thus, a middle leader may understand the role clearly while still perceiving that the principal's delegation, supervision, or decision-making practices are inconsistent with that role.

Leadership self-efficacy was assessed with six items reflecting confidence in carrying out leadership responsibilities, including coordinating colleagues, communicating professional judgments, addressing problems, managing interpersonal difficulties, and supporting organizational improvement. The measure was informed by established research on leadership self-efficacy [12]. A representative item was, "I am confident that I can coordinate colleagues and resolve problems within my area of responsibility."

Self-reported middle leadership effectiveness was assessed with 12 items covering four domains: task execution, instructional and professional leadership, team coordination, and continuous improvement. These domains reflected the major functions of contemporary school middle leadership identified in previous research [1], [2]. Representative content included translating school priorities into operational tasks, supporting teaching and professional learning, coordinating colleagues, solving team-level problems, and facilitating improvement. For example, one item stated, "I effectively translate school priorities into workable actions for the team that I lead." Because the effectiveness measure relied on respondents' own evaluations, it is referred to throughout the study as self-reported middle leadership effectiveness rather than as an objective measure of leadership performance.

The questionnaire was developed through a construct-guided adaptation process for the Chinese school context rather than through direct adoption of a single existing scale. Items measuring the four principal-leadership dimensions were developed with reference to established theoretical definitions and instruments [4]–[7]. The alignment items were informed by subjective person–environment fit research [8], [9], while role-clarity and leadership-self-efficacy items were based on established work concerning role ambiguity and leadership efficacy [11], [12]. The middle-leadership effectiveness items were mapped to functions consistently identified in contemporary middle-leadership research [1], [2]. The questionnaire was administered in Chinese, and construct terminology was expressed in language appropriate to the responsibilities and organizational practices of middle leaders in Chinese schools. The adaptation emphasized conceptual equivalence with the source constructs rather than literal reproduction of wording from English-language instruments.

Measurement quality was evaluated cautiously because the sample contained only 72 respondents. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. As reported in Table I, coefficients for the study variables ranged from .712 to .933, indicating acceptable to excellent internal consistency. A full confirmatory factor analysis was not conducted because the ratio of participants to the number of items and latent dimensions would have provided insufficient stability for a complex measurement model. Preliminary evidence that the principal focal constructs were empirically distinguishable was obtained from their intercorrelations. Correlations among perceived alignment, role clarity, leadership self-efficacy, and self-reported leadership effectiveness ranged from .481 to .698 (Table II). These relationships were substantial, as theoretically expected, but remained below levels that would suggest that the constructs were empirically interchangeable. This evidence supplements the theory-based mapping of items and reliability estimates but should not be regarded as a substitute for comprehensive construct validation. Future studies with larger, multi-school samples should examine the measurement structure using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis and test convergent and discriminant validity more systematically.

3.5 Control and Grouping Variables

School division, leadership-position type, and cumulative leadership tenure were included as organizational or experience-related variables. School division distinguished primary, junior secondary, and schoolwide/cross-divisional positions. Leadership-position type distinguished instructional/professional leaders, student/grade-management leaders, and administrative/support leaders. These categorical variables were dummy-coded when entered into the hierarchical regression models.

Cumulative leadership tenure represented the respondent's total middle-leadership experience and was retained as a continuous variable. This treatment was consistent with the analysis of its association with perceived alignment and avoided unnecessary information loss that would have resulted from dividing tenure into arbitrary categories. Accordingly, the study examined whether perceived alignment differed across school division and leadership-position categories and whether it was associated with cumulative leadership tenure.

3.6 Data Collection

The target population consisted of all formally appointed middle leaders who met the eligibility criteria at the participating school. Because the number of eligible middle leaders was limited, a census approach rather than probability sampling was used. The questionnaire was distributed directly by the researcher, and participation was voluntary. Respondents were not required to provide names or other directly identifying information, and questionnaire responses were not used for personnel appraisal or other employment-related decisions.

Several procedural measures were used to reduce potential common-method bias associated with collecting predictor and outcome variables from the same respondents [16]. Measures representing different constructs were presented in separate sections of the questionnaire, construct labels and theoretical relationships were not emphasized to respondents, and different item formulations were used across sections where appropriate. Respondents were also informed that there were no predetermined correct answers and that responses should reflect their own perceptions and experiences.

The use of an anonymous questionnaire was particularly important because participants occupied leadership positions within the same organizational hierarchy in which the principal served as the senior leader. Anonymous responding and aggregate reporting were intended to reduce evaluation apprehension and the possibility that respondents would feel

pressure to provide favorable assessments of the principal or of their own effectiveness. Nevertheless, because all focal constructs were obtained from a single self-report questionnaire, common-method variance and socially desirable responding cannot be completely excluded and are considered when interpreting the findings.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in several stages. First, descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the major study variables, and Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate internal consistency. RQ1 was examined using descriptive statistics, one-way analyses of variance with appropriate post-hoc comparisons for categorical organizational variables, and Pearson correlation for cumulative leadership tenure because tenure was analyzed as a continuous variable.

RQ2 was examined using hierarchical multiple regression. School division, leadership-position type, and cumulative leadership tenure were entered as control variables in the first step, followed by perceived alignment in the second step. The contribution of perceived alignment was evaluated through its regression coefficient and the change in explained variance (ΔR^2).

Before interpreting the hierarchical regression results, standard regression assumptions and diagnostic criteria were considered. Linearity was evaluated by examining the relationship between predicted values and residuals, and residual plots were inspected for evidence of substantial heteroscedasticity. Approximate normality of residuals was assessed using the normal probability (Q–Q) plot. Multicollinearity was evaluated using variance inflation factors and tolerance statistics, with particular attention to whether the predictors showed levels that could destabilize coefficient estimates. The Durbin–Watson statistic was used to assess residual independence, while standardized residuals and Cook's distance were examined for potentially influential cases. The diagnostic evaluation was used to determine whether any substantial violations were present that would materially undermine interpretation of the regression coefficients. Because the sample was relatively small, regression estimates and subgroup comparisons were interpreted with appropriate caution.

RQ3 examined whether role clarity and leadership self-efficacy constituted statistically significant indirect pathways in the association between perceived alignment and self-reported leadership effectiveness. A parallel indirect-effects model was estimated while controlling for school division, leadership-position type, and cumulative leadership tenure. Indirect effects were evaluated using 5,000 bootstrap resamples and bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals [17], [18]. An indirect effect was regarded as statistically supported when its bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero.

Although this procedure is conventionally described as mediation analysis, the present study used cross-sectional data collected at a single point in time. The analysis therefore cannot establish the temporal sequence required for causal mediation. Throughout the Results and Discussion, the estimated pathways are interpreted as statistical indirect effects or indirect associations rather than evidence that perceived alignment causally changes role clarity or leadership self-efficacy and thereby produces greater leadership effectiveness.

3.8 Ethical and Interpretive Considerations

The study involved an anonymous, minimal-risk survey of adult participants in a single educational organization. Participation was voluntary, no directly identifying information was collected, and individual responses were not provided to the school for personnel evaluation. Findings were reported only in aggregate form so that individual middle leaders could not be identified from the published results. Particular attention was given to confidentiality because participants were evaluating leadership practices within their own workplace and could therefore have perceived organizational pressure or reputational risk.

IV. Results

The dataset contained 72 complete cases and no missing responses. Of the 72 participants, 30 were from the primary division, 30 from the junior secondary division, and 12 from schoolwide or cross-divisional positions. Regarding leadership-position type, 32 participants were classified as instructional and professional leaders, 24 as student and grade-management leaders, and 16 as administrative and support leaders.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Scale Reliability

Table I presents the descriptive statistics and internal-consistency coefficients for the principal leadership, middle-leader role identity, perceived alignment, mediator, and outcome variables. All scales demonstrated acceptable to excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .712 to .933.

Among the four principal leadership dimensions, instructional leadership received the highest mean score ($M = 3.921$, $SD = 0.428$), followed by directive leadership ($M = 3.880$, $SD = 0.270$), transformational leadership ($M = 3.764$, $SD = 0.405$), and empowering leadership ($M = 3.574$, $SD = 0.510$). This pattern indicates that the middle leaders perceived the principal as placing relatively strong emphasis on instructional direction and structured task implementation, whereas the provision of autonomy and participatory decision-making was comparatively less prominent.

For role identity, instructional-leader identity had the highest mean score ($M = 4.037$, $SD = 0.406$), followed by team-coordinator identity ($M = 3.977$, $SD = 0.313$), administrative-executor identity ($M = 3.796$, $SD = 0.409$), and change-agent identity ($M = 3.565$, $SD = 0.502$). The profile therefore represented middle leaders as identifying most strongly with instructional improvement and team coordination and less strongly with initiating organizational change.

Perceived leadership style–role identity alignment had a mean of 3.574 ($SD = 0.537$), suggesting a moderately positive level of alignment. Role clarity ($M = 4.167$, $SD = 0.402$), leadership self-efficacy ($M = 3.984$, $SD = 0.414$), and self-reported middle leadership effectiveness ($M = 4.222$, $SD = 0.429$) were all relatively high.

The mean for self-reported leadership effectiveness was high relative to the five-point scale ($M = 4.222$, $SD = 0.429$), with observed scores ranging from 3.167 to 5.000. This distribution raises the possibility of range restriction or a ceiling

tendency. Because effectiveness, alignment, role clarity, and self-efficacy were reported by the same respondents, social-desirability and common-method influences also cannot be ruled out [16]. The effectiveness score is therefore interpreted as perceived effectiveness rather than an objective performance indicator.

TABLE I DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND INTERNAL CONSISTENCY OF THE STUDY VARIABLES

Variable	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum	α
Transformational leadership	3.764	0.405	2.667	4.333	0.725
Instructional leadership	3.921	0.428	3	5	0.8
Empowering leadership	3.574	0.51	2.333	4.667	0.852
Directive leadership	3.88	0.27	3	4.333	0.712
Administrative-executor identity	3.796	0.409	3	4.667	0.764
Instructional-leader identity	4.037	0.406	3	5	0.863
Team-coordinator identity	3.977	0.313	3	5	0.716
Change-agent identity	3.565	0.502	2.333	4.667	0.804
Perceived alignment	3.574	0.537	2.5	5	0.92
Role clarity	4.167	0.402	3.25	5	0.845
Leadership self-efficacy	3.984	0.414	3	5	0.884
Self-reported leadership effectiveness	4.222	0.429	3.167	5	0.933

Note—N = 72. All variables were measured on five-point scales.

The four dimensions of self-reported leadership effectiveness also produced high mean scores. Task-execution effectiveness was highest (M = 4.301, SD = 0.430), followed by team and coordination effectiveness (M = 4.250, SD = 0.474), instructional and professional effectiveness (M = 4.185, SD = 0.458), and change and improvement effectiveness (M = 4.153, SD = 0.519). Their internal-consistency coefficients were .748, .764, .791, and .806, respectively.

4.2. Correlations Among the Main Study Variables

Pearson correlations among perceived alignment, role clarity, leadership self-efficacy, and self-reported leadership effectiveness are shown in Table II. All correlations were positive and statistically significant at $p < .001$.

Perceived alignment was strongly associated with role clarity, r = .686, and self-reported leadership effectiveness, r = .665. Its association with leadership self-efficacy was moderately strong, r = .515. Both proposed mediators were also strongly associated with leadership effectiveness. Role clarity correlated with effectiveness at r = .676, whereas leadership self-efficacy produced the strongest bivariate association with effectiveness, r = .698.

The correlations were substantial, but the focal constructs were not perfectly overlapping: intercorrelations ranged from .481 to .698. This pattern provides preliminary evidence that perceived alignment, role clarity, leadership self-efficacy, and self-reported leadership effectiveness were related but distinguishable in this sample. However, these correlations are only limited construct-validity evidence and do not substitute for factor-analytic validation in a larger sample.

TABLE II MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, RELIABILITY, AND CORRELATIONS

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4
1. Perceived alignment	3.574	0.537	0.92	—			
2. Role clarity	4.167	0.402	0.845	.686***	—		
3. Leadership self-efficacy	3.984	0.414	0.884	.515***	.481***	—	
4. Leadership effectiveness	4.222	0.429	0.933	.665***	.676***	.698***	—

Note—N = 72. Leadership effectiveness refers to self-reported middle leadership effectiveness.

*** $p < .001$.

4.3. Perceived Alignment Across Organizational Groups

RQ1 examined the overall level of perceived alignment and whether it differed by school division, leadership-position type, and cumulative leadership tenure. The omnibus analysis revealed statistically significant differences across school divisions, $F(2, 69) = 9.243$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .211$. The effect size indicated that school division accounted for approximately 21.1% of the variance in perceived alignment.

Schoolwide and cross-divisional leaders reported the highest alignment (M = 3.958, SD = 0.537), followed by primary-division leaders (M = 3.689, SD = 0.514). Junior secondary leaders reported the lowest alignment (M = 3.306, SD = 0.429).

Tukey-adjusted comparisons showed that primary leaders reported significantly higher alignment than junior secondary leaders, mean difference = 0.383, p = .009, 95% CI [0.084, 0.683]. Schoolwide and cross-divisional leaders also reported higher alignment than junior secondary leaders, mean difference = 0.653, p < .001, 95% CI [0.257, 1.049]. The difference between primary and schoolwide or cross-divisional leaders was not statistically significant, mean difference = 0.269, p = .240.

Alignment also differed significantly across leadership-position types, $F(2, 69) = 6.166$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .152$. Student and grade-management leaders reported the highest mean alignment (M = 3.750, SD = 0.511), followed by instructional and professional leaders (M = 3.630, SD = 0.504). Administrative and support leaders reported the lowest alignment (M = 3.198, SD = 0.484).

Administrative and support leaders reported significantly lower alignment than instructional and professional leaders, mean difference = 0.432, p = .017, 95% CI [0.064, 0.800], and student and grade-management leaders, mean difference = 0.552, p = .003, 95% CI [0.164, 0.940]. The difference between instructional and professional leaders and student and grade-management leaders was not significant, mean difference = 0.120, p = .652.

Cumulative leadership tenure was positively associated with perceived alignment, r = .416, p < .001. Middle leaders with longer cumulative leadership experience therefore tended to report greater compatibility between the principal's leadership approach and their own role identity.

TABLE III GROUP DIFFERENCES IN PERCEIVED ALIGNMENT

Grouping variable	Category	N	M	SD
School division	Primary	30	3.689	0.514
	Junior secondary	30	3.306	0.429
	Schoolwide/cross-division	12	3.958	0.537
Leadership position	Instructional/professional	32	3.63	0.504
	Student/grade management	24	3.75	0.511
	Administrative/support	16	3.198	0.484

Note—Division: $F(2, 69) = 9.243$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .211$. Position type: $F(2, 69) = 6.166$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .152$. Cumulative leadership tenure was positively correlated with perceived alignment, r = .416, p < .001.

These results supported the revised H1: perceived alignment differed significantly by school division and leadership-position type and was positively associated with cumulative leadership tenure.

4.4. Hierarchical Regression Analysis

RQ2 examined whether perceived alignment predicted self-reported middle leadership effectiveness after controlling for school division, leadership-position type, and cumulative leadership tenure. Hierarchical multiple regression was used.

The control-only model was statistically significant, $F(5, 66) = 9.786$, $p < .001$, and explained 42.6% of the variance in leadership effectiveness, $R^2 = .426$, adjusted $R^2 = .382$. After perceived alignment was entered, the second model remained statistically significant, $F(6, 65) = 13.439$, $p < .001$, and explained 55.4% of the outcome variance, $R^2 = .554$, adjusted $R^2 = .512$.

The addition of perceived alignment increased explained variance by 12.8%, $\Delta R^2 = .128$. This increase was statistically significant, $\Delta F(1, 65) = 18.632$, $p < .001$.

As shown in Table IV, perceived alignment was a statistically significant positive predictor in the regression model, B = 0.380, SE = 0.088, $\beta = .475$, t = 4.316, p < .001, 95% CI [0.204, 0.556]. Holding the control variables constant, a one-point difference in perceived alignment was associated with an estimated 0.380-point difference in self-reported leadership effectiveness. This coefficient is an adjusted cross-sectional association and should not be interpreted as a causal effect.

Leadership tenure also remained a significant positive predictor, B = 0.125, $\beta = .290$, p = .004. The coefficients for school division and leadership-position type were not statistically significant after the other variables were controlled.

TABLE IV HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION PREDICTING SELF-REPORTED LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Junior secondary vs. primary	0.061	0.085	0.071	0.715	0.477	[−0.109, 0.231]
Schoolwide/cross-division vs. primary	0.199	0.106	0.174	1.879	0.065	[−0.013, 0.410]

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Student/grade management vs. instructional/professional	−0.020	0.083	−.022	−0.244	0.808	[−0.187, 0.146]
Administrative/support vs. instructional/professional	−0.132	0.099	−.128	−1.324	0.19	[−0.330, 0.067]
Leadership tenure	0.125	0.042	0.29	2.975	0.004	[0.041, 0.208]
Perceived alignment	0.38	0.088	0.475	4.316	<.001	[0.204, 0.556]

Note—Final model: $R^2 = .554$, adjusted $R^2 = .512$, $F(6, 65) = 13.439$, $p < .001$. Change after entering perceived alignment: $\Delta R^2 = .128$, $\Delta F(1, 65) = 18.632$, $p < .001$.

The results supported H2. Perceived alignment contributed significant explanatory power beyond division, position type, and leadership tenure. Given the cross-sectional design, this finding represents statistical prediction rather than evidence that alignment causally produced higher leadership effectiveness.

4.5. Parallel Indirect-Effect Analysis

RQ3 examined whether role clarity and leadership self-efficacy formed statistically significant indirect pathways in the association between perceived alignment and self-reported leadership effectiveness. The parallel indirect-effect model controlled for school division, leadership-position type, and cumulative leadership tenure.

Perceived alignment significantly predicted role clarity, $B = 0.436$, $SE = 0.084$, $t = 5.165$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.268, 0.605]. Alignment also positively predicted leadership self-efficacy, although this path was smaller, $B = 0.221$, $SE = 0.097$, $t = 2.270$, $p = .027$, 95% CI [0.027, 0.415]. When the two mediators were entered simultaneously, role clarity positively predicted leadership effectiveness, $B = 0.338$, $SE = 0.110$, $t = 3.075$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [0.118, 0.557]. Leadership self-efficacy also positively predicted effectiveness, $B = 0.374$, $SE = 0.095$, $t = 3.929$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.184, 0.565]. The total association between perceived alignment and effectiveness was statistically significant, $B = 0.380$, $p < .001$. After role clarity and leadership self-efficacy were included, the remaining direct association decreased to $B = 0.150$ and was no longer statistically significant, $p = .096$, 95% CI [−0.027, 0.328].

Bootstrap analysis with 5,000 resamples showed a statistically significant indirect association through role clarity, indirect effect = 0.147, bootstrap SE = 0.055, 95% CI [0.048, 0.261]. The indirect association through leadership self-efficacy was also statistically significant, indirect effect = 0.083, bootstrap SE = 0.043, 95% CI [0.004, 0.176]. The total indirect effect through both variables was 0.230, bootstrap SE = 0.065, 95% CI [0.107, 0.366]. Because these confidence intervals did not include zero, H3 was supported at the level of statistical indirect association.

TABLE V PARALLEL INDIRECT-EFFECT RESULTS

Effect or path	Estimate	SE	p	95% CI
Alignment → role clarity	0.436	0.084	<.001	[0.268, 0.605]
Alignment → leadership self-efficacy	0.221	0.097	0.027	[0.027, 0.415]
Role clarity → effectiveness	0.338	0.11	0.003	[0.118, 0.557]
Leadership self-efficacy → effectiveness	0.374	0.095	<.001	[0.184, 0.565]
Total effect of alignment	0.38	0.088	<.001	[0.204, 0.556]
Direct effect of alignment	0.15	0.089	0.096	[−0.027, 0.328]
Indirect effect through role clarity	0.147	0.055[a]	—	[0.048, 0.261][a]
Indirect effect through self-efficacy	0.083	0.043[a]	—	[0.004, 0.176][a]
Total indirect effect	0.23	0.065[a]	—	[0.107, 0.366][a]

Note—Unstandardized coefficients are reported. The model controlled for school division, leadership-position type, and leadership tenure. Bootstrap standard errors and 95% confidence intervals are based on 5,000 resamples. Because the data are cross-sectional, indirect effects are statistical associations rather than evidence of temporal or causal mediation.

The bootstrap pattern indicates that the association between perceived alignment and self-reported leadership effectiveness was statistically transmitted through role clarity and leadership self-efficacy within the fitted cross-sectional model. Role clarity produced the larger indirect estimate, although both pathways were statistically supported. Because all variables were measured at the same time and reported by the same respondents, these results do not establish temporal ordering or causal mediation; they should be interpreted only as statistical indirect associations [16], [18].

4.6. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

TABLE VI SUMMARY OF HYPOTHESIS TESTS

Hypothesis	Decision	Principal evidence

Hypothesis	Decision	Principal evidence
H1	Supported	Alignment differed by division and position type and was positively associated with tenure.
H2	Supported	Alignment was positively associated with effectiveness after controls, $\beta = .475$, $\Delta R^2 = .128$, $p < .001$.
H3	Supported	Total indirect effect = 0.230, 95% CI [0.107, 0.366].

The results supported all proposed hypotheses at the level specified by the analyses. Perceived principal leadership style–role identity alignment varied across organizational groups, was positively associated with tenure, contributed additional explanatory variance in self-reported middle leadership effectiveness beyond the selected control variables, and showed statistically significant indirect associations through both role clarity and leadership self-efficacy.

V. DISCUSSION

This study examined the association between perceived alignment of principal leadership styles and middle leaders' role identity, self-reported leadership effectiveness, and two proposed statistical indirect pathways: role clarity and leadership self-efficacy. Perceived alignment differed across school divisions and leadership positions, was positively related to leadership tenure, explained additional variance in self-reported effectiveness, and showed significant cross-sectional indirect associations through role clarity and self-efficacy.

5.1 Differences in Perceived Alignment

Perceived alignment varied across organizational groups. Junior secondary middle leaders reported lower alignment than primary and schoolwide or cross-divisional leaders, while administrative and support leaders reported lower alignment than instructional, professional, student, and grade-management leaders. These results indicate that perceived alignment differed according to middle leaders' organizational positions and working contexts within this school; they do not establish that position itself caused the differences.

The lower alignment among junior secondary leaders should be treated as a contextual interpretation rather than a directly tested mechanism. One plausible explanation is that junior secondary work combines subject specialization, examination preparation, student-progress monitoring, teacher collaboration, and formal accountability, potentially intensifying tensions between professional judgment and centralized expectations. Prior research shows that principals shape the scope, authority, and instructional work of middle leaders [3], while research in China emphasizes that leadership practice reflects an interaction between school-improvement models and context-specific expectations concerning hierarchy and collective responsibility [14]. The present study did not directly measure examination pressure, autonomy, or centralization; these factors therefore remain hypotheses for future research rather than findings of this study.

Middle leaders also perform a boundary-spanning role by translating senior leadership expectations into practices that teachers consider professionally credible and practically workable [1]. When school-wide expectations are not adapted to particular subjects, grades, or student needs, middle leaders may experience a gap between the role they are expected to perform and the role they believe they should perform.

The lower alignment reported by administrative and support leaders likewise requires cautious interpretation. Middle-leadership research shows that roles differ substantially in task demands, authority, and relationships with senior leaders [1], [2]. Administrative and support positions often involve safety, compliance, documentation, logistics, and service continuity, so one possible explanation is an imbalance between responsibility and decision authority. However, the questionnaire did not directly measure authority–resource imbalance or organizational status. The present result therefore establishes a group difference in perceived alignment, not the mechanism producing that difference.

Instructional and professional leaders reported comparatively stronger alignment in a setting where instructional leadership was the highest-rated principal-leadership dimension and instructional-leader identity was the strongest role-identity dimension. This pattern is consistent with the importance placed on goal setting, curriculum, teaching quality, and professional development in instructional-leadership research [4], and with evidence that instructional-leadership constructs require contextual adaptation in Chinese schools [15]. Nevertheless, the present study's six-item alignment measure assesses overall perceived fit and does not test a specific causal match between the instructional-leadership and instructional-identity subscales.

Leadership tenure was positively related to alignment. Experienced middle leaders may understand organizational expectations, authority boundaries, and informal decision processes more clearly. However, reverse selection is also possible: leaders who experience stronger alignment may remain in their positions longer, while those facing persistent misalignment may leave. Longitudinal research is needed to distinguish these explanations.

5.2 Alignment and Leadership Effectiveness

Perceived alignment was significantly associated with self-reported middle leadership effectiveness after school division, position type, and tenure were controlled. Its inclusion explained an additional 12.8% of the variance, showing that perceived fit contributed explanatory information beyond the measured structural characteristics within this school. Because the data are cross-sectional, "prediction" here refers to regression-based statistical prediction rather than temporal prediction or causal influence.

This association is consistent with person–environment fit theory, which proposes that work attitudes and behavior are related to compatibility between individual characteristics and environmental demands or provisions [8]. It is also

compatible with school-leadership research showing that principal practices can shape middle leaders' authority, participation, and ability to enact instructional responsibilities [3]. In the Chinese context, the meaning and enactment of instructional leadership are further conditioned by organizational hierarchy, collective responsibility, and local expectations [14]. Taken together, this literature provides a plausible basis for the observed association, while the present design does not establish that alignment itself caused higher effectiveness.

A plausible interpretation is that perceived misalignment is accompanied by conflicting demands, insufficient autonomy, unclear accountability, or tasks that middle leaders view as inconsistent with their professional responsibilities. Such conditions could divert attention from instructional improvement and team coordination. This explanation is consistent with prior middle-leadership research on boundary spanning and principal support [1], [3], but the specific mechanisms were not directly measured here. They should therefore be treated as interpretive possibilities rather than demonstrated causal processes.

Leadership tenure remained a statistically significant correlate of self-reported effectiveness in the regression model. More experienced leaders may possess stronger professional networks, organizational knowledge, and problem-solving skills, but these mechanisms were not measured directly. The association between alignment and effectiveness also remained after tenure was controlled, indicating that tenure did not account for the observed alignment–effectiveness relationship. School division and position type were not statistically significant direct predictors after alignment and tenure were included; this pattern should not be interpreted as evidence that those positions are intrinsically more or less effective.

5.3 Role Clarity as a Statistical Indirect Pathway

Role clarity formed a statistically significant indirect pathway between perceived alignment and self-reported leadership effectiveness and produced the larger of the two indirect estimates. This pattern is theoretically consistent with role theory: ambiguity about responsibilities, authority, reporting relationships, and expected outcomes can undermine organizational functioning [11]. When leadership expectations are perceived as compatible with a middle leader's role identity, role boundaries may also be experienced as easier to interpret. However, because alignment and role clarity were measured simultaneously, the data do not demonstrate that alignment temporally produced greater role clarity.

Role clarity was also positively associated with effectiveness after the other variables were considered. Prior role-ambiguity research identifies uncertainty about duties and authority as a source of strain and impaired organizational functioning [11]. In school middle leadership, clearly specified decision rights and accountability may therefore be especially important because leaders operate between senior management and teachers [1]. The present statistical pathway is consistent with that explanation, but longitudinal or experimental evidence would be required to establish mediation as a causal process.

5.4 Leadership Self-Efficacy as a Statistical Indirect Pathway

Leadership self-efficacy also formed a statistically significant indirect pathway. Middle leaders who reported stronger alignment also reported greater confidence in leading teams, managing conflict, communicating professional judgments, coordinating across departments, and addressing complex problems. This pattern is consistent with research linking leadership self-efficacy to motivation for leading change [12] and with Chinese evidence connecting principal instructional leadership, teacher self-efficacy, and professional learning [13]. Nonetheless, the present cross-sectional data cannot determine whether perceived alignment preceded self-efficacy, whether confident leaders perceived greater alignment, or whether both were shaped by other organizational conditions.

The self-efficacy pathway was smaller than the role-clarity pathway. One interpretation is that confidence may be insufficient when decision authority and role expectations remain uncertain; this is compatible with research emphasizing both personal efficacy and organizational conditions in leadership work [12], [13]. For practice, leadership-development initiatives may therefore need to combine skill development with role design, delegation, information access, and feedback. These implications should be treated as context-informed propositions rather than experimentally established interventions.

5.5 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study shifts attention from identifying a universally superior leadership style to examining perceived compatibility between leadership practices and middle leaders' role identities. It also connects middle-leadership research with person–environment fit theory and distinguishes alignment from role clarity and self-efficacy. Within the participating school, the results suggest value in regular discussion of role expectations and in matching responsibility with appropriate authority, information, and resources. Particular attention may be warranted for junior secondary and administrative-support positions, while less experienced leaders may benefit from clearer guidance and more experienced leaders from opportunities for autonomy and strategic participation. These implications are limited to the institutional context studied and should not be generalized as prescriptions for Chinese schools without replication.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research

The study has several limitations. First, the sample comprised only 72 middle leaders from one private nine-year school. Although a census approach was appropriate for describing this setting, the small N limits statistical power, the precision of multivariable estimates, and the stability of any construct-validation analysis. The findings should therefore be interpreted as evidence about this institution, not generalized to Chinese schools broadly. Replication across public and private schools, regions, and larger samples is needed before broader claims can be made.

Second, all focal variables were measured through the same questionnaire. The high mean for self-reported leadership effectiveness ($M = 4.222$) raises the possibility of ceiling effects, restricted variance, and social-desirability bias, while

same-source measurement may inflate associations through common-method variance [16]. Future studies should triangulate self-reports with principal evaluations, teacher or colleague ratings, documented leadership outputs, and, where appropriate, instructional or student-related indicators.

Third, the cross-sectional design does not establish temporal order. The bootstrap indirect effects through role clarity and leadership self-efficacy are statistical indirect associations and should not be interpreted as causal mediation. Longitudinal, time-lagged, or intervention designs are needed to test whether changes in alignment precede changes in clarity, efficacy, and effectiveness. Finally, the six-item alignment measure captures overall perceived fit rather than specific pairwise matches between four leadership styles and four role identities. Future research should validate the alignment construct in larger samples and test more differentiated style–identity configurations using confirmatory factor analysis, profile methods, or other fit-oriented approaches.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study investigated perceived alignment between principal leadership styles and middle leaders' role identity and examined its relationship with self-reported middle leadership effectiveness. It also assessed whether role clarity and leadership self-efficacy statistically explained this relationship. The proposed model responds to an important limitation in school leadership research: principal leadership is often examined as a direct influence, while insufficient attention is given to whether leadership practices correspond with how middle leaders understand and enact their professional roles.

The results indicated that perceived alignment differed across school divisions and leadership-position categories and was positively associated with cumulative leadership tenure. Junior secondary leaders and administrative-support leaders reported comparatively lower alignment, whereas more experienced middle leaders tended to report stronger compatibility between principal leadership practices and their role identities. These results describe variation within the participating private school; they do not establish why those group differences occurred or whether the same pattern would appear in other schools.

Perceived alignment also made a significant contribution to explaining self-reported middle leadership effectiveness after school division, position type, and leadership tenure were controlled. Role clarity and leadership self-efficacy both showed statistically significant indirect associations, with the role-clarity estimate being larger. These findings are consistent with the possibility that compatibility between leadership practices and professional role understanding is related to clearer role boundaries and stronger leadership confidence. However, because the data are cross-sectional and self-reported, neither the regression coefficient nor the indirect effects should be interpreted as evidence of causal influence or temporal mediation.

The study therefore identifies perceived alignment as a potentially useful framework for understanding middle leadership within this institutional context. For the participating school, differentiated delegation, meaningful participation, appropriate autonomy, clear expectations, and role-specific support may be useful areas for leadership review. Broader conclusions about Chinese schools require larger, multi-site, multi-source, and longitudinal research, together with stronger validation of the study-specific alignment instrument.

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