

**EXPLORING THE IDENTITY OF MIDDLE MANAGERS AS STRATEGY
PRACTITIONERS WITHIN A SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT
DEPARTMENT**

by

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Exploring the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a South African government department

I, Mishumo Emmanuel Mamburu, declare that the above dissertation is my own work and that all the sources that I have used and quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Mishumo Mamburu



Signature

14 February 2022

Date

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To God be all the glory!

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“It always seems impossible until it’s done”

~Nelson Mandela~

ABSTRACT

EXPLORING THE IDENTITY OF MIDDLE MANAGERS AS STRATEGY PRACTITIONERS WITHIN A SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT

The traditional views in strategy research place strategising as the domain of top management. The middle management perspective has however gained prominence as middle managers are recognised as significant strategy practitioners. The current study sought to explore the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners in a government department, through the strategy-as-practice lens. A single case study approach was followed, and data was gathered through in-depth interviews with middle managers and their immediate supervisors as the participants. Findings are presented through three main themes. The first theme describes the unique organisational context within which participating middle managers were situated. The second theme reveals the internal multi-level dynamics between participating middle managers and their immediate supervisors. The final theme highlights the diverse roles and skills of middle managers. The research findings provide insight into the multi-level dynamics present between middle managers and their immediate supervisors and expose some of the enabling and constraining practices that influenced participating middle managers in their day-to-day work environment. The findings revealed that middle managers are considered critical strategy practitioners and the link between the top management and lower-level staff. The findings also revealed that middle managers engage in identity work as a process of self-enhancement, confirming that identity is not static. The study sought to contribute to the body of knowledge within the strategy- as-practice perspective as it explored the strategy–identity nexus from a practice perspective, particularly the perception of the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners.

Key words: identity, middle managers, identity work, strategising, strategy-as-practice perspective, practices, middle management perspective

TSHOBOKANYO

GO TLHOTLHOMISA BOITSHUPO JWA BATSAMAISIBOGARENG JAAKA BADIRAKATOGAMAANO MO LEFAPHENG LA PUSO LA AFORIKABORWA

Melebo ya tlwaelo mo patlisisong ya togamaano e tsaya go loga maano e le tiro ya botsamaisi jo bo kwa godimo. Fela botsamaisibogareng bo simolotse go nna botlhokwa jaaka fa batsamaisibogareng ba tswelela go lemogwa jaaka badirakatogamaano ba ba botlhokwa. Thutopatlisiso ya ga jaana e ne e batla go tlhotlhomisa boitshupo jwa batsamaisibogareng jaaka badirakatogamaano mo lefapheng la puso, ka leitlho la togamaano-jaaka-tiragatso. Go latetswe molebo wa thutopatlisiso ya tobiso e le nngwe, mme go kokoantswe *data* ka dikopanopotsolotso tse di tseneletseng le bannileseabe ba batsamaisibogareng le batlhokomedi ba bona. Diphitlhelelo di tlhagisiwa go ya ka meonomegolo e le meraro: Moono wa ntlha o tlhalosa seemo se se kgethegileng sa setheo se batsamaisibogareng ba ba nnileng le seabe ba neng ba le mo go sona. Moono wa bobedi o senola diphetogo tsa magatomantsi tsa ka fa gare magareng ga batsamaisibogareng ba ba nnileng le seabe le batlhokomedi ba bona. Moono wa bofelo o senola diabe le dikgono tse di farologaneng tsa batsamaisibogareng. Diphitlhelelo tsa patlisiso di sedimosa diphetogo tsa magatomantsi tse di gona magareng ga batsamaisibogareng le batlhokomedi ba bona, mme di senola dingwe tsa ditiragatso tse di kgontshang le tse di lekanyetsang tse di ka tlhotlheletsang batsamaisibogareng ba ba nang le seabe mo seemong sa bona sa tiro ya letsatsi le letsatsi. Diphitlhelelo di bontsha gore batsamaisibogareng ba tsewa e le badirakatogamaano ba botlhokwa, le kgolagano magareng ga botsamaisi jo bo kwa godimo le badiri ba ba kwa legatong le le kwa tlase. Gape diphitlhelelo di bontsha gore batsamaisibogareng ba dira tiro ya boitshupo jaaka tirego ya go itokafatsa, ba tlhomamisa gore boitshupo ga bo a ema felo go le gongwe fela. Thutopatlisiso e ne e batla go akgela mo kitsong e e gona mo mogopolong wa togamaano-jaaka-tiragatso jaaka e ne e tlhotlhomisa ntlha ya togamaano le boitshupo go ya ka tiragatso, bogolo segolo mogopolo wa boitshupo jwa batsamaisibogareng jaaka badirakatogamaano.

Mafoko a botlhokwa: boitshupo, batsamaisibogareng, tiro ya boitshupo, go loga maano, mogopolo wa togamaano-jaaka-tiragatso, ditiragatso, mogopolo wa botsamaisibogareng

ABSTRACT

U WANULUSA VHUVHA HA VHALANGULI VHA VHUKATI SA VHABVELEDZI VHA TSHITIRATHEDZHI KHA MUHASHO WA MUVHUSO AFRIKA TSHIPEMBE

Maitele a kale kha tshodisiso ya tshitirathedzhi a dzhia u bveledza tshitirathedzhi sa sia la vhulanguli vhuhulwane. Mbonalo ya vhulanguli ha vhukati naho zwo ralo yo vhuvelwa nga u dzhielwa ntha musi vhalanguli vha vhukati vha tshi khou engedzea u dzhielwa ntha sa vhabveledzi vha tshitirathedzhi vha ndeme. Tshodisiso ya zwino yo toda u wanulusa vhuvha ha vhalanguli vha vhukati sa vhabveledzi vha tshitirathedzhi kha muhasho wa muvhuso, nga kha maitele a tshitirathedzhi tsha nyito. Ho tevhedzwa kuitele kwa tshodisiso nthihi, data yo kuvhanganyiwa nga kha inthaviwu dzo tandavhuwaho na vhalanguli vha vhukati na vhatoli vhavho vhane vha lavhelesa mushumo wa vhatholiwa sa vhadzheneli. Mawanwa o kumedzwa u ya nga thero tharu khulwane: Thero ya u thoma i talusa nyimele yo fhambanaho ya tshiimiswa hune vhadzheneli vha vhulanguli ha vhukati vha wanala hone. Thero ya vuvhili i dzumbulula tshanduko ya nga ngomu ya levele nnzhi vhukati ha vhadzheneli vha vhalanguli vha vhukati na vhatoli vhavho vhane vha lavhelesa mushumo wa vhatholiwa. Thero ya u fhedzisela i ombedzela mishumo yo fhambanaho na zwikili zwa vhalanguli vha vhukati. Mawanwa a tshodisiso a netshedza kupfesesele kha tshanduko dza levele nnzhi dzi re hone vhukati ha vhalanguli vha vhukati na vhatoli vhavho vhane vha lavhelesa mushumo wavho, na u tana vhuwe vhukoni na maitele a zwithivheli ane a tutuwedza u dzhenelela nga vhalanguli vha vhukati kha vhupo ha mushumo wavho wa duvha nga duvha. Mawanwa o dzumbulula uri vhalanguli vha vhukati vha dzhiwa sa vhabveledzi vha tshitirathedzhi vha ndeme, na vhumani vhukati ha vhulanguli ha ntha na vhashumi vha levele ya fhasi. Mawanwa o dovha a wanulusa uri vhalanguli vha vhukati hu didzhenisa kha mushumo wa vhuwe sa kuitele kwa u dipfumisa, u khwathisedza uri vhuwe a si tshithu tshi sa shanduki. Ngudo i toda u shela mulenzhe kha sia la ndivho kha tshitirathedzhi sa mbonalo ya nyito musi hu tshi wanuluswa u didzhenisa kha vhuwe thwii u bva kha mbonalo ya nyito, nga maanda mbonalo ya vhuwe kha vhalanguli vha vhukati sa vhabveledzi vha tshitirathedzhi.

Maipfi a ndeme: vhuwe, vhalanguli vha vhukati, mushumo wa vhuwe, u bveledza tshitirathedzhi, tshitirathedzhi sa mbonalo ya nyito, nyito, mbonalo ya ndangulo ya vhukati

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

APP	Annual Performance Plan
CAQDAS	Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software
CD	Chief director
CEM	Council of Education Ministers
CEMS	College of Economic and Management Sciences
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CES	Chief education specialist
CMC	Core management competencies
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DCES	Deputy chief education specialist
DDG	Deputy director-general
DG	Director-general
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DPSA	Department of Public Service and Administration
FSAPP	Framework for Strategic and Annual Performance Plan
HEDCOM	Heads of Education Departments Committee
MMS	Middle management services
MTEF	Medium Term Expenditure Framework
MTSF	Medium Term Strategic Framework
NDP	National Development Plan
NPC	National Planning Commission
PED	Provincial education departments
POPI	Protection of Personal Information Act
SMS	Senior management services
SAPP	Strategy processes and practices
Unisa	University of South Africa

Definition of key terms

Table 1: Definition of key terms

Term	Definition
Identity	Subjective and fragile self-concept that individuals construct as they engage in questions, such as ‘who am I?’ and ‘how should I act?’ (Oliver, 2015:331).
Identity work	‘Identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Brown, 2015:24).
Middle manager	Can be defined as those managers who have managers reporting to them and are required to report to managers at a more senior level (Jansen Van Rensburg <i>et al.</i> , 2014).
Practices	The various routines, discourses, concepts and technologies through which strategy labour is made possible – not just obvious ones, such as strategy reviews and off-sites, but also those embedded in academic and consulting tools and in more material technologies and artefacts (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009).
Praxis	The sheer labour of strategy, the flow of activities, such as meeting, talking, calculating, form-filling, and presenting through which strategy gets made (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009).
Strategising	Those actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices upon which they draw in accomplishing that activity (Jarzabkowski <i>et al.</i> , 2007:7–9).
Strategy	Strategy is conceptualised as a situated, socially accomplished activity. From a strategy-as-practice perspective, strategy is not something that an organisation has but something its members do (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007:7).
Strategy practitioners	Include both those directly involved in making strategy, most prominently managers and consultants, and those with indirect influence – the policymakers, the media, the gurus and the business schools who shape legitimate praxis and practices (Jarzabkowski & Whittington 2008: 101–102).
Strategy-as-practice perspective	Is concerned with the doing of strategy; who does it, what they do, how they do it, what they use and which implications this has for shaping strategy (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009).

Source: Own compilation

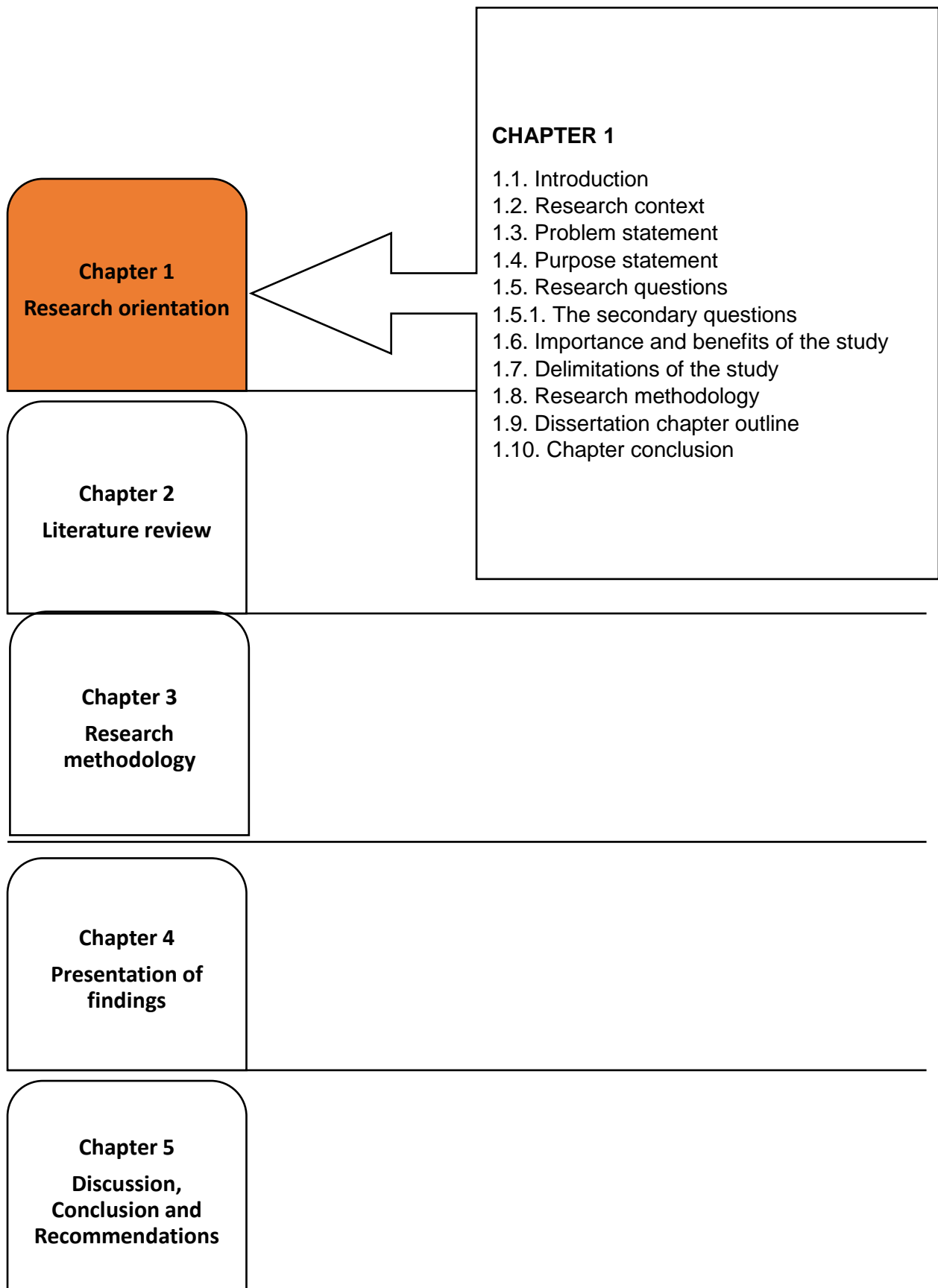


Figure 1: Overview of Chapter 1
Source: Own compilation

CHAPTER 1

RESEARCH ORIENTATION

1.1 Introduction

Strategy and identity are two different yet related constructs that are often studied individually. Organisations with multiple layers of management are prone to identity ambiguities, which may influence the strategising work of the strategy practitioners (Oliver, 2015). Sillince and Simpson (2010) state that identity and strategy have a strong link, as strategy is often defined or influenced by the identity of the strategist involved (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007; Van den Steen, 2013). The strategy–identity nexus has not been sufficiently researched, and there have been calls for more studies that combine the concepts of ‘identity’ and ‘strategy’ (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007; Sillince & Simpson, 2010). A special issue by Ravasi *et al.* (2017) calls for more research focusing on the strategy–identity nexus, and a number of recent articles highlight this gap (Bojovic, Sabatier & Coblence, 2020; Ravasi *et al.*, 2017; Ravasi, Tripsas & Langley, 2020; Wenzel, Cornelissen, Koch, Hartmann & Rauch, 2020). Combining strategy and identity at individual level presents an opportunity to study the struggle between individuals’ identities as agents inside an organisation in the practice of strategising (Gomez, 2007:9; Ravasi, Tripsas & Langley, 2017).

The public sector, in particular, remains an under-researched context when it comes to strategy research (Axelsson, 2016). Very few studies have been conducted within the South African public sector context, focusing on identity and strategy simultaneously, and especially from a multi-level perspective of management. The current study was situated within a single government department within the South African public sector, and focused on the middle manager and his or her immediate supervisors (referred to as ‘directors’). The study focused on how the identity of middle managers, as strategy practitioners in a government department, is perceived internally and how this influences their strategising work. Thus, the study focused on identity at individual level. Sillince and Simpson (2010) conclude that placing strategy and identity within the same field of experienced reality provides a new theorisation that enables the development of more integrated theoretical and empirical

investigation of strategy than the traditional perspectives. Furthermore, the continuous decentralisation of strategising work (Jansen van Rensburg, Davis & Venter, 2014) suggests that more strategy actors in different areas of an organisation are being recognised than in the traditional studies of strategy. This prompted the need for a study to be conducted focusing on middle managers and their identity as strategy practitioners within a government department.

Ravasi *et al.* (2017) refer to various identity issues still in need of further research. Issues such as including issues of strategic change, identity work and micro level practices, focusing on the activities that individuals or groups undertake in organisations (Ravasi *et al.*, 2017). In addition, issues such as multi-level dynamics; the role of material practices, routines, and artefacts; balancing similarity and distinctiveness; and finally managing inter-firm relationships are still under-researched (Bojovic, Sabatier & Coblence, 2020; Ravasi *et al.*, 2017; Ravasi *et al.*, 2020; Wenzel, Cornelissen, Koch, Hartmann & Rauch, 2020). The current study responded to this call and sought to understand how the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a government department is internally perceived from the perspective of both middle managers and their immediate supervisors (referred to as 'directors') and how this affects their role as a strategy practitioner.

A study by Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014) recognised middle managers as influential strategic actors. The middle management perspective deviates from traditional perspectives, which see strategy as the domain of the upper echelon, as it recognises middle managers as strategy practitioners and places them as a unit of analysis in strategy research (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). As such, the middle management perspective offers a contemporary view on middle managers, which places the focus especially on the making of strategic decisions (Surju, De Metz & Davis, 2020) by middle managers.

A government institution of an emerging economy provides an ideal context to explore the strategy–identity nexus because of its unique context (Axelsson, 2016). Walker (2013) suggests that, although research on public organisations has grown rapidly, its findings are drawn from inadequate data and a limited geographical milieu, focusing predominantly on the United Kingdom and the United States. Axelsson (2016) further

states that much knowledge on strategising still emanates from the private sector, which then necessitates adjustments to the public sector context. Therefore, a study on strategising or strategy work provided an opportunity to explore strategising work from the perspective of a government institution in South Africa. Middle managers, particularly in a public institution, are recognised as contributors to the strategy work of the organisations (Jansen van Rensburg *et al.*, 2014). The next section discusses the research context within which the study was conducted.

1.2 Research context: The public sector in South Africa

This study was conducted in a single South African government department responsible for education provision. The focus of the study was on the Department of Basic Education (DBE) as the unique research context. The National Planning Commission (NPC) has dedicated the entire Chapter 9 of the National Development Plan: Vision 2030 (NDP) (NPC, 2015) to education, giving it top priority status. The DBE is given priority in the NDP because education is perceived to be central and the driving force towards the development of the country (NPC, 2015).

Strategic management in the context of the South African government is broad and encapsulates the development and implementation of strategic plans of various government departments, at different levels. The planning process is guided by the Framework for Strategic Plans and Annual Performance Plans (FSAPP) introduced in 2010 (NPC, 2015). In addition, the planning process is influenced by the country's National Development Plan (NDP), which is translated into the five-year Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF). The MTSF identifies institutional key priorities for the period of five years (NPC, 2015).

The NPC (2015) also provides a broad range of plans produced in different areas, for different purposes. In addition to the NDP and MTSF, public institutions produce delivery agreements related to the priority outcomes, sector plans, departmental strategic plans and the annual performance plans (APPs), to mention a few. It is important to note that these plans determine the course of action of the public institutions. All initiatives, programmes and strategies are mirrored against these broad plans.

For the purpose of this dissertation, the strategising process in the government institution under review is represented in terms of the development and the implementation of the MTSF, the 5-year strategic plan and the annual performance plan (APP). Moreover, the contributions and inputs into the development of the delivery agreement of the minister of Basic Education are part of the formal planning process. The implementation of the activities that fall under flagship programmes or projects of the department constitutes strategising to the extent that the activity is consequential to the strategic success of the department (Whittington, 2012). Data collection took place from December 2019 to January 2020, which was the beginning of the 2019–2024 MTSF period.

A typical hierarchical structure comprises of the director-general (who is the accounting officer of the department), the deputy director-general, the chief director, the director, the deputy director, the assistant director, the senior administrative officer and in some sections, administrative officers and/or clerks. All these positions have influence in strategising although the degree of influence will vary according to the authority and responsibility that come with the position. The deputy directors in the case department are appointed in terms of the Middle Management Services (MMS) and thus, the researcher took advantage of this in determining middle managers who should be part of the study. Directors are appointed in terms of the Senior Management Services (SMS). Deputy Directors report directly to directors. Therefore, inevitably, the work of a deputy director, who represent the middle managers in the context of this study, is affected by the upward multiple layers of director, chief director, deputy director-general and ultimately the director-general.

Worth noting is that the directors and deputy directors are the focus of this study and deputy directors are identified as middle managers. Therefore, these managers shape strategy through who they are and by way of their positions in the hierarchy or organisational structure (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). For the purpose of this study, the term middle manager will be used to represent the deputy director.

The choice of a public organisation was informed by Höglund, Caicedo and Mårtensson (2018) who state that not much is known about the application of strategic management in practice within public organisations and its possible consequences,

despite its prominence in the agenda of some public organisations. This assertion by Höglund *et al.* (2018) made the DBE a relevant context within which this study could be based. Furthermore, the current research explored the strategy–identity nexus (Ravasi *et al.*, 2020) within a government department and extended research to different contexts. A keyword search on this topic was done on the SABINET database using the phrase ‘exploring identity of middle managers’ with a date range of 2000 to 2021 and no research was found on this topic within the South African context. However, this should not be understood as indicating that there are no studies on identity and strategy within the public sector.

Taking the above into account, the current study aimed to explore the identity of the middle managers within the DBE. The problem that the study sought to address is discussed in the next section.

1.3 Problem statement

The identity of the middle manager as strategy practitioner, particularly in a South African government department, provides a unique research context to explore the nexus between strategy and identity. The concept of identity, which emanates from different layers of the organisation, affects how strategy is defined (Jarzabkowski *et al.* 2007; Van der Steen, 2013) and thus is consequential to the success of an organisation. As such, identity underlies organisational strategising work (Oliver, 2015). Notably, in the literature, the matter of the identity and subjectivity involving the question of who can be seen as a ‘strategist’ is still open for exploration (Burgelman *et al.*, 2018). Ravasi *et al.* (2017) support this view by indicating that the strategy–identity nexus has not always received the attention it deserves. The views of Sillince and Simpson (2010) appear to remain relevant as there is growing interest in the link between strategy and identity; however, more research is required on the identity of the strategy practitioner, particularly from a multi-level perspective (Ravasi *et al.*, 2020) within a public sector context.

The problem that this study sought to address was –

- the lack of knowledge on how the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners is perceived internally; and

- the lack of knowledge on how the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners influences their strategising work within a government department.

1.4 Purpose statement

The purpose of the current study was to explore how the internal identity dynamics of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a government department influence and shape the strategising work of middle managers. The study aimed to approach this from a multi-level perspective by focusing on how middle managers and their immediate supervisors perceive middle managers as strategy practitioners.

1.5 Research questions

The primary research question and secondary research questions are presented below.

1.5.1. Primary research question

How do the internal identity dynamics of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a government department influence and shape the strategising work of a middle manager?

1.5.2. Secondary research questions

The secondary research questions are presented below:

1. How are middle managers as strategy practitioners within a government department perceived from the perspective of their immediate supervisors?
2. How do middle managers perceive themselves as strategy practitioners?
3. How do internal identity dynamics constrain or enable strategy practitioners in their strategising work in a government context?

1.6 Importance and benefits of the study

The study sought to contribute to the body of knowledge within the strategy-as-practice perspective as it explored the strategy–identity nexus from a practice perspective, particularly the perception of the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners. This dissertation presents the empirical findings on how the identity of a strategist

influences the strategising work of the individual practitioner from a middle management perspective. The current study also contributed to bridging the gap between the fields of strategic management and organisational theory research and thus, potentially enriches the strategy-as-practice research agenda. In addition, the study provided a multi-level perspective on the link between identity and strategy, within a public sector context.

1.7 Delimitations of the study

The focus of this study was on two groups of participants, focusing only on the middle managers, defined in the government context as deputy directors and or chief education specialists, and their immediate supervisors (referred to as 'directors'). The study only focused on the identity at individual level rather than identity at group level. Moreover, the study was limited to middle managers and directors in the DBE and thus excluded other senior management teams, such as deputy director-general and chief director. This study was conducted in a single government department and did not focus on any other public entities. Data was gathered from December 2019 to January 2020 and focused on the 2019–2020 strategic cycle.

1.8 Research methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach and comprised a single case study in the public sector in South Africa. The case study approach was deemed appropriate as it provides new insights about a phenomenon and a theoretical perspective but also uncovers problems that may exist about the phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). The study adopted the interpretive-constructivist research paradigm in order to study the lived experiences of middle managers in relation to their strategy work. The interpretive-constructivist paradigm is credited for its usefulness to understanding reality as an expression of deeper-lying processes (Duffy, Fernandez & Sène-Harper, 2021). This paradigm made it possible to collect deep data through in-depth interviews that were conducted with the middle managers and directors as the participants in order to understand how the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners is perceived in relation to the strategy work. Lastly, the study was conducted from the strategy-as-practice research perspective with a particular focus on the practices

within which actors engage while strategising. The strategy-as-practice research perspective focuses on the meticulous practices related to the doing of strategy.

1.9 Dissertation chapter outline

The study is structured as follows:

Chapter 1: Research orientation

This chapter introduced the research and provided the background to the study, including the purpose and problem statement. The central research question and sub-questions were stated and an overview of the research design, which framed the study, was provided.

Chapter 2: Literature review

In this chapter, the researcher presents the overview of the literature focusing on the strategy-as-practice perspective, strategic management, the middle management perspective, the identity concept and identity work concepts. In Chapter 2, the public sector strategising is discussed in order to provide a basis for understanding this unique context. Lastly, Chapter 2 discusses middle managers in the context of the study, which was a government setting.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

Chapter 3 discusses the research design, research approach and research paradigm that was followed. The chapter also offers the sampling method as well as the data collection and analysis process. The chapter concludes with the key ethical considerations that guided the study.

Chapter 4: Data analysis and findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on the three themes that emerged from the data.

Chapter 5: Interpretation of findings, conclusion and recommendations

Chapter 5 discusses the key interpretations of the findings and presents the conclusions drawn from the findings. The benefits for both the department and research are discussed and recommendations of the study are presented.

1.10 Chapter conclusion

Chapter 1 provided an orientation to the study, and highlighted the main gap which the study intended to answer, focusing specifically on the strategy-identity nexus. Chapter 1 also noted that the strategy–identity nexus area of research – particularly in a government department in South Africa and focusing on the middle manager – has not been sufficiently researched before. This assertion made the study relevant to the discourse within the strategy-as-practice research perspective. Chapter 1 further provided the problem statement that the study sought to address, as well as the research questions, which guided the study. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth discussion on the literature within which the study was grounded. An overview of Chapter 2 is depicted in Figure 2 below.

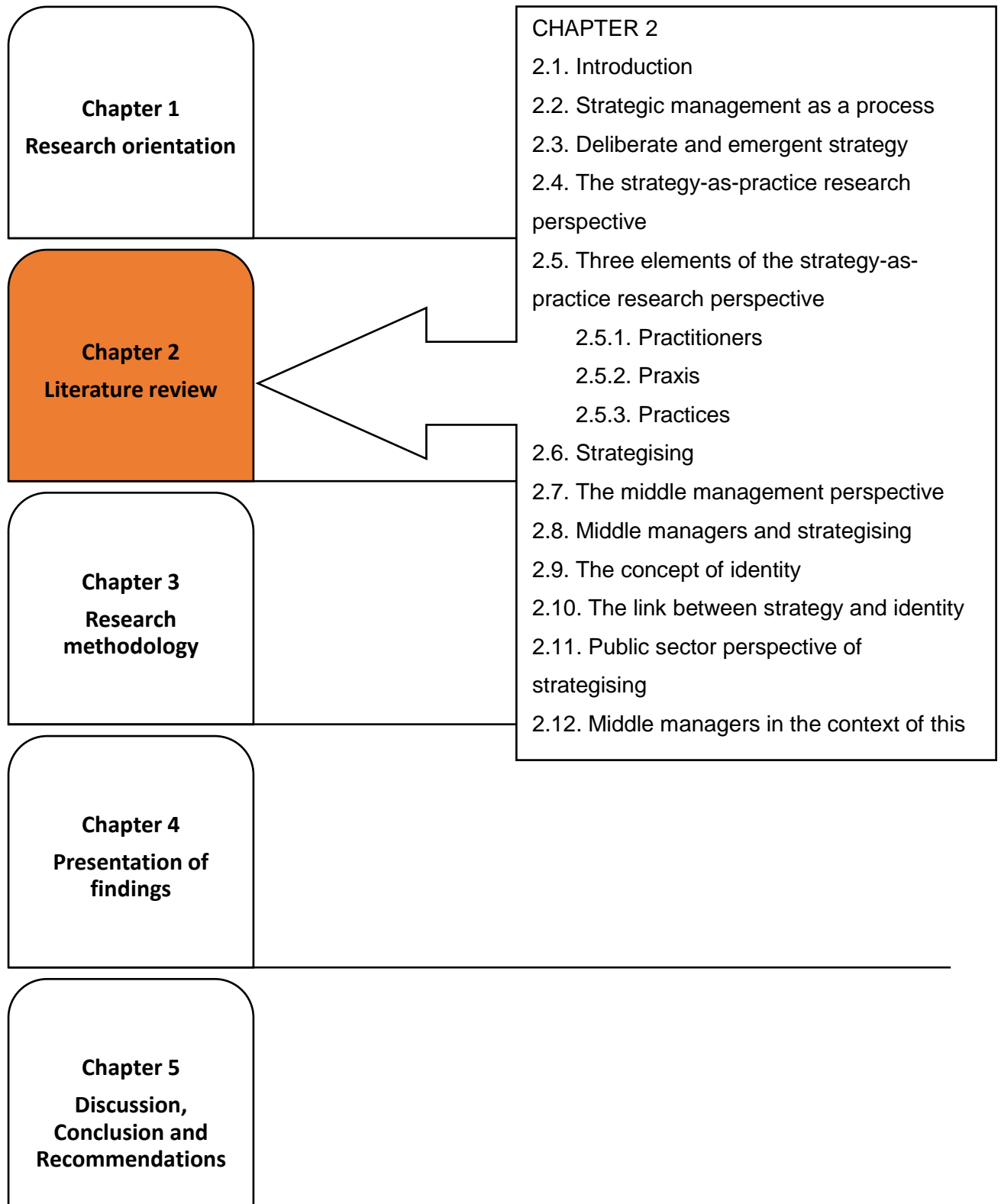


Figure 2: Overview of Chapter 2
Source: Own compilation

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to position the current study within the broader strategy-as-practice and identity literature, and its relation to strategy, as seen from a practice perspective. The current study focused on the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a South African government department. The choice of a government department was motivated by Whittington (2012) who called for more research using the strategy-as-practice perspective to study strategy in different organisational contexts. A selected department within the South African government provided an opportunity to advance research, as a limited number of studies on strategy research have been done, which focused specifically on the public sector and particularly within the South African context. The selection of the case department was also motivated by convenient access given that the researcher has an insider perspective. In addition, the education sector receives large part of the budget of the country (Mokoena, 2018), which makes it an interesting strategising terrain.

Chapter 2 further presents the theoretical context of this study and offers a critical evaluation of previous research within the strategy-as-practice perspective, focusing on the internal identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners. Ronda-pupo and Angel (2012) contend that, despite being the most taught and most studied concept, the “messy” reality of strategy remains least understood. In order to understand the interconnection between strategy and identity, this study adopted the strategy-as-practice research perspective to study the micro level practices and often ‘messy’ processes and practices not covered by conventional strategy research.

This chapter starts with a discussion of strategic management as a process, followed by a discussion of the concepts of deliberate and emergent strategies. The chapter proceeds with a discussion of the strategy-as-practice research perspective, including the construct of strategising. The chapter includes a discussion of the interface between strategy and identity as well as the public sector perspective of strategising. Chapter 2 concludes with a discussion of middle managers in the context of this study. The next section discusses strategic management as a process.

2.2 Strategic management as a process

The history of the development of strategic management is well documented and provides a rich empirical and theoretical basis for scholars in strategy research. Strategic management originated in the late 1970s with a focus on competition and profit maximisation in the business environment (Venter, 2014). As an area of academic inquiry and organisational practice, strategic management examines the relationships between strategic aims, processes and content, through a contingency framework, to maximise organisational performance (Walker, 2013). 'Strategy', 'strategic management', as well as 'strategising' are common and often-used concepts in the strategy management field in general. These constructs are sometimes used interchangeably although they convey and carry with them different meanings. The interchangeable use of the concepts of strategy and strategic management may distort the correct interpretation or meaning of these related but different concepts in certain contexts (Bryson & George, 2020). It was therefore important to clarify these constructs since they are intertwined and form the basis of the discussion throughout the study.

Porter (1996:1) defines strategy as the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities. Freeman *et al.* (2010) hold that strategy is an organising process that involves both formulation and implementation. Decisions taken become the plan of action of the organisation towards pre-determined goals. A more simplistic view of a strategy is that provided by Thompson and Martin (2010) who state that strategies are a means to an end. Venter (2014:10) defines strategy as the direction provided by the actions and decisions of strategists in pursuit of organisational goals. All these definitions of strategy find convergence in that they are future-oriented (Thompson & Martin, 2010).

Worth noting is that most of the strategy definitions include fundamental elements, such as goals or objectives and actions of an organisation, but more importantly, that strategy is future-oriented. The study by Mainardes, Ferreira and Raposo (2014) noted some degree of difficulty in understanding the concept of strategy in relation to translating the concept into the reality of organisations.

The traditional definition of strategic management depicts it as a process of setting strategic direction, setting goals, crafting strategy, implementing and executing the strategy but, most importantly, adopting appropriate corrective measures (Venter, 2014). The definitions above find resonance in Thompson and Martin (2010:11) who define strategic management as:

[A] process by which organisations determine their purpose, objectives and desired levels of attainment; decide on the actions for achieving these objectives in an appropriate time-scale, and frequently in a changing environment; implement the actions; and assess progress and results.

This definition by Thompson and Martin (2010) provides important clarification, although in a subtle way, about strategy and strategic management. It appears that strategy is a sub-set or an activity in the overall process of strategic management. Furthermore, the process of strategic management entails the following elements, as discussed by Thompson and Martin (2010):

- clarification of the desired goals;
- creating strategies to attain the desired goals;
- implementation of the strategies;
- adjusting strategies in the wake of competition or as a result of changes in the environment of the organisation; and
- measuring performance against the desired goals.

This is well narrated in Nag, Hambrick and Chen (2007) who assert that strategic management entails a process involving building means that will drive an organisation to value creation for its stakeholders. These elements are important, particularly in that they provide the basis of the making of strategy in an organisation and can be used to mirror strategising in the organisation under review.

Figure 3 below depicts strategic management from a process perspective adopted from Venter (2014). In the process perspective, strategic management is seen as a sequential interlinked activity beginning with the strategy formulation phase. The second phase is called strategy implementation, and the last phase, strategic control, is concerned with monitoring progress against the adopted strategy but also a review of it.

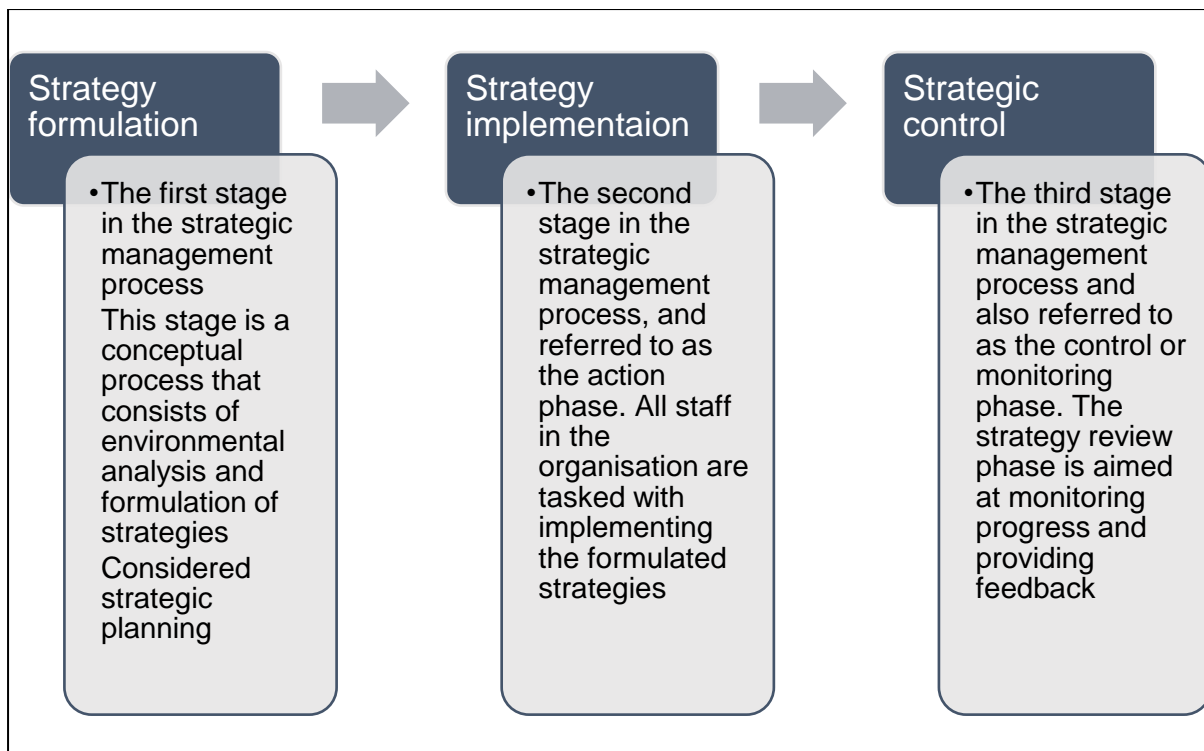


Figure 3: Strategic management process
 Source: Adapted from Venter (2014) and Höglund *et al.* (2018)

As depicted in Figure 3 above, strategy formulation is considered the first and conceptual stage of the strategic management process (Venter 2014, Höglund *et al.*, 2018). The strategy formulation stage covers aspects, such as environmental analysis, and ultimately, the conception of strategy (Venter, 2014). In the context of this study, it could be said that strategic planning is encapsulated in the strategy formulation phase of strategic management. For Höglund *et al.* (2018), strategic planning entails formulating strategies. In addition, Bryson, Edwards and Van Slyke (2018:317) define strategic planning as a deliberate, disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organisation does. This definition embodies what an organisation is and why it exists in the industry within which it is. Furthermore, the definition by Bryson *et al.* (2018) emphasises the fundamental decisions and actions that shape the entity, which is in line with the definition by Nag *et al.* (2007).

Ali (2018) offers another definition of strategic planning, which views such planning as a process of determining the mission, major objectives, strategies and policies that govern the acquisition and allocation of resources to achieve organisational aims. It can be said that strategic planning represents the strategising activity, since it involves

determining the overall course of action for the organisation (Höglund *et al.*, 2018, Ali 2018). Both these definitions of strategic planning – that by Bryson *et al.* (2018) and the one by Ali (2018) – argue that strategic planning shapes the course of action for the organisation but, most importantly, produces strategies with organisational aims. Thus, the two definitions both render the assertion by Gomez (2007) that strategic planning is part of strategising practice, relevant.

Neis (2017) notes that the strategic planning process, as an organisational tool, contributes to the challenge of successfully implementing strategies given the gap between the formulation and implementation of strategy. The gap between formulation and implementation of strategy could signal a top-down approach in formulating strategies in which implementation takes place at operational level. Again, Neis (2017) emphasises the importance of focusing attention not only on the formulation of strategy but also on the implementation thereof in order to generate the intended results, which completes the whole process of the strategic planning process.

The second phase, namely the strategy implementation phase, is known as the ‘action phase’ and is very critical in the organisational performance. The strategy implementation phase enjoins all staff members of the organisation to act on the adopted strategies (Venter, 2014). Lê and Jarzabkowski (2014) consider strategy implementation to be a complex activity, in part, because of human dynamics, such as resistance, politics and tensions. The human dynamics aspect was of particular interest in the current study given that there are different strategy actors in organisations, private or public.

The last phase is the strategic control phase. The strategic control phase of the strategic management process can also be referred as the ‘monitoring phase’ (Ali, 2018). This phase also serves to review the progress and to provide feedback against the set strategies but also assist the organisation in making the necessary corrections (Ali, 2018). This phase can be linked to the process covered by the FSAPP, which relates to monitoring performance through regular monitoring reports (NPC, 2015).

Having explored different conceptualisations of the concept ‘strategic management’ and after discussing the strategic management process in detail, it should be understood that the ultimate purpose of strategic management is to align the

organisation with its internal and external environment in pursuit of the strategic direction (Venter, 2014). Bryson and George (2020) note that strategic planning and strategic management are specific approaches that could enable effective strategising in and by public organisations. Thus, strategising in public organisations includes strategic planning to formulate strategies, ways of implementing strategies, and continuous strategic learning (Bryson & George, 2020).

Lê and Jarzabkowski (2014) suggest that the strategic management process as a whole refers to strategising as it covers the day-to-day making of the strategy from formulation to control. Strategising means the doing of strategy, and strategy can be deliberate or emergent (Stretton, 2017) as described in the next section.

2.3 Deliberate and emergent strategy

Mintzberg and Waters (1985) introduced the terms 'deliberate' and 'emergent strategy', and viewed strategy making as taking place within a strategy continuum from planned to emergent. Strategy making can be both planned and unplanned (Venter, 2014). It can therefore be viewed along a continuum where planned strategy is deliberate, and unplanned strategy is emergent (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985).

Emergent strategy implies exploring what works, taking one action at a time in search of a viable solution. Emergent strategy may also emanate as changes in the deliberate (planned) strategy (Stretton, 2017). Deliberate strategies are those planned or intended strategies that are realised, but may as well be unrealised and emanate from a formal planning process (Mintzberg, 1978; Stretton, 2017). These strategies are depicted in Figure 4 below.

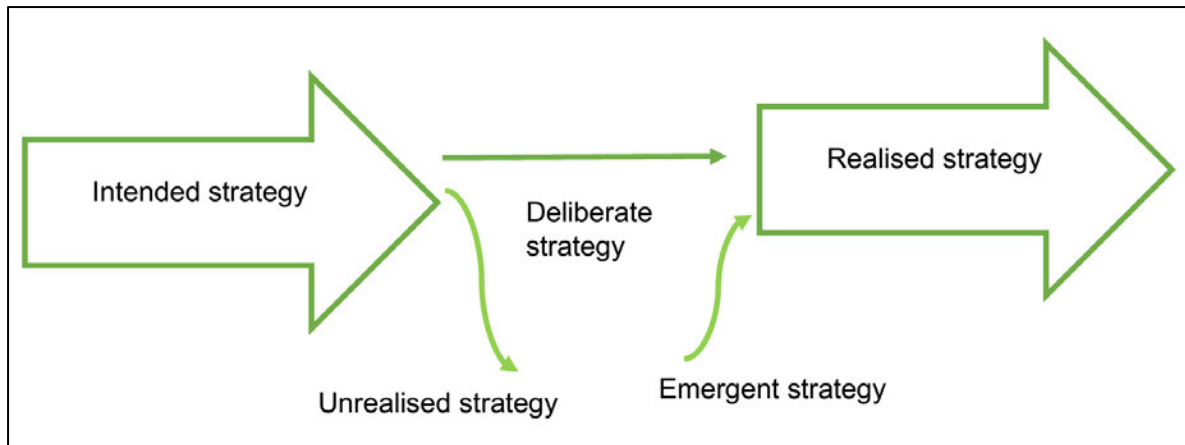


Figure 4: Types of strategies
 Source: Mintzberg & Waters (1985:258)

Naldemirci, Wolf, Elam, Lydahl, Moore and Britten (2017) define deliberate strategy as those strategies that are introduced as intended according to a specific agenda set by an organisation. Naldemirci *et al.* (2017) further offer a description of emergent strategy as those strategies that arise in response to contingencies encountered when pursuing deliberate strategies. In other words, deliberate strategies are the result of formal planning by an institution, whereas emergent strategies encapsulates learning what works, and is therefore an unplanned way as a result of desirable patterns often recognised after it happened (Bryson & George, 2020; Naldemirci *et al.*, 2017). Deliberate strategy may not be achieved, and could become unrealised strategies, whilst emergent strategies become realised due to the learning approach adopted in the contingency situation (Bryson & George, 2020).

The planned approach to strategy assumes that strategic planning is understood as a well-structured process consisting of various steps; however in reality, strategy is often realised through emergent practices (Bryson & George, 2020). Therefore, it is important to view strategy as both planned and emerging from the organisational environment. Strategy research has grown significantly over the last decades, shifting the concern on level of analysis – which used to be dominated by the firm, and perceived as a unit of decision process and administration – to the inclusion of the focus on actors and their actions (Bryson & George, 2020). Traditionally, previous research focused on the elite group called ‘top management’ with little or no attention to other actors in the organisation. It can be said that top management are associated with the top down approach represented by deliberate strategising. With the advent of

the strategy-as-practice research perspective (Whittington, 2006), there was a shift to scrutinise the activities involved in the making of the strategy, focusing on actors in and around the organisation. Other actors include middle managers who are mostly associated with emergent strategy, represented by bottom up approach. According to Vaara and Lamberg (2016), the strategy-as-practice research perspective was compelled by the growing interest in the detailed activities and practices of strategy. Section 2.4 below discusses the strategy-as-practice research perspective as an academic lens in order to view and study the complexities of strategy.

2.4 The strategy-as-practice research perspective

The strategy-as-practice research perspective emanates from the practice turn in social sciences and a turn towards processual views on management and strategy (Asmub, 2018). It emerged as a result of concern over the gap between the theory of what people do and what people actually do, the 'practice' approach in the management literature (Jarzabkowski, 2004:529). Strategy-as-practice research is rooted in the theory of practice but its substantive origin is concerned with meticulous studies of strategy in different organisational contexts (Whittington, 2012). Thus, strategy-as-practice perspective provides for the analysis of the micro activities, and focuses on praxis, practitioners and practices (Maritz & Du Toit, 2018).

The current study was situated within a strategy-as-practice research perspective, and adopted a definition of strategy conceptualised as a situated, socially accomplished activity (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007:7; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). To further elucidate the choice of definition, the researcher adopted the same approach adopted by Lê and Jarzabkowski (2014), namely that of a strategising perspective, which implies a focus on the detailed processes and practices, which constitute the day-to-day activities of organisational life and which relate to strategic outcomes of the organisation.

The strategy-as-practice research perspective is concerned with the doing of strategy, who does the strategy, what and how do they do it, and the use and the implications thereof in shaping strategy (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). What makes this research agenda crucial is its ability to expose how strategy making is enabled and constrained by prevailing organisational and societal practices (Whittington, 2012). Figure 5 below depicts the main elements of the strategy-as-practice framework and reveals the

reality of the interface between praxis, practices and practitioners. As depicted in Figure 5, strategising occurs at the nexus between the three elements of the framework (praxis, practices and practitioners) and represents various activities and social practices performed by different actors that are consequential to the success of the organisation (Asmub, 2018; Stander & Pretorius, 2016; Whittington, 2012).

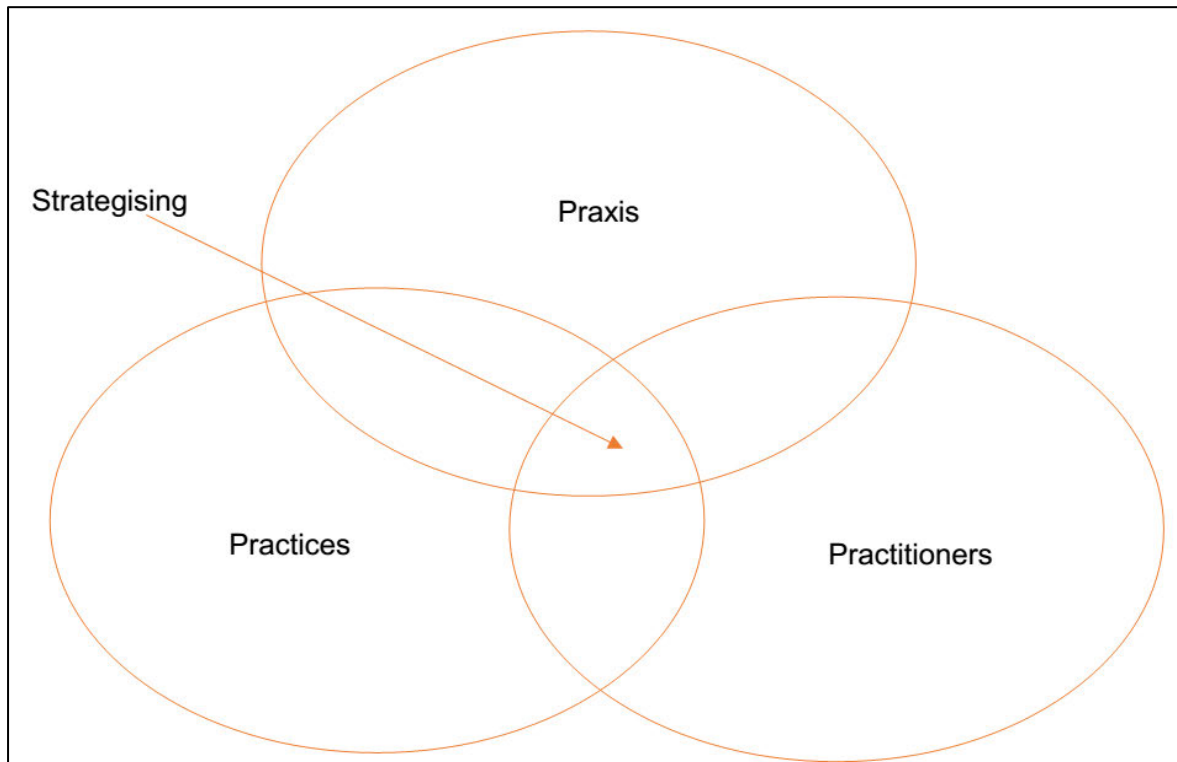


Figure 5: Strategy-as-practice framework
Source: Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007:8)

In essence, the overall aim of research within the strategy-as-practice perspective is to move away from a traditional understanding of strategy as something an organisation has, to a more dynamic understanding of strategy as something an organisation and its members do as part of their day-to-day organisational activities (Asmub, 2018).

With the advent of debates on the relationship between the strategy process and strategy-as-practice research (Mirabeau, Maguire & Hardy, 2018), a combinatory research perspective called 'strategy as practice and process' (SAPP) was developed (Maritz & Du Toit, 2018). Mirabeau *et al.* (2018) contend that strategy process research focuses on choice processes involving strategic decision-making and the implementation processes (strategic change). Moreover, the strategy process

perspective emphasises the critical role played by time and history with particular focus on action and context. The elements of strategy process research are strategists, the issue and the sequence of actions (Mirabeau *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, Maritz and Du Toit (2018) contend that strategy-as-practice research cannot be separated from the process of strategy. This can be deduced in the shift from 'strategy' as a noun to 'strategising', which depicts a process (Asmub, 2018).

Although the strategy-as-process and strategy-as-practice research perspectives differ, particularly in terms of unit of analysis, Vaara and Whittington (2012) contend that strategy-as-practice research does incorporate the process approach to strategy making, as the two research perspectives are concerned with the study of strategy.

Larsen and Rasmussen (2018) acknowledge that many studies have been conducted on what actually happens during strategic processes, but they then further emphasise a need to focus on micro founded actions, subtle nuances and the way everyday coping activities help to shape strategic practices. This is encouraged by researchers within both the strategy-as-practice and strategy-in-process communities (Larsen & Rasmussen, 2018). Although the current study was situated with the strategy-as-practice research perspective, it also borrowed from the strategy-as-process research perspective. The current study looked at the day-to-day practices and processes underlying strategic action. Maritz and Du Toit (2018) affirm the importance of situating strategy-as-practice research within the strategy-as-process research perspective, labelling it a subfield of the strategy-as-practice research perspective. Furthermore, the combinatory research perspective introduces a fundamental compatibility that allows for a comprehensive exchange of questions, concepts, and methodologies between them. Therefore, Maritz and Du Toit (2018) assert that strategy-as-practice research cannot be separated from the process of strategy. The current study supported this assertion, as it aimed to explore the social practices and processes underlying strategic action and strategising within a specific context. In Section 2.5, the three elements of the strategy-as-practice research perspective, namely practitioners, practices and praxis are discussed in depth.

2.5 The framework of the strategy-as-practice research perspective

This section discusses the three elements that make up strategising within the strategy-as-practice framework and defines them within the context of this study. For the current study, the emphasis was specifically on practitioners (middle managers and their immediate supervisors) as the unit of analysis focusing on middle managers' identity as strategy practitioners.

2.5.1 Practitioners

Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008) define practitioners widely to include both those directly involved in making strategy, such as managers and consultants, and those with indirect influence which can include policymakers, the media, the gurus and the business schools who shape legitimate praxis and practices. Gomez (2007) refers to practitioners also as 'agents', understood as people who engage in strategy work, including managers at multiple levels of the organisation as well as the influential external actors. According to Mookherjee and West (2013), strategy practitioners are individuals who are conscious of participating in the strategy process within an organisation; however, excluding non-employed staff, such as consultants or non-executive directors. The by Mookherjee and West (2013) definition neglects that individuals can be engaged in strategic activities unconsciously, depending on how the activity is consequential to the success of the organisation (Asmub, 2018).

Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) and Asmub (2018) state that an activity is considered strategic to the extent that it has consequences for and to the survival, direction and strategic outcome of the organisation. Therefore, practitioners are those individuals involved in the making or doing of strategy. This assertion is particularly important in framing what middle managers in the context of the current study did in their day-to-day activities. Middle managers are viewed as strategy practitioners given their role in the making of strategy. And thus, 'practitioners' in this study referred to those individuals who were involved in making strategy and are referred to in this dissertation as 'strategy practitioners'.

Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) contend that practitioners could consequently influence the strategic activity through who they are, how they act and which practices they draw upon in that action. Middle managers were viewed as practitioners within the context

of the study, and were the unit of analysis given their role in the construction of activity consequential to the strategic outcome of the organisation (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007).

Venter (2014) discusses different categories of strategy practitioners in order of seniority as well as power and authority vested in certain groups of people within the organisation. Figure 6 below depicts practitioners by level of seniority and the influence they have in strategy making. Importantly, these practitioners include middle managers as part of this structure, and consider them strategy practitioners.

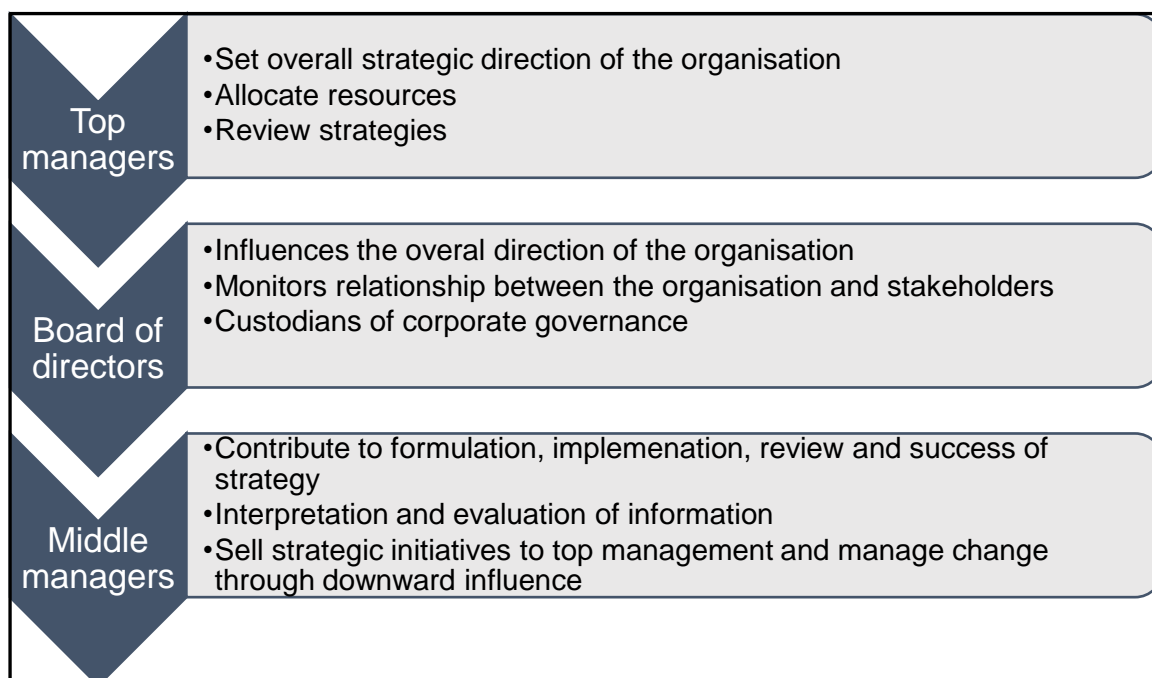


Figure 6: Strategy practitioners by order of seniority and influence
Source: Adapted from Venter (2014)

Rouleau (2013) suggests that there are specific values, interests and concerns that guide the work done by strategy practitioners, which strategy practitioners need to understand. This suggests that practitioners need to be accustomed to certain norms or practices but they should also have certain attributes to guide their strategising work. In addition, Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) suggest that there is a need to deal with individual experiences of agency where who a person is, is innately connected to how that person acts and also the consequences of such action. This assertion is particularly important as it directs the attention to the identity of the actor embedded in the question of 'who am I'. The assertion by Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) relates to the

focus of this study, namely to explore how the identity of individual middle managers, as strategy practitioners, affects how such individual acts.

2.5.2 Praxis

'Praxis' refers to the sheer labour of strategy, the flow of activities – such as meeting, talking, calculating, form-filling and presenting – through which strategy gets made (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008). Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) suggest that praxis leaves its authority by describing the whole of human action. Praxis combines groups of actors, including those socially, politically and economically embedded institutions within which individuals act and to which they contribute. In addition, Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) and Cordier, Hameed, Marin and Stablein (2014) mention the fact that praxis is both embedded in the operation of the institutions but also a dynamic concept in that it can be influenced by interactions between levels in the hierarchy within an organisation. It is therefore necessary to link praxis and the concept of identity. Cordier, Hameed, Marin, and Stablein (2014) suggest that praxis can be influenced between levels or at cross-level in the hierarchy, which is embodied in individual identity at different levels called cross-level identity. According to Cordier *et al.* (2014), the identity of practitioners has an influence on how praxis is shaped by practitioners, which then signals an unavoidable link between identity and praxis. For the purpose of this study, praxis was seen as what individual practitioners identified as that which middle managers do, such as conceptualising documents, presenting work, as well as attending meetings.

2.5.3 Practices

Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007:9) define practices as routinised types of behaviour, which consist of several elements that are interconnected to one another, such as forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. Practices entail those ways of doing things that can be recognised even when done unconsciously (Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl & Whittington, 2016). According to Asmub (2018:3), practices serve as resources for strategy practitioners to conduct strategically relevant praxis, which is the doing of strategic activities. As Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008) assert, practice encapsulates those routines,

discourses, concepts and technologies in the doing of strategy. Well-known ways of doing strategy involve activities such as the strategy reviews, off-sites interactions, as well as PowerPoint presentations.

Jarzabkowski (2004) contends that the term 'practice' implies repetitive performance in order to become practised; that is, to attain recurrent, habitual or routinised accomplishment of particular actions. Practice finds resonance in performances, such as in sport or music, as an underlying factor in developing competence and thus, improving performance. Although practice is largely associated with performing sports or music, it is also prevalent in strategy research, in particular the strategy-as-practice research perspective, as Jarzabkowski (2004) states that one becomes competent when doing the same practice over and over again (Jarzabkowski, 2004).

The current study adopted the definition provided by Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2016) and considered practices as those established ways or norms of doing things that, even if not articulated, can be recognised even when done unconsciously. Given that the current study focused on the identity of the middle manager as a strategy practitioner, identity-influenced practices are included in the above definition.

2.6 Strategising

As mentioned in Section 2.4, strategising occurs at the nexus of the three elements of practices, praxis and practitioners (Jarzabkowski, 2007). Strategising involves the doing of strategy and includes discourse and decision-making in terms of the position of the organisation in the industry (Gomez, 2007; Vaz, 2019). It is about attaining a detailed understanding of the myriad micro activities that constitute strategy and strategising in practice (Höglund *et al.*, 2018). Central to this process is human action and interaction (Axelsson, 2016). Gomez (2007) views strategising as a practice with specific rules and routines that were constructed over time and which are about the making of strategic discourses and defining strategic goals. Therefore, strategising is much more than the explicit making of strategy, and includes activities such as strategic planning, annual reviews, strategy workshops and associated discourses. Jarzabkowski (2014) notes that strategising focuses on the detailed processes and practices of those activities that are important for the strategic outcomes of the organisation.

Mookherjee and West (2013) suggest that practitioners, given their position in the organisation, may choose in which activity they can engage and with which they want to identify. Practitioners' position in the hierarchy of an organisation may therefore influence the manner in which they undertake the day-to-day activities. Mookherjee and West (2013) also note that the individual identity of practitioners has an influence on their choice of and approach to their activities. There is therefore a need to understand the practice of strategising by individual practitioners within their organisations, particularly in the public sector context (Gomez, 2007). After all, strategising can also be understood in the public organisation context (Bryson & George, 2020). The current study aimed to understand what enables and constrains strategy practitioners in their strategising. Garlick (2021) notes that involving strategy practitioners in strategising activity may enable them to strategise, suggesting that middle managers' strategising maybe enabled prevailing practices. The leadership competence of those directing the strategising process is also important and can influence the work of strategy practitioners. Garlick (2021) further notes that, in part, the availability of time and resources as practice of participation in strategy can also constrain strategy practitioners' strategising work. The current study exploited the gap to study strategy at multiple levels by soliciting the views of both middle managers and their immediate in the department under study.

2.7 The middle management perspective

The relevance of middle management in strategy literature begun in the 1970s (Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008), and has moved from viewing as the terrain of the top management to recognising other actors within and outside the organisation. Prior research on strategy focused predominantly on top management as unit of analysis (Jarzabkowski *et al.* 2007); however, there was a shift, which led to an interest in middle managers as unit of analysis in strategy research (Jarzabkowski *et al.* 2007). Wooldridge *et al.* (2008) introduced the middle management perspective in the 1980s, and provided three motivations for a middle management perspective in the literature:

- middle managers occupy intermediate positions within organisations, and serve as important interfaces between otherwise disconnected actors and domains such as top-level and operating-level managers;

- middle management is recognised as an alternative model of managerial agency and strategic choice, particularly in geographically dispersed organisations; and
- middle managers are more likely than top managers to penetrate the causal ambiguities surrounding relationships between the capabilities of an organisation and its economic performance. As a contemporary middle manager model, the middle manager perspective places more focus on the making of strategic decisions (Surju *et al.*, 2020).

Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014) note that, although the term ‘middle manager’ is prominent in the literature, it is difficult to find people with this title in an organisation. This was particularly evident in the organisation under review. Harding, Lee, and Ford (2014) also acknowledge the difficulty in finding answers on who the middle managers are. These findings resonate with Rezvani (2017:1) who found that, from the reviewed literature, a lack of consistency in a holistic typology of middle management and their roles was evident. Rezvani (2017:1) points to the fact that all authors agree on a broad definition, which states that the middle management group is found between the top and lower levels of management (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008). To expand on the clarification of middle managers, Harding *et al.* (2014) define middle managers as those who occupy a particular position in the hierarchy, in which they face upwards to senior management or downwards to junior staff. The definition by Harding *et al.* (2014) is similar to the definition by Wooldridge *et al.* (2008), and states that middle managers can be described as those managers located below top managers and above first-level supervision in the hierarchy. It is notable that middle managers have to face two directions (up and down) and that they therefore have to deal with both superiors and subordinates (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2019).

At the time of this research, the department on which this case study was based, had three categories of deputy directors, namely chief education specialist, branch coordinator, and a pure deputy director. Worth noting is that all these categories are appointed in terms of the MMS, and are referred to as middle managers in the context of this study. The current study focused on middle managers and their immediate supervisors and is thus aligned to the middle management perspective. Middle managers and their activities are important for key organisational outcomes as

recognised in the literature (Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008). Studies have shown that middle managers have a role in strategising (Jansen van Rensburg *et al.*, 2014; Venter, 2014), but moreover, they also play a critical role in the implementation of organisational strategies (Salih & Doll, 2013). To affirm the importance of middle management in strategy implementation, a study by Salih and Doll (2013) focused on soliciting the views of middle managers, including their contributions in the implementation of organisational strategies. Salih and Doll (2013) also sought to establish common challenges associated with implementing strategies. One of the main findings of the study is that middle managers, given their structural position, can be viewed as conduits through which the strategic intents from top managers can be translated into daily operations of the organisation (Salih & Doll, 2013).

Mantere (2005) recognised middle managers as strategic champions, the individuals who go beyond their operative responsibilities in strategic issues, and Mantere (2005) therefore considered middle managers key stakeholders in research within the strategy-as-practice perspective. Freek, Hermkens, Georges, and Sharon (2020) noted four strategic roles of middle managers, namely championing strategic alternatives, facilitating adaptability, synthesising information, and implementing deliberate strategy. Freek *et al.* (2020) further acknowledges that middle managers and middle managers' involvement in strategy formulation are associated with improving performance outcomes of the organisation. Garlick (2021) adds that middle managers play a crucial role in translating the strategic meaning into lower-level staff but also communicating operational issues to top management. Furthermore, middle managers are considered individuals who try to influence strategic issues larger than their own immediate operational responsibilities. A study by Yimer (2020) concluded that middle managers contribute to the strategic management of public organisations. Yimer's (2020) study further recommended that future research could be conducted on the strategic contributions of middle managers in relation to formulation, implementation or evaluation individually.

While there is growing research using the middle manager perspective and the increasing importance placed on the role of the middle manager within various contexts, there remains a gap in investigating how the identities of middle managers,

as strategy practitioners, influence and shape their strategising work, from a multi-level perspective.

2.8 Middle managers as strategy practitioners

In affirming the importance of middle managers as strategy practitioners, Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014) demonstrate that middle managers are critical in making strategy work. Some of the roles played by middle managers include the interpretation of strategies into action plans, downward and upward influencing, as well as communication (Jansen van Rensburg *et al.*, 2014).

It is evident that middle managers are mostly defined by the position in the hierarchy or organisational structure (Yimer, 2020). This is affirmed by Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014) who indicate that the operational function or hierarchical placement defines the position of a middle manager. As Harding *et al.* (2014) point out, one of the main tasks of the middle manager is to exercise control over lower-management level staff. Therefore, this assertion adds to the elements that are used to describe middle managers, such as the role, tasks or functions and hierarchical position in the organisation. Interestingly, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) note that compared to the senior managers, middle managers have limited authority to act strategically. However, Vaz (2019) notes two distinct strategising practices middle managers employ in their strategising work. Firstly, the practices of 'involving', which relates to when middle managers participate in the actual decision-making process. And secondly, the practice of influencing, which relates to when middle managers affect top-down or bottom-up strategy processes (Freek *et al.*, 2020; Surju *et al.*, 2020; Vaz, 2019). According to Vaz (2019), middle managers are involved in the decision-making process to the extent that they are invited by the top management team to be part of decision-making. Furthermore, middle managers strategise through the bottom-up influencing of strategy processes. Notably, middle managers are the linking pins with an upward, downward and lateral influence in the organisation (Surju *et al.*, 2020).

Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014) adopted two key determinants of a middle manager, namely access to top management and knowledge of operations. In this case, a middle manager reports to the senior and/or top management team while also getting reports from lower-level managers at operational level. This view is supported

by Tsuda and Sato (2020) who note that middle managers are the link between the top and bottom levels of an organisation. This is understood to be one of the key roles of middle managers (Tsuda & Sato, 2020). Understandably, however, middle managers often influence top managers through putting together “a convincing story about what they are doing for the benefit of their seniors” (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020:129). It can be said that middle managers engage in issue-selling in order to influence the strategic direction (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). Surju *et al.* (2020) also suggest that one of the roles of middle managers is to recommend an alternative course of action.

When referring to the roles of middle managers and how they influence strategising, Mantere (2005) highlights some key practices that enable and constrain middle managers as strategy champions. Mantere (2005) argues that role expectations can both enable and constrain middle managers agency. The current study aimed to shed light on the multi-level dynamics evident between middle managers and their immediate supervisors, and thereby revealing some of these enabling and constraining factors affecting middle managers and their agency. Through the strategy-as-practice perspective, the intention was to understand and reveal the messy realities of strategy.

Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014) warn that, while middle managers have the potential to influence the strategy agenda and the strategies of organisations, if they are constrained by traditional perspectives of what middle managers are supposed to do, this potential will not be realised. For example, in describing another difficult role of middle managers, Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) point to the umbrella role. The umbrella role defines middle managers as protectors of lower-level staff from all sorts of pressures from top management. Information from top management regarding periodic crises and urgencies that usually turn out to be less critical or urgent was perceived over time as another form of unnecessary disturbance from which staff needs shielding (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020:135). Lastly, Freek *et al.* (2020) suggest that middle managers play an important role in influencing strategising from the bottom-up. This includes synthesising information from the bottom and influencing top management towards a particular strategic direction.

It is evident that middle managers hold unique positions within organisations providing them with an opportunity to influence the strategic activities of the organisation (Salih & Doll, 2013:33; Vaz, 2019). Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that middle managers play a significant role not only in the implementation of strategy but also in the formulation of strategy within their organisations. Furthermore, the middle manager perspective affirms that middle managers' activities and behaviours have important consequences for how strategy is formulated in an organisation (Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008).

Whittington (2006) asserts that preparing practitioners better for entry into strategy praxis should help middle managers and others contribute more effectively to strategising by their organisations. This suggests that strategising work and in particular, praxis, may require some form of basic strategising knowledge. Research on middle managers provides an opportunity to understand strategy and change but most importantly, it offers great promise for generating future insight about the role of middle managers in an organisation (Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, middle managers can be considered a strategic asset in organisations, even though they are also considered an endangered species that has been delayed (Freek *et al.*, 2020).

There is a growing body of knowledge with regard to one of the practices middle managers embark on when strategising. The seminal work of Dutton and Ashford (1993) introduced issue selling as a process in which top managers allocate time and attention to issues. According to Dutton and Ashford (1993), no issue is inherently strategic. The authors therefore suggest that issue selling is a process of influencing upwards, in which top managers pay attention to the issue being introduced, mostly by middle managers. Understandably, the influence is on bringing the attention of top managers to the issue, which should be deemed strategic. Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill and Lawrence (2001:716) define issue selling as the process by which individuals affect others' attention to and understanding of the events, developments and trends that have implications for organisational performance. Wooldridge *et al.* (2008) acknowledge that issue selling is one of the roles played by middle managers. According to Wooldridge *et al.* (2008), middle managers use issue selling to shape the strategic agenda and influence strategic change. This view is supported by De Souza Santos (2021) who suggests that issue selling is a practice used by middle managers

to influence their superiors in relation to a particular strategic issue. It involves a persuasion strategy aimed at influencing strategic decisions in an organisation. In most cases, this practice is employed by middle managers to influence the top echelons (De Souza Santos, 2021).

The current study viewed middle managers as strategy practitioners and also referred to them as 'strategists', despite not holding a formal strategy role (Jansen van Rensburg *et al.*, 2014; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). Specifically, the 'who they are, how they act and what practice' assertion provided the basis for this study. In essence, Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) are of the view that the identity of practitioners and the practices as well as the praxis from which they draw influence how strategy in their organisational context is defined. In supporting this view, Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara (2018) postulate that actors in an organisation have different understandings of specific strategic concepts and therefore attach different meanings to strategic concepts. This assertion by Jalonen *et al.* (2018) suggests that actors, given their different understandings and interpretations of strategic concepts, may influence strategising in a divergent manner.

Surju *et al.* (2020) note that middle managers in the public sector play a key role in implementing strategy. However, Yimer (2020) suggests that middle managers are often involved in the entire strategy process from construction to implementation. In addition, middle managers comprise a critical level that keeps the wheels of the organisation rolling (Yimer, 2020). The current study therefore set out to understand the individual identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners, which also entailed, in part, an understanding of the doing of the strategy by these practitioners.

2.9 The construct of identity

The concept of identity, derived from the Latin word *idem* meaning 'the same' (Oliver, 2015; Van Tonder & Lessing, 2003), originated in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis. Albert and Whetten (1985) introduced the concept of identity within the broader context of organisational identity. The first seminal definition developed by Albert and Whetten (1985) describes organisational identity as the central, distinctive and enduring character of an organisation. Identity has long been used as a personal frame of reference to explain behaviour and self-understanding (Oliver, 2015).

According to Albert and Whetten (1985), organisational identity is firstly used to define and characterise some aspects of the organisation, and secondly, to characterise aspects of organisations, such as identity as self-reflection. As noted in Albert and Whetten (1985), identity is an important concept attracting scholarly attention; however, it is equally difficult to comprehend, and is often shrouded in ambiguity (Van Tonder & Lessing, 2003). The dynamism and ambiguous nature of identity can be attributed to its durability across organisational levels but most importantly, its mutable nature (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000). Furthermore, Gioia *et al.* (2000) argue that identity has continuous interrelationships with organisational image, which is entangled in fluidity. According to Nag, Corley and Gioia (2007), research on identity has taken the concept in many directions, giving rise to different perspectives of conceptualising identity. Oliver (2015) affirms that identity emanates from the evolution of the concept of organisational identity. Tracy and Haughton (1994:281) conceptualise identity as who one is or how one acts in a given situation. This definition by Tracy and Haughton suggests that identity is encapsulated in oneself but also in the action of an individual.

In expanding on the definition of identity, Mainemelis, Altman, Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) refer to identity as the various meanings attached to oneself by the self and others. In addition, Mainemelis *et al.* (2010) ascribe these meanings to self-conceptions, based on social roles and group memberships, personal and character traits, and personal conduct. Similarly, Brown (2014) suggests that identity refers to meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves, which are developed and sustained through processes of social interaction as individuals seek to address the question 'who am I'. Furthermore, Cuganesan (2016) suggests that identity is constructed through a process of engaging in a questions such as 'who am I' and 'how should I act'. The two definitions are similar in that they both view identity as a self-centred concept viewed internally and externally. Interestingly, the explanations by Cuganesan (2016) and Tracy and Haughton (1994) extend the definition of identity to include the aspect of influencing actions embedded in 'how should I act'.

It is important to note that identity generally manifests itself in three levels of analysis, namely individual identity, social or collective identity, and organisational identity (Ashforth, Rogers & Corley, 2010; Oliver, 2015). The notion of individual identity is

described as how an individual develops a self-image, or mental model, of him- or herself (Oliver, 2015). More importantly, however, Oliver (2015) contends that individual identity is relational and evolves through environmental interactions as well as introspections. Therefore, one understands him- or herself in reference to other entities.

According to Oliver (2015:331), individual identity can be defined as an 'inner sense of sameness' and 'continuity of character'. This definition borrows heavily from the definition of organisational identity provided by Albert and Whetten (1985). Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) however define identity as an actor's self-definition, the way the actor answers the questions, 'who am I' or 'who are we', which signify individual-level identity. In addition, Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) emphasise the importance of individuals to understand who they are and how they fit in an organisation. A clear sense of 'who the individual is' becomes fundamental in how persons act in their context. Therefore, individuals require a situated identity, which then influences how they act within organisations (Ashforth & Schinoff 2016). It is important to note that the identity of individuals is formulated through creating narratives that link their past and present to the desired state, often defined as 'who I want to be', and thus providing direction (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

Oliver (2015) discusses the social/collective identity level. This level of identity suggests that, although identity can be an individual construct, it can also be influenced by groups and collectives, such as organisations. Furthermore, social or collective identity suggests that identity is integrative and generative and travels across levels (Oliver, 2015). Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) postulate that identity ranges from social identities based on collectives (such as teams, occupations, organisations) and categories (such as gender, racio-ethnicity, and age) to personal identities based on idiosyncratic attributes that typify them as individuals (e.g. personality profile, memories, sense of humour).

Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition sees organisational identity as what members collectively understand to be central and relatively permanent features, and that which distinguish the organisation from others. Oliver (2015) suggests that organisational identity can also be viewed as a set of institutionalised claims that exist irrespective of the individual members of the organisation. Organisations will then be distinguished

by the elements from which members can construct, give meaning to, and legitimise identities and identity symbols as their cultural meanings, values, sentiments and rules (Oliver, 2015). Furthermore, this approach assumes that, at organisational level, identity is seen as an inner core, which is expected to alter less than the outer core, while strategy is seen as an outer periphery revolving around the unchangeable core, the identity (Cuganesan, 2017). The strategy-making process therefore circles around an inner, unchangeable core, which individuals within the organisation could use to provide an anchor point for personal and organisational identity (Cuganesan, 2017).

Cuganesan's (2017) definition of identity at individual level finds resonance in views of Ashforth, Harrison and Corley (2008) who contend that identity has the ability to influence a set of cognitions, affect and behaviours in a given context. Identity is therefore integral in studying human cognition as it helps explain why people think about their environments the way they do and why people do what they do in those environments. Furthermore, Ashforth *et al.* (2008) state that the concept of identity also helps capture the essence of who people are and why they do what they do. More importantly, identity gives reason why people join and leave organisations voluntarily, but also why people approach their work the way they do and why they interact with others the way they do during that work. In essence, it is acceptable to think of people's identities as the underlying factor affecting behaviour, decision-making, and the manner in which people do their work and how they do their work. Identity encapsulates the essence of an entity, such as who am I, as an individual, or who are we as a collective, in a subjective or objective way (Ashforth *et al.*, 2010). Brown (2021) notes that identity can also be viewed from the role theory. In this approach, "the core of an identity is the categorisation of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance" (Brown, 2021:5).

Identity can also be viewed from a micro perspective, often referred to as "identity work" (Brown, 2015). As identity rose to prominence in literature, so did the process of its formation and most importantly the agency that actors exercise in their conduct of identity work (Brown, 2015; 2021). Enacting or assuming a particular identity is not static but evolves over time as people seek to better their current identities (Brown, 2021). People engage in what is termed "identity work" (Brown, 2021) as they seek to

negotiate the 'who am I' question within their social contexts. This view is supported by Brown and Toyoki (2013) who note that individuals' social identities take the form of self-narratives, which are authored through internal orations as well as interactions with others. It can be said that identities are constructed through and within discursive systems enabling individuals to craft their desired selves by providing materials and opportunities for self-reflection (Brown & Toyoki, 2013). Therefore, identity work is simply an identity construction process (Brown, 2015).

Identity work is defined as the "range of activities that individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006:1032). According to Kreiner *et al.* (2006), identity work entails individuals being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness, which comprise their identities. Similarly, Mainemelis *et al.* (2010) define identity work as people's engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining and strengthening or revising their identities. Finally, according to Brown and Toyoki (2013:2), identity work refers to the mutually constitutive processes by which people strive to shape relatively coherent and distinctive notions of their selves.

Brown and Toyoki (2013) further contend that individuals in organisations draw on locally available discourses in their continuous experiments with who they want to become. This assertion best affirms the view that identity of individuals is constructed over time, and therefore is not static. It can therefore be said that people are in a continuous state of being or becoming (Brown, 2014).

For the purpose of the current study, the research focused on identity, from a micro-perspective, specifically how middle managers themselves, and their immediate supervisors internally perceive it. Previous strategy-as-practice research has mostly focused on conceptually identifying middle manager roles from the perspective of researchers rather than from the perspective of middle managers themselves (Jansen van Rensburg *et al.*, 2014:166). The current study shifted away from conceptually narrating the identity of middle managers to empirically soliciting the practical views of middle managers and their immediate supervisors about who they think they are in relation to strategising work. By focusing on how middle managers view themselves

as strategy practitioners, the study inevitably also focused on how they construct their own identity and how identity work was a central component as defined by Brown (, 2014 and 2015).

Oliver (2015) posits that although there is organisational literature on identity at the individual level of analysis, the focus has mostly been on the elite group of chief executive officers (CEOs) and the top management team. The current study sought to exploit the research gap by studying identity at individual level and focusing specifically on middle managers as strategy practitioners. Furthermore, the current study sought to explore the cross-level identity interface as suggested by Ravasi *et al.* (2017) in order to determine how the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners is perceived from the perspective of middle managers themselves as well as from the perspective of their immediate supervisors (referred to as 'directors'). Most importantly, how assuming or embracing a certain identity can constrain or enable individual practitioners in relation to their strategising work.

2.10 The link between strategy and identity

Sillince and Simpson (2010) and Ravasi *et al.* (2017) argue that, although identity theory is necessary in the theorising of strategy (and vice versa), these two sets of research remain largely independent. The independence of the research can be attributed to, among others, the differences in methodological and theoretical paradigms. On the one hand, organisational identity literature is biased towards a psychology approach in studying organisations and predominantly takes on a social constructionist view (Sillince & Simpson, 2010). On the other hand, a large portion of strategy literature is focused on the quantitative and economic view in its methodology and theorising (Sillince & Simpson, 2010). However, the strategy-as-practice perspective ushered in some methodological and theoretical changes, which makes it possible to study the two constructs together. The strategy-as-practice research perspective has moved the emphasis from the firm as a unit of analysis in strategy research to strategists and what they do (Jarzabkowski, 2004). Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) argue that another important area of analysing strategy-as-practice research encapsulates identifying who the strategist is. The concept of identity work and who the strategy practitioners are, have gained importance in literature (Brown, 2015). The

need for further understanding of who a strategist is by strategy-as-practice scholars is confirmed by Ravasi *et al.* (2017).

Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2016) suggest that the concept of identity is very influential in strategising work. For example, strategy practices are strongly influenced by the strategy practitioners who not only develop such practices but also advocate them. As such, cognitive traits, roles and organisational positions are some of the characteristics that have strong implications for practice use in different organisations (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2016). In essence, the same practice may have different performance outcomes when used by a different practitioner, perhaps a more experienced or a prestigious consulting firm (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, the concept of identity embodies different characteristics and/or traits of individuals within organisations and such characteristics have a bearing on the doing of strategy.

The identity that individuals bring into the organisations shapes how such individuals undertake their day-to-day activities (Whittington, 2006). Strategising is not exempted from these day-to-day activities that individuals undertake within organisations. Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) point out the strong unavoidable link between the identity of a strategist and the strategy of the organisation. As such, the identity that the strategist embraces shapes how the strategy is enacted. In the same vein, Ravasi *et al.* (2017) encourage studies exploring the connection between strategy and identity. Yet, more than a decade ago, strategy and identity are largely being pursued individually (Sillince & Simpson, 2010). Therefore, in advancing the strategy-as-practice research agenda, this study combines the strategy and identity constructs in order to further understand the messy realities of strategy from a practice perspective.

Sillince and Simpson (2010) argue that there is a link between strategy and identity which potentially could provide empirical benefits when studied in combination. One of the benefits could be new theorisation that will enable the development of a more integrated approach to the theoretical and empirical investigation of strategy (Sillince & Simpson 2010). Identity and strategy influence each other. Strategy is often defined or influenced by the identity of the strategist (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007; Van den Steen, 2013). Ravasi *et al.* (2017) argue that there is room for more research to explore the reciprocal tensions and inter-relationships between identity and strategy, and the way in which these interactions are managed. Ravasi *et al.* (2017) further explain that the

doing of strategy is closely related to the being or identity. The devised strategy is therefore a material outcome of the identity of the practitioner involved.

Larsen and Rasmussen (2018) assert that those who do the strategy are the employees of the organisation and include middle managers, top leaders and various stakeholders both within and beyond the organisation. However, Ravasi *et al.* (2017) note that limited work has been done on cross-level identity dynamics. The current study responded to this gap by studying identity and strategy at multiple levels by involving both middle managers and their immediate supervisors.

The need for incorporating identity in strategy is further confirmed by Balogun, Beech and Johnson (2015) who state that the strategy-as-practice field needs to recognise the importance of identity. Therefore, Balogun *et al.* (2015) suggest that it would be prudent to conduct further research into understanding how strategists shape strategising activity by exploring who they are, as this area of research is underdeveloped. Beyond just understanding how strategists shape strategising through who they are, Brown (2015) posits that there is a continuing need to understand identity dynamics better. In addition, the formulation or construction of identity is not far from the notion of strategy in that while identity links the past and present to create the desired state, strategy is more focused on the desired state (Brown, 2021).

The existence of tension between identity and strategy is evident during organisational life (Brown 2021; Sillince & Simpson, 2010). Sillince and Simpson (2010) warn that, when the identity of an individual is incompatible to new alternatives that are adapted to new problems, strategy and identity become a vicious circle that negatively affects change (Sillince & Simpson, 2010).

Organisations would be required to manage the compatibility between strategy and identity constantly (Sillince & Simpson, 2010). Incompatibility of strategy and identity approaches suggest that the strategy–identity nexus as a collective of two constructs has two peripheries, the inner periphery and outer periphery. The strategy is viewed as the changeable output from interaction between individuals trying to secure a stable sense of identity and control (Sillince & Simpson, 2010). Sillince and Simpson (2010) further suggest that even though strategists may share similar organisational

identities, disagreements about an organisation’s strategy abound. This suggests that, although strategists may share a common identity, the identity that individuals embrace influences the way they act in different ways (Ravasi *et al.*, 2020).

Mookherjee and West (2013) further emphasise the importance of considering the factors influencing the choice of strategy activities to be engaged in by strategy practitioners. According to Mookherjee and West (2013), strategy activity or the doing of the strategy is shaped by the organisational context within which it takes place. In addition, the strategy activity is also shaped by the characteristics or the identity of the strategy practitioner involved. Figure 7 below depicts the influence of context and identity on strategy.

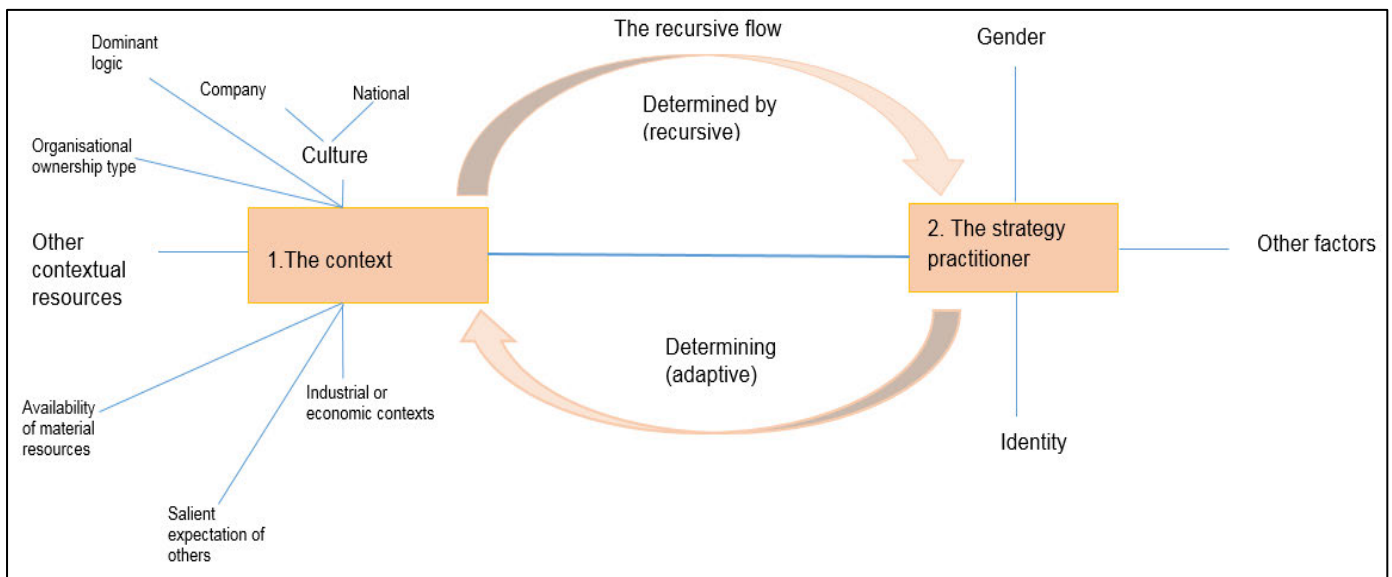


Figure 7: Factors affecting the activities in which strategy practitioner engages
Source: Mookherjee and West (2013)

It is clear from Figure 7 that the identity of the practitioner forms part of the factors affecting or influencing the activities of the individual strategy practitioner. The question that links to the main research question of this study is how the identity of the strategy practitioner (who he or she is or is perceived to be), in the category of middle management is perceived and how it shapes strategy.

Gomez (2007) states that the strategising territory reveals the struggle for power in which agents are in conflict over the power to influence the direction of the organisation. This suggested that the power, authority or simply the identity of the agent, strongly influences the strategic outcomes of the organisation. Gomez (2007)

further reveals that those who hold identity with power may want to impose their powerful identity whereas the less powerful either resists the imposition or try to increase their position of power. Therefore, Gomez (2007) is of the view that strategic discourses are spaces of struggles representing a dialectical battle between competing groups, corporate management and less powerful agents, such as middle managers or project managers. Lumby (2019:7) asserts that the concepts of power range from the ability of one individual to impose his or her will on another to Orwellian-type ideas of influencing the thinking of others so that no compulsion is necessary to achieve a desired change; people think, and as a result, act as intended by those in power.

Combining strategy and identity could present an opportunity to untangle the myriad of activities and practices further in order to understand the doing of strategy through a more integrated framework, which combines the theories of strategic organisation and industrial psychology (Ravasi *et al.*, 2017; 2020). Identity influences organisational strategising, which then renders identity a theoretical construct worth further exploration by strategy-as-practice scholars (Oliver, 2015). Therefore, there is an inevitable need for a strategy-as-practice research agenda to acknowledge the importance of the identity construct and the methodological implications of studying the linkages between strategy practitioners and their strategy work (Balogun *et al.*, 2015).

As Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007:12) suggest, the identities that strategists bring to their work may constitute fundamentally different experiences in the way those actors shape strategy. Although there is considerable theory to confirm the suggestive link between strategy and identity concepts, there is a lack of research focusing on the link between identity and strategy, within a government context, specifically, the way the identity of the middle manager influences and shapes the strategy of an organisation for which he or she works. In addition, it was also the intention of the researcher to explore how 'who they are', from the perspective of the middle managers themselves as well as their immediate supervisors, enables or constrains middle managers as strategy practitioners within their organisational context. However, the influence of context, as shown in Figure 7, whilst very important in considering the link

between strategy and identity, it is beyond the scope of this study and will thus not be discussed in this section.

2.11 Strategising within the public sector

Organisational contexts shape how strategising takes place (Mookherjee & West, 2013; Venter, 2014). Höglund *et al.* (2018) support this view by suggesting that not much is known about the practical application of strategic management in the public sector despite its prominence in the agenda of many public sector institutions. In the case of public institutions, it is commonly known that strategy emanates from policies of government, which then forms the basis of the strategy discourse. Axelsson (2016) notes that strategies in public institutions emanate from government or top-level management of public authorities. It is possible to define a strategy as an outcome of policies and ideologies advanced by the political party as political discourse (Axelsson, 2016). However, in the African context, strategic management does not happen without some major challenges. Venter (2014) notes that some key strategic issues facing strategic management in Africa include but are not limited to issues such as political instability, high levels of poverty, an inefficient public sector, and a lack of key skills.

When referring to strategic planning and strategising work, there are some key differences between the private sector and public sector. Bryson *et al.* (2018) argue that the public sector engages in strategic planning in order to maximise performance, achieve goal alignment and continuity of efforts, whereas private sector strategic planning is concerned with profit, market share, and other business-related outcomes. More than just maximising organisational performance, two of the compelling reasons why public sector organisations conduct strategic planning are accountability and compliance with the laws (Bryson *et al.*, 2018). Growing financial and social pressures are some of the forces compelling public institutions to have structured planning based on pre-defined objectives and priorities (Favoreu *et al.*, 2015). This is in line with the assertion by Walker (2013) who suggests that strategic management is used in public service to put more emphasises on improving performance (Walker, 2013). Bryson and George (2020) further assert that strategic management in the public sector is prominent and could assist public organisations to improve performance. Axelsson (2016) states that the private and public sectors differ in business principles and

prerequisites thereof. For example, strategising in the public sector may be dominated by politics or influenced by a wider spectrum of stakeholders involved directly or indirectly in the strategising work. This view is supported by Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014) who found that many of the strategies in government departments are conceptualised as policy decisions. In the private sector, however, concepts such as profit maximisation, competitive advantage and the long-term survival of the entity, drive the strategising work.

It is important to understand that public entities are held accountable for the resources allocated in pursuit of their constitutional mandates. In meeting constitutional obligations, public entities embark on a planning process, which eventually leads to the development of plans and strategies towards meeting service delivery targets (NPC, 2015).

It is also important to note that strategy is a situated activity, which means where it is taking place could influence how it takes place (Venter, 2014). The government context appears to be a political terrain where political power and authority shapes the day-to-day activities of the organisation (Venter, 2014). It is therefore crucial to understand the realities of strategising activities within a governmental context through the lens of the strategy-as-practice approach. As already noted above, the strategy-as-practice lens provides a practical view of strategy and the activities involved in the strategising process through what people do and what practices they use (Whittington, 2006). Therefore, the strategy-as-practice approach allowed the researcher to explore the strategy-identity link within the public sector, and assisted in revealing the realities associated within this specific context.

Public sector strategising, given its political orientation, is characterised by multiple internal and external stakeholders with different interests (Höglund *et al.*, 2018). Public organisations must strive to meet these interests simultaneously. Therefore, the public strategising tensions are seemingly inherent in the public sector and lead to the development of various bureaucratic organising practices and processes to deal with those tensions (Höglund *et al.*, 2018). However, Bryson and George (2020) note that strategising in public institutions is subjected to a negotiation process. According to Bryson and George (2020), the use of negotiations acknowledges power dynamics within the public institutions. Ferguson (2019) acknowledges that trade unions is a

majority stakeholders in government. Therefore, their views in relation to their demands are important and often a subject for negotiation.

From the above discussion, it is evident that the public sector context provided a unique and dynamic context within which to study aspects such as strategising and the concept of identity. In addition, middle managers are immersed in these tensions, and need to conduct their day-to-day strategising activities within this dynamic organisation setting. The next chapter discusses the research design and methodological process that were followed in the current study.

2.12 Chapter conclusion

This chapter synthesised literature within the strategic management and identity fields in order to provide the theoretical basis to position the study within the broader literature. Chapter 2 began with a discussion on the research framework that guided the study, namely the strategy-as-practice research perspective. Chapter 2 further introduced arguments, which suggest that strategy and identity, although pursued as two separate lines of research, have a strong link. The literature revealed that identity and strategy influence each other but empirical evidence is necessary to determine this link in a government context. Chapter 2 showed that people bring with them different identities, which are encapsulated in their character, behaviour, norms and beliefs. The interface between strategy and identity was discussed and scholarly arguments presented. The central concept of strategising was discussed, giving insight into both public and private sector strategising. The researcher also outlined the strategising continuum, which indicated that strategising is not only about strategy formulation but encapsulates other activities, such as strategy implementation, control and evaluation. Chapter 2 also provided the context within which the study took place. The middle management perspective was discussed and different definitions of middle managers were shared. The chapter concluded with the different roles of middle managers and the competencies of middle managers in the public sector in South Africa, emphasising the strategic role they play within a department. An overview of Chapter 3 is presented in Figure 8 below.

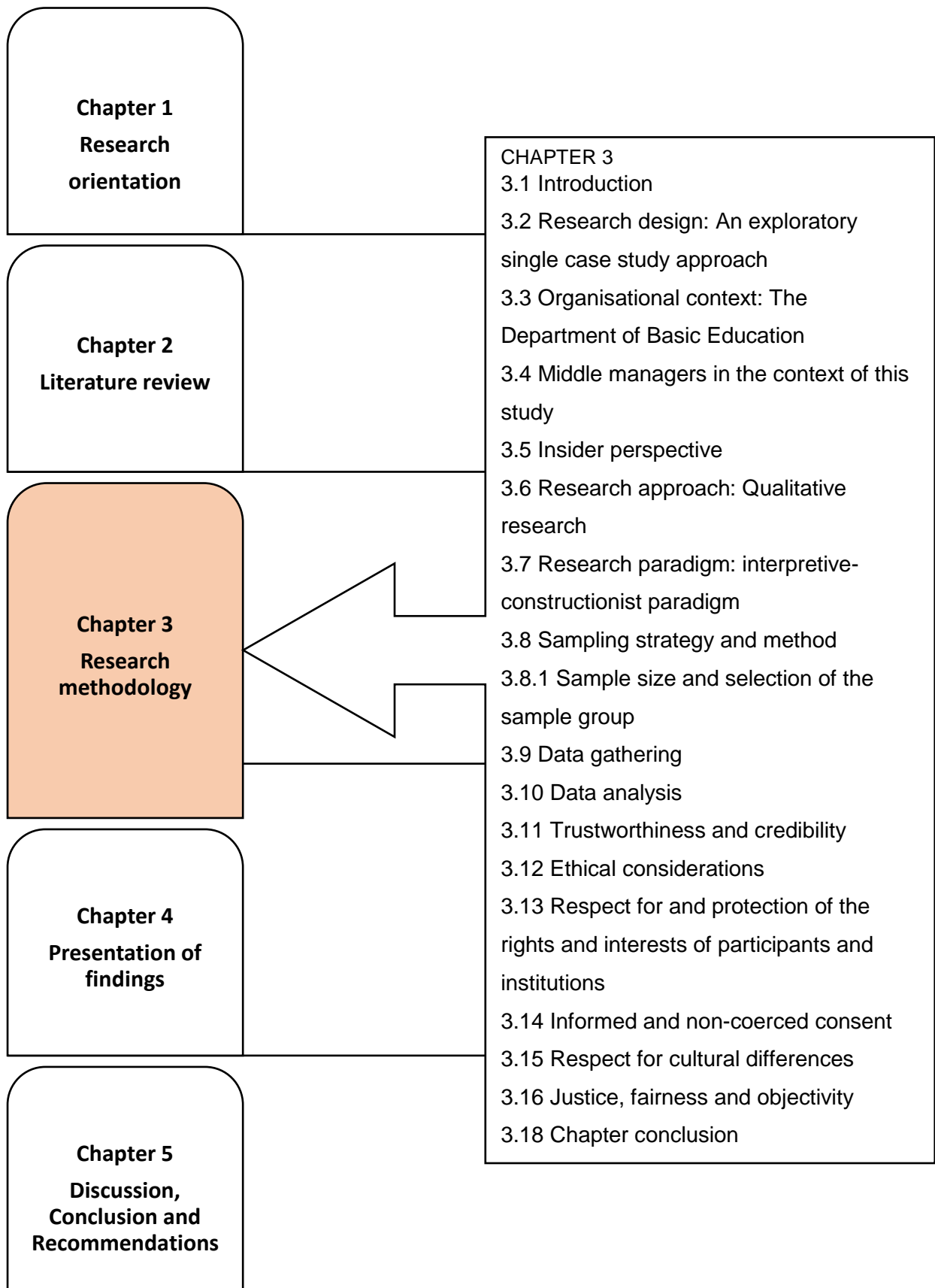


Figure 8: Overview of Chapter 3

Source: Own compilation

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 provided the theoretical basis of the current study by presenting a literature review on strategy and the main lens through which the study was conducted, namely the strategy-as-practice perspective. The literature review considered the identity concept, specifically identity at the individual level of analysis, and highlighted the link between the constructs 'strategy' and 'identity', and the need for more research investigating how identity influences the doing of the strategy, particularly in a public sector context. Chapter 2 also offered discussion on the middle management perspective adopted for the current study as well as the discussion on the middle managers in the context of this study. The current study sought to explore how the internal identity dynamics of middle managers, as strategy practitioners within a government department, influence and shape the strategising work of middle managers.

In Chapter 3, the researcher discusses the research design chosen for this study and the methodology process followed. The researcher first considers the case study approach as the main research design chosen for the study, and then describes the specific research context within which the study was conducted. The overall research design and the main approach followed – involving a predominantly qualitative study of a single case study within a unique context – are then described. Furthermore, the researcher introduces the interpretive-constructivist paradigm as the main paradigm chosen to study the lived experiences of the middle managers in relation to their strategising work, as recommended by Duffy *et al.* (2021). Following that, the sampling method, data collection and analysis procedures are described, including the inclusion and exclusion criteria applicable to the study. This is followed by a discussion of trustworthiness and credibility in qualitative research in order to address issues of quality and rigour. The chapter concludes by providing a discussion on the insider perspective that was adopted for this study and ethical considerations pertinent to the study.

3.2 Research design: An exploratory single case study approach

The study combined both descriptive and exploratory research designs. According to Neuman (2006), descriptive and exploratory research approaches have much in common and blend well into practice. The main purpose of a descriptive study is to elucidate on the characteristics of an existing phenomenon (Salkind, 2012). Neuman (2006) further contends that a descriptive study provides a picture of the specific situation in detail but also provides a picture of types of people or activities. It focuses on the how and who type of questions. Such questions were central in the context of this study to elicit views of who is seen as a strategy practitioner, and how being a middle manager influences the strategising work of these people. In the same vein, exploratory research examines a little understood issue or phenomenon (Neuman, 2006). In the context of this study, the way middle managers shape strategy through who they are was not known, and therefore had to be explored.

A case study approach was deemed an appropriate research design to investigate a single government department. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2014), a case study considers a particular individual, programme or event thoroughly over time, making it a suitable method for comprehending a little understood situation. Harrison, Birks, Franklin and Mills (2017) assert that case study research can be considered an effective methodology to study and understand complex issues in real-world settings. Case study designs cover a number of disciplines, particularly the social sciences, education, business, law and health (Harrison *et al.*, 2017). This type of design has the ability to address a wide range of research questions, such as how, why and what types of questions, which is in agreement with Neuman (2006) above. Harrison *et al.* (2017) conclude that the outcomes of case study research can lead to an in-depth understanding of behaviours, processes, practices and relationships in context.

To affirm the above descriptions of a case study research, Yin (2018) offers a two-fold definition. According to Yin (2018), (a) case study is an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (which is the case) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when (b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be evident.

Therefore, the researcher deemed a case study approach suitable to study the strategy–identity nexus within a single government department and to understand how the identity of a middle manager influences and/or is influenced by strategising practices. Section 3.3 expands on and discusses the organisational context within which the study was conducted.

3.3 Organisational context: The Department of Basic Education

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the current study took place within a single government department in South Africa, namely the Department of Basic Education (DBE), and Section 3.4 offers a detailed description on the research context of the selected case study organisation.

The South African (SA) government system comprises three spheres of administration, namely the national, provincial and local government spheres. These three spheres of government are distinctive, interdependent and also interrelated (DPSA, 2003). Parliament has the legislative authority and powers to enact laws of the country within the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. South Africa democratically elects the national assembly every five years to represent the people in the administration of government programmes (Mokoena, 2018). At the time of the current study, there were 28 government departments.

The DBE was formed in 2010, when the then National Department of Education was split into two departments, namely the Departments of Basic Education (DBE) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The DBE focuses on all schools from Grade R to Grade 12, including adult literacy programmes whereas the DHET focuses on higher education institutions or institutions of higher learning. The rationale behind the split was to ensure that there is a focused approach in addressing and improving the quality of education systems in South Africa, starting at foundational level. The aim of the DBE is to develop, maintain and support the SA school system of the twenty-first century in pursuit of the developmental agenda of the country (DBE, 2020).

The vision of the department, as articulated in the strategic documents, is of a South Africa in which all its people will have access to lifelong learning, education and training opportunities, which will, in turn, contribute towards improving the quality of life and

building a peaceful, prosperous and democratic strategic plan (DBE, 2020). The mission of the DBE states that the department works with provinces to provide relevant and cutting-edge quality education for the twenty-first century. This suggests that putting together plans or strategising towards the common goal is also a strategic focus in the department. In cascading the vision of the department down to strategic intent, the department develops a five-year strategic plan, followed by an annual performance plan (APP), which translates the strategic objectives into actionable plans. The DBE also developed an Action Plan for 2019: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030 (DBE, 2016), also referred to as the “Sector Plan” (DBE, 2020:15). The Sector Plan of the Department identifies specific goals for different functional units in the Department (DBE, 2020).

The Sector Plan encapsulates the response of the DBE to the priorities, targets and programmes articulated in the National Development Plan: Vision 2030 (NDP) (DBE, 2019). The Sector Plan also provides a detailed five-year plan and 15-year targets as well as programmes for the entire basic education sector. Therefore, it can be said that the Sector Plan constitutes a blue print plan of the department. The plans and programmes of the department are widely consulted with key education stakeholders in the basic education sector. Emanating from its strategic focus, the DBE develops a wide range of plans that are driven by and aligned to government initiatives and the developmental agenda of the country (NPC, 2015).

The DBE continuously faces a challenge relating to providing education relevant to the diverse needs of young people for both learning and development in all public schools in the country (DBE, 2020). The DBE has developed three types of curricula (academic, vocational and technical) as one of its policy imperatives. Policy decisions such as this are often discussed by oversight and consultative structures of the department, constituted by senior management teams both from the provincial and national office. The Heads of Education Departments Committee (HEDCOM) is one of the role players responsible for facilitating the development of a national education system (DBE, 2020; Van Niekerk, 2013). The HEDCOM does so through sharing information and views on national education, co-ordinating administrative action on matters of mutual interest and advising the department on matters relating to the proper functioning of the education system (DBE, 2020; Van Niekerk, 2013). The director-general (DG) as

an accounting officer is the presiding officer. HEDCOM consists of the deputy directors-general (DDGs) of the national department and the heads of Provincial Education Departments (PEDs).

Another important oversight structure is the Council of Education Ministers (CEM), comprising the Minister of Basic Education, the Minister of Higher Education and Training as well as the nine provincial members of the executive councils for education. The CEM is a critical decision-making structure, which is expected to meet regularly to discuss wide education policies, take stock of significant progress and assess new developments (Van Niekerk, 2013). All these structures are part of the decision-making structures within the DBE and are critical in driving the strategic intent of the department (DBE, 2020; Van Niekerk, 2013).

To explain the decision-making structures in the DBE further, it is important to introduce the hierarchical structure depicting positions of power and authority. The DBE follows a typical SA government organisational structure, which can be described as a “tall organisational structure” (Andersson & Zbirenko, 2014). The structure is led by the minister as the political head of the department, assisted by the deputy minister. Just below the deputy minister, is the administrative layer of the department led by the director-general. The director-general (DG) is also known as the accounting officer, responsible for the overall administrative functions of the department, including strategic leadership and operations of all programmes. The DG is assisted by the various deputy directors-general (DDGs) heading different functional units known as programmes. Below the DDG there are on average two chief directors heading sub-programmes. The directors, usually a minimum of two per chief directorate, are managers of operational work, heading what is referred to as a ‘directorate’. The operational work is in essence what strategy-as-practice scholars refer to as praxis and also make up the bulk of 'strategising' or 'strategy work'. Directors are assisted by deputy directors (referred to as ‘middle managers’ in the current study), followed by assistant director. The senior administrative officer, administrative clerk and secretary are responsible for the office and administrative management (DBE, 2020).

The education sector takes up a large part of the budget of the country (Mokoena, 2018). According to Mokoena (2018), the 2016 Mid-Term Expenditure Framework

(MTEF) allocation for the DBE was R22 270 billion, an increase of 3,5% from the 2015 MTEF allocation. This was broken down as follows:

- Administration: R377,9 million;
- Curriculum Policy Support and Monitoring: R1,936 billion;
- Teacher Education Human Resource and Institutional Development: R1,164 billion;
- Planning Information and Assessment R12,5 billion; and
- Educational Enrichment Services increased to R6,292 billion (Mokoena, 2018).

The DBE works with and through the PEDs to ensure that provincial budgets and strategies are in line with and support national policies (DBE, 2020; DPSA, 2013). Therefore, the DBE and PEDs share a concurrent role in advancing basic schooling, but it is the responsibility of each PED to finance and manage schools in their respective provinces directly (DBE, 2020; DPSA, 2013).

At the time of the current study in 2019, the SA government had gone through the process of electing the sixth administration into government in May 2019. The new administration ushered in a new era in terms of policies and focus of government in the current planning cycle, which led to the reconfiguration of government administration. The current study took place at the time when the SA government had started the process of reviewing the National Development Plan: Vision 2030 (NPC, 2020). The review affected the work of all government departments, including the DBE in terms of strategic focus. The researcher deemed it appropriate to conduct the study as a single case study focusing on the DBE given its unique nature. Further, to answer the research questions, deep data was called for, and a single case study design enabled deep data gathering. Section 3.4 offers a discussion on the middle managers in the context of this study.

3.4 Middle managers in the context of this study

For the purpose of the current study, middle managers are described as managers having lower-level staff reporting to them, but middle managers are also required to report to managers at senior management level (Jansen van Rensburg *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the researcher opted to focus on deputy directors who are appointed in terms of the middle management service in the public

sector. Thus, study focused on the middle manager who also has management and/or supervisory tasks in a government department, in South Africa. These middle managers are expected to have some level of competence in order to perform duties attached to their post. The Guide to the Middle Management Competency Framework (Department of Public Service and Administration [DPSA], 2006) issued by the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) identified feeder and generic competencies for middle managers at levels 11 and 12. The middle managers at levels 11 and 12 are deputy directors in their different categories, as discussed in section 2.7. All employees entering middle management ranks must possess or be able to demonstrate feeder competencies.

The purpose of the feeder competencies is to ensure that all middle managers have similar basic entry skills, which support the abilities of managers to work in unison with all stakeholders, all according to a common framework (DPSA, 2006). Generic competencies are skills that are required by middle managers in most of their duties and activities throughout the public service (DPSA, 2006). Some noticeable generic competencies are applied strategy thinking, budgeting and financial management, communication, and information, planning and organising, as well being a team leader (DPSA, 2006). Table 2 below provides a synopsis of competencies under the feeder and generic categories:

Table 2: Competencies of middle managers

Feeder competencies	Generic competencies
Concern of others	Applied strategic thinking
Creative thinking	Applying technology
Citizen service orientation	Budgeting and financial management
Decision-making	Communication and information
Diversity citizenship	Continuous improvement
Organisational communication effectiveness	Citizen focus and responsiveness
Problem analysis	Developing others
Self-management	Diversity management
Team membership	Impact and influence
Technical proficiency	Managing interpersonal conflict and resolving problems

	Networking and building bonds
	Planning and organising
	Problem solving and decision-making
	Project management
	Team leadership

Source: DPSA (2006)

According to the DPSA (2006), applied strategic thinking appears to be a prerequisite for roles associated with the middle manager in the public service. Therefore, it is possible to assume that middle managers are expected to play a strategic role in the public service. Yimer (2020) asserts that middle managers are an integral part of the strategy process in public organisations.

The public sector is characterised by multiple stakeholders – both internal and external. These stakeholders influence the strategising work of the department. For example, a strategic plan of the department is presented to the presidency, among other departments, and ultimately the cabinet or portfolio committee on basic education in parliament. This confirms that there are different strategists in the public service who have influence over the strategic work of the department.

3.5 Insider perspective

The researcher's position in terms of the participants has a direct influence on the knowledge co-created by these two groups. The researcher's position is therefore an epistemological matter, which cannot be avoided (Hayfield & Huxley, 2014). According to Hayfield and Huxley (2014), two positions for the researcher can be distinguished, namely an insider and an outsider perspective. An insider is a researcher who personally belongs to the same group as the participants while an outsider is not a member of that group (Hayfield & Huxley, 2014). In the current study, the researcher adopted an insider perspective. In essence, the insider-researcher is one of the members of the group being studied (Saidin & Yaacob, 2016). Therefore, being an insider-researcher makes the researcher familiar not only with the context but also with the group being studied. According to Saidin and Yaacob (2016), being an insider researcher comes with some benefits. In the current study, the insider-researcher had a passion about the topic being researched and was thus committed to the study

irrespective of the challenges. This had a beneficial effect on the study. Another benefit to the study was that the researcher had an understanding of the issue being studied, given his intimate knowledge of the organisational context (Hayfield & Huxley, 2014).

The insider-researcher also had a rapport with the participants given that he was a middle manager within the case department at the time. Furthermore, the ease of access to the research participants – from recruitment to securing an appointment – was attributed to the researcher’s understanding of research protocols in the case department. Hayfield and Huxley (2014) also suggest that the insider has better awareness of the group being studied than an outsider and therefore is in a good position to conduct ethical research and to be sensitive to the needs of the participants.

Saidin and Yaacob (2016) posit that, in addition to the above benefits, the researcher’s familiarity with the cultural and political structure of an organisation also saves time in trying to understand the issue being studied. However, it was also important for the researcher to ensure that there is no research biasness, which is dealt with in sections 3.11 and 5.8. In essence, the researcher continuously had to be aware of his own biases. This was mitigated through keeping reflective notes and journals.

3.6 Research approach: Qualitative research

Case study research tends to be qualitative in nature (Harrison *et al.*, 2017). This type of research is usually associated with studying people’s lives, their experiences, and the way people understand the social and cultural context of the world within which they live (Harrison *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, a qualitative research design can be credited for not only providing insight about a phenomenon being studied but also revealing problems that may exist about that phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). The aim is to gain insight into how individuals interpret and attribute meanings to their own experiences and how they construct their worlds. According to Salkind (2012), qualitative research examines human behaviour and the social, cultural and political contexts within which it takes place. This study adopted a qualitative approach, as this approach allowed for the study of human behaviour and phenomena in contexts within which they occur, i.e. social, political and their lived experiences, in relation to the strategising work (Salkind, 2012).

3.7 Research paradigm: interpretive-constructionist paradigm

'Research paradigm' is the term used to describe the worldview, perspective or set of beliefs used to inform the meaning and interpretation of research data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The most popularly used research paradigms are the positivist, interpretivist, critical and pragmatic paradigms (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

A positivist paradigm is said to be based on a scientific method of investigation and, generally, the context in this research paradigm is not considered (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Interpretivist paradigm is concerned with understanding the subjective world of human experience. Interpretivist paradigm makes effort to understand the participants and the world around them. And thus, the interpretivist interprets what the subject being studied is thinking (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

A critical paradigm situates its research in social justice issues and seeks to address political, social and economic issues, which lead to social oppression, conflict, struggle and power structures at whatever levels these might occur (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Finally, the pragmatic paradigm, as explained by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), emanated from philosophers who argued the impossibility of accessing the truth about the real world based on a single scientific method only. A pragmatic paradigm advocates the use of mixed methods as a pragmatic way to understand human behaviour. According to Creswell (2003:7), 'post-positivism' refers to the thinking after positivism, challenging the traditional notion of the absolute truth of knowledge and recognising that one cannot be positive about one's claims of knowledge when studying the behaviour and actions of humans. This is also called 'quantitative post-positivism', suggesting that it is more inclined towards quantitative research. Post-positivism is especially suitable for quantitative research, while the critical paradigm is limited to social justice studies.

The current study was guided by the assumptions, beliefs, norms and values of the interpretive-constructionist research paradigm. This paradigm assumes that the interactions and beliefs of people create reality, as a product of social processes (Neuman, 2006). In addition, Creswell (2007) contends that the goal of a social constructionist research paradigm is to elicit participants' views of a situation. In essence, what people see and experience are socially constructed. Furthermore, in a

constructionist research paradigm, people live in, believe and accept the constructed reality that is linked to but distinct from physical reality (Neuman, 2006).

In addition to the constructionist research paradigm, an interpretative research approach has been adopted for the current study. An interpretive paradigm holds that social life is based on social interactions and is socially constructed. People possess an internally experienced sense of reality, which is important in order to understand human social life (Neuman, 2006). Creswell (2007) further asserts that an interpretive perspective is particularly useful in understanding the specific issues or the conditions that serve to disadvantage and isolate individuals, such as conditions relating to hierarchy, unequal power relations, identity or inequalities in a society. In furthering the understanding of human social life, Greener (2008) suggests that an interpretivist endeavours to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied, which then allows for multiple perspectives. The current study sought to understand the realities around what it means to be a middle manager in relation to strategising. It was therefore necessary to gain this understanding through the views of both middle managers and their immediate supervisors. Scholars within the strategy-as-practice perspective mostly adopt a constructivist paradigm and support this approach because it underpins strategy research (Jarzabkowski, 2004). Similarly, Sillince and Simpson (2010) claim that identity theory is largely based on a social constructionist research paradigm. This can be attributed to the ability of this latter paradigm to elicit participants' views of a situation, but most importantly, to view the world as socially constructed over time. The current study was therefore positioned within a combinatory interpretive-constructionist paradigm.

3.8 Sampling strategy and method

Sampling can be defined as a process of selecting a few participants from a group of potential participants (Kumar, 2011). Therefore, a sample becomes the subgroup in which the researcher is (Kumar, 2011; Salkind, 2012). According to Salkind (2012), two sampling strategies are distinguishable, namely probability and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling represents a sampling method in which the likelihood of any one member of the population being selected is known, whereas in non-probability sampling, the likelihood is not known. Kumar (2011) suggests that in qualitative research, all non-probability sampling types can be used. The current study

opted for a purposive sampling method. The purposive sampling method or technique can be defined as the deliberate process of selecting participants who meet qualities sought by the researcher (Kumar, 2011). Such qualities include knowledge and experience about the topic but also willingness to participate (Kumar, 2011). Purposive sampling is based on what the researcher has in mind about the participants in relation to a particular purpose of the study Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, (2016). The researcher therefore decides what needs to be known and sets out inclusion and exclusion criteria in order to find participants with experience and knowledge about the topic being researched. The purposive sampling method was therefore deemed appropriate for the current research, as it is mostly utilised in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). The researcher therefore opted for this method to get readily available directors and middle managers situated within the DBE who meet the selection criteria (Etikan *et al.*, 2016; Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012; Salkind, 2012).

3.8.1 Sample size and selection of the sample group

The target population consisted of middle managers (referred to as deputy directors) and their immediate supervisors (directors) within a single government department. At the time the study took place, there was a total population of 243 employees under the category of director and deputy director in the DBE. Although the researcher targeted both directors and deputy directors as participants, the main focus was to study the identity of 'deputy directors' occupying salary levels 11 and 12, otherwise viewed as middle managers. Furthermore, the study included middle managers categorised as specialists, such as chief education specialists (CESs) as they are also appointed in terms of MMS. The inclusion of CESs also provides an opportunity to understand identity of middle managers from a specialist perspective. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, 'middle manager' is used to represent deputy director. The directors are the immediate supervisors of the middle managers. Directors were included in order to get their perception of middle managers as strategy practitioners within the government department and to add a multi-level perspective.

At the time of the study, there were 47 directors and 191 middle managers employed in the selected case department. Given that this study was qualitative in nature, samples of 15 directors and 20 middle managers were considered for participation in

the study, as recommended by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006). In accordance with Guest *et al.* (2006), saturation can be reached with as few as six interviews. In the current research, saturation was reached in the ninth interview for both the directors and middle managers. Saturation was reached when there were no new themes emerging from the interviews (Guest *et al.* 2006). However, the researcher continued with the interviews to at least thirteen interviews in both groups, in accordance with Francis *et al.* (2010), who say saturation might be reached after the tenth interview but suggest that three additional interviews may be necessary.

At the time of the current study, the DBE had 47 functional areas, which fall under what is defined as 'programmes' and 'sub-programmes', led by the DDG and chief director respectively. The middle managers and their immediate supervisors were selected from different functional areas in the DBE to ensure representation and unbiased sampling, (Gibbs *et al.*, 2007). As the functional section responsible for strategic planning and reporting in the department under review did not have a permanent director at the time of the study, no director could be selected.

Figure 3.1 below represents a typical organisational structure within the department from the director-general (DG) down to the lower-level staff members. Worth noting is that in positions below that of director, more than two persons per section could be selected. At the time of this research, a functional area could have up to nine deputy directors and up to nine assistant directors in one section. As depicted in Figure 9, the organisational structure starts with the Minister and the deputy Minister both as the political heads. As indicated in section 9 already, the DG is responsible for the overall operation of the department, working with the deputy director-Generals (DDGs). The chief directors (CDs) manage the sub-programmes and report to the DDGs. The directors receive mandates and also initiate work through the direct line of reporting to the office of the CD. The position of the middle manager and his or her immediate supervisor is shown in Figure 9 and highlighted in orange.

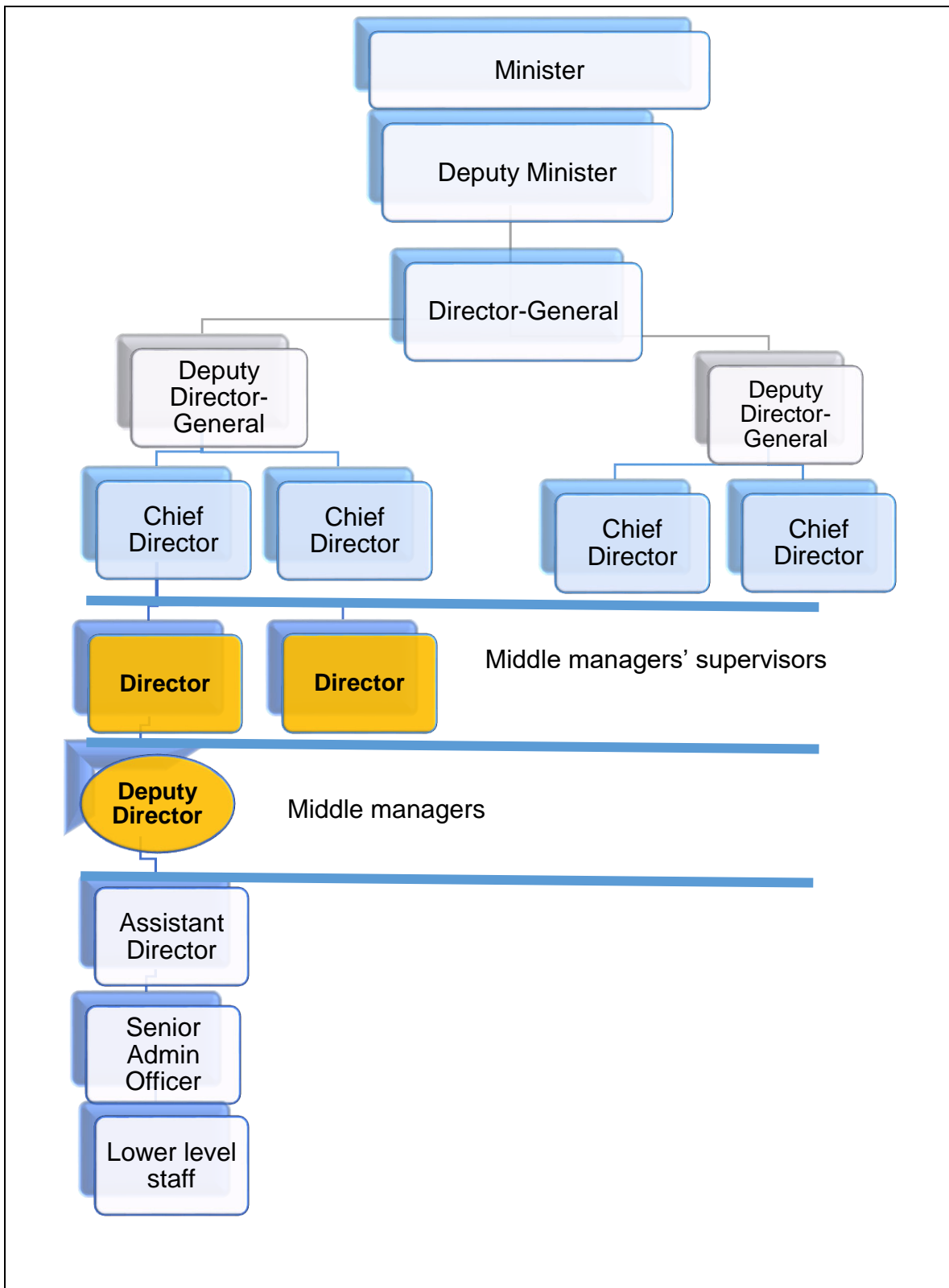


Figure 9: A typical organogram in the DBE
 Source: Own compilation

Directors are situated between the chief directors and the middle managers, making them the immediate supervisors of the deputy directors. The directors are regarded as

the first tier of the senior management cohort in the context of this study, while deputy directors are considered as part of the middle management cohort (deputy directors in salary level 11 and 12). Middle managers are appointed in terms of MMS, which also determines their functions and salary structure. This is why the study deliberately focused on this position (namely that of a deputy director) in the hierarchy, as it is understood as the operational core, getting the things done with and through the lower-level staff cohort. This was identified as an under-researched context within the public sector context, especially when focusing on issues of identity and strategy. As discussed in Chapter 2, the study viewed a middle manager as a manager who reports to senior management and who receives reports from lower-level staff. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for directors and deputy directors are summarised in Tables 3 and 4 below. Directors and middle managers who have been appointed for at least two years were considered for selection, as they were deemed to have sufficient knowledge on issues relating to the operational and strategising functions.

Table 3: The inclusion and exclusion criteria for directors

Directors	
Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Directors within a single department were included	Directors employed in other departments
Directors who had been employed for more than two years were included	Directors employed for less than two years
The study include all races, genders, ethnicities and ages	No exclusion on account of race, gender, ethnicities and age
Only directors in the DBE were considered	Directors outside the structure of the DBE
All permanently employed directors were included	Directors on contract

Source: Own compilation

Table 4: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for middle managers

Middle managers (deputy directors)	
Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Middle managers from a single department	Middle managers employed in other departments were not be considered
Middle managers who have been employed for more than two years	Middle managers employed for less than two years were not considered
Any race, gender, ethnicity and age	
Only middle managers in the functional areas of the DBE	Middle managers outside the DBE structure
Middle managers permanently employed	Middle managers on contract were not considered

Source: Own compilation

The directors and middle managers were selected and informed about the research study through the research protocol followed in the department. At the time of this research, the process entailed the following:

- a) the researcher communicated the intention to conduct the research in the department;
- b) permission was granted by a gatekeeper, who is the accounting officer of the department;
- c) the researcher received a list with all the names, including profiles of participants (such as functional area, number of years in service, gender, age) of the directors and deputy directors in the department;
- d) notification was sent to all potential participants by the research co-ordination section within the department;
- e) the researcher sent individual emails to the selected participants who met the inclusion criteria;
- f) the researcher arranged a briefing meeting to arrange for the actual interview session; and
- g) agreement was reached on the interview date, time and location.

The notification to potential participants was sent in November 2019 and included, among other things, the title of the study, purpose and a brief description of the study.

A maximum number of 20 directors and deputy directors each were recruited with the view of obtaining at least 15 participants from each group.

3.9 Data gathering

The main data gathering method for the current study was in-depth interviews, which were supplemented with the reviewing of official documents, such as annual reports, planning frameworks and other government-relevant policies in the DBE. The choice of the interviews was guided by Leedy and Ormrod (2014) who suggest that interviews can be beneficial in providing useful information, which may include facts, people's beliefs and perspectives about the facts as well as conscious reasons for actions or feelings. According to Boyce and Neale (2006), in-depth interviews offer detailed information about a person's thoughts in relation to the issue being explored in depth. Furthermore, Boyce and Neale (2006) credit in-depth interviews for providing more detail than any other data collection method in a relaxed environment for participants.

Data gathering took place between December 2019 and January 2020. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed specifically to assist in the data collection process (Appendices A and B). The interview guide contained open-ended questions to allow the participants to provide their own views on the questions. Open-ended questions are commonly used by qualitative researchers in order to get the views of the participants (Creswell, 2003). Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe and Neville (2014:545) describe in-depth interviews as one of the most powerful tools for gaining an understanding of human beings and exploring topics in depth. In-depth interviews were therefore deemed appropriate for the study due to the ability of such interviews to provide detailed information about participants' views and behaviour in response to the research questions (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Carter *et al.*, 2014).

The interview questions were drawn from the main research question and the sub-questions (Section 1.5). The interview guide for directors was based on Objective 1, which was to establish how the identity of a middle manager as a strategy practitioner is perceived within a government department. The interview guide for deputy directors was structured based on the three objectives to ensure that it would provide answers to both the central question and the sub-questions:

- Objective 2: to establish how middle managers perceive themselves as strategy practitioners
- Objective 3: to explore how identity dynamics influence the work of a middle manager as a strategy practitioner?
- Objective 4: to explore identity of practitioners

A copy of the interview guide is included as Appendices A and B. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher performed a thorough literature search to identify gaps, which led to the main research question focusing on middle managers and their identities in relation to strategising. As part of the preparations for the interviews, the researcher explained the purpose of the study. The interviews were conducted at the offices of the DBE and varied in length. The shortest interview lasted 30 minutes and the longest interview lasted 1 hour 11 minutes. The interviews took place in designated meeting rooms situated within the office building where DBE resides.

Table 5 below provides details of the interviews conducted with the directors indicating the date on which the interview was conducted and the duration of each interview.

Table 5: Interview schedule of directors

Participants	Date	Duration
D1	09 December 2019	29:51:00
D2	09 December 2019	34:04:00
D3	09 December 2019	26:36:00
D4	09 December 2019	43:17:00
D5	10 December 2019	14:30:00
D6	11 December 2019	27:57:00
D7	11 December 2019	20:55:00
D8	12 December 2019	29:02:00
D9 (a)	19 December 2019	22:16:00
D9 (b)	19 December 2019	2:45:00
D10 (a)	21 January 2020	9:12:00
D10 (b)	21 January 2020	24:45:00
D11	23 January 2020	20:29:00
D12	24 January 2020	18:58:00
D13	29 January 2020	32:48:00
Duration of the interviews		357:25:00

Source: Own compilation

Table 6 below provides details of the interviews conducted with the middle managers, indicating the date on which the interview was conducted and the duration of each interview.

Table 6: Interview schedule of middle managers

Participants	Date	Duration
DD1	10 December 2019	37:43:00
DD2	10 December 2019	34:58:00
DD3	10 December 2019	37:38:00
DD4	11 December 2019	37:10:00
DD5	11 December 2019	46:09:00
DD6	12 December 2019	59:42:00
DD7	12 December 2019	29:26:00
DD8	17 December 2019	59:45:00
DD9	18 December 2019	39:21:00
DD10	19 December 2019	01:07:23
DD11	20 January 2020	01:11:27
DD12	21 January 2020	32:09:00
DD13	31 January 2020	42:56:00
Duration of the interviews		459:15:50

Source: Own compilation

Prior to the interviews with the participants from the two groups, both the Department and the participants granted consent to be interviewed. A copy of the informed consent form are included in Appendix C and Appendix D. In addition, participants received a participant information sheet, which provided specific information about the research study, including the purposes of the research and all the details pertaining to the study. A copy of the participant information sheet is included as Appendix E. All participants gave their consent for the digital recording of the interview sessions. The request to conduct interviews was made through the research coordination section of the DBE and approval was granted by the responsible person. A copy of the permission letter is included as Appendix F. Finally, the ethics clearance certificate and the Turnitin digital receipt are included as Appendix G and F. The recorded data was stored on an external hard drive and was password protected to ensure safety and protection of information. The recorded data was then transcribed in preparation for the analysis of the data. The services of an external transcriber were secured to complete the task of transcription. The transcriber signed a confidentiality form as part of maintaining ethical standards related to confidentiality. The interview transcriptions for both groups of participants amounted to 331 pages for analysis. The researcher also sought the services of a professional editor. The declaration of editing is attached in appendix I.

3.10 Data analysis

Subsequent to the in-depth interviews, data was prepared for the analysis phase of the study. As noted by Basit (2003) and Nowell, Norris, White and Moules (2017), the analysis of this qualitative study was a rather dynamic process, which involved both inductive and deductive reasoning. Deductive analysis involved generating themes from theory while inductive analysis was driven by codes and themes emerging from the data (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). This process required a recursive process whereby the researcher had to go back and forth between the data and transcripts to ensure he was fully immersed in the data that had been generated.

Before the actual data analysis commenced, the researcher re-organised the transcripts and randomly allocated pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants. The pseudonyms were allocated based on the race and gender of participants. For example, participant DD1 was an African male middle manager. The researcher kept a separate reference table with real names to assist in the writing up of the data and relating the statements to the original participant context. Tables 7 and 8 below represent the pseudonyms allocated to the directors (the immediate supervisors) and pseudonyms allocated to the middle managers (deputy directors).

Table 7: Participants' pseudonyms – directors

Participant number	Pseudonym
14	Rodney
15	Thabo
16	Pule
17	Lwazi
18	Edward
19	Peter
20	Robert
21	Sydney
22	Suzan
23	Bongani
24	Mark
25	Sinazo
26	Aluwani

Source: Own compilation

Table 8: Participants' pseudonyms – Middle managers

Participant number	Pseudonym
1	Mpho
2	Sindiso
3	Steven
4	John
5	Collen
6	Mangi
7	Cynthia
8	Constance
9	Ngwako
10	Kgosi
11	Thembi
12	Owen
13	Dipuo

Source: Own compilation

After the allocation of the pseudonyms, data was deemed ready for analysis. Data analysis focused mainly on generating *in vivo* codes that would form part of the categories or themes, as suggested by Saldaña (2016). *In vivo* codes are codes that use the direct language of participants (Saldaña, 2013:61). In addition, the researcher opted for a thematic data analysis method as recommended by Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas (2013) and Nowell *et al.* (2017) who suggest that thematic analysis is suitable for the search for and identification of as well as reporting on common themes from an interview or set of interviews. According to Nowell *et al.* (2017), thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be used in different epistemological and research questions. The researcher also found that thematic analysis was a useful research tool, which provided rich and detailed data as well as complex reflection of data (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013).

The researcher categorised the data analysis process in phases. Phase 1 involved the preparation of data, which meant reading the transcripts and an open-coding process where the researcher noted and jotted down some codes that emerged (Saldaña, 2016). This allowed the researcher to create a list of codes and to construct broad categories, which were then manually created on ATLAS.ti, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) that was used to manage and coordinate the process of data analysis. The researcher also examined and re-examined data obtained from the interviews several times to get a holistic sense of what it contained. The examining and re-examining of data assisted the researcher to be immersed in data but also served as data cleaning process (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014; Yin, 2016).

The second phase involved loading the data into ATLAS.ti and breaking down the data into smaller segments and allocating labels called codes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014; Yin, 2016). A code can be defined as a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data (Saldaña, 2014:584). Therefore, the process of assigning codes to data was called the data coding phase of analysis in this study. Data coding in the context of this study entailed using words or short phrases that represented or captured a summary and the essence of an attribute. Saldaña (2014:584) describes coding as a heuristic method of discovery to the meanings of individual sections of data. The researcher applied codes that emerged during the initial data preparation phase and those that emerged from the interview scripts. Data coding is considered a transitional process from data collection to data analysis (Saldaña, 2016).

The third phase involved identification and creation of main themes of the study. Figure 10 summarises the phases discussed above.

The analysis followed the process as outlined in Figure 10 below:

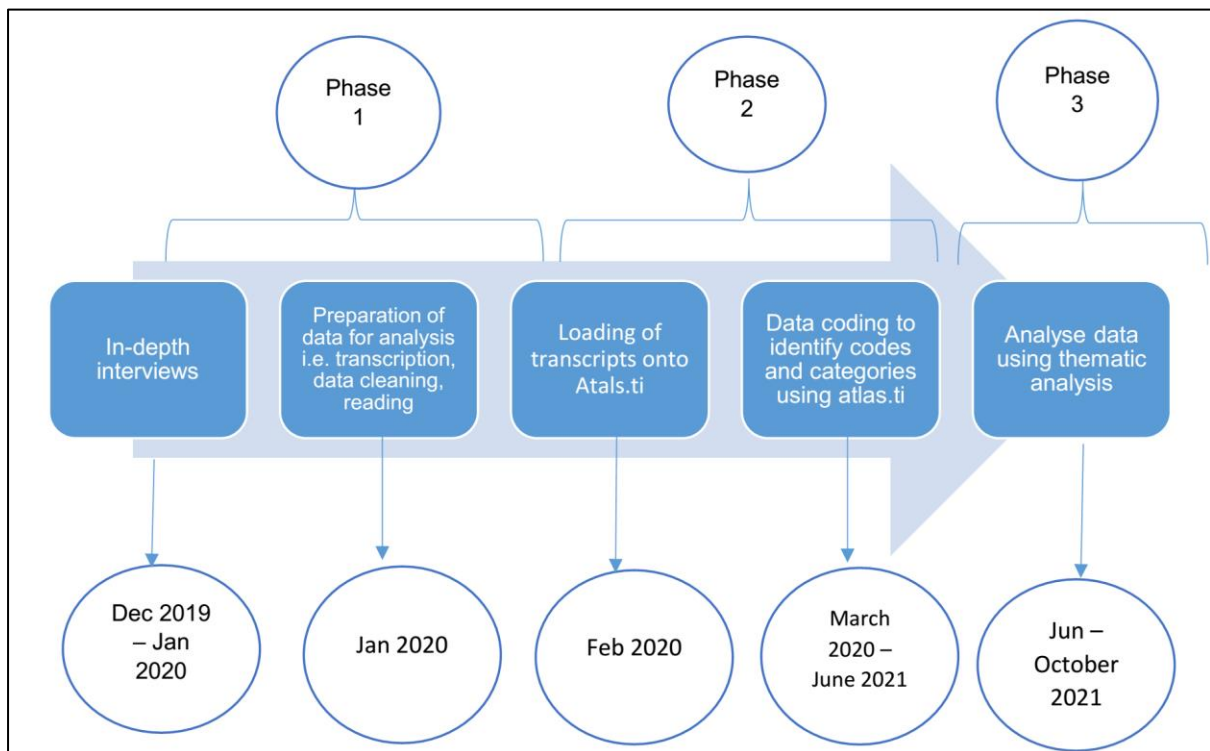


Figure 10: Data analysis phases
Source: Own compilation

As depicted in Figure 10 above, the data analysis process was a rigorous process, comprising three phases.

The data analysis process involved a thorough data coding process as outlined by Saldaña (2013), comprising first cycle coding and second cycle coding. Saldaña (2013) acknowledges the problematic nature of researches, such as research pertaining to identity, a concept or construct with multiple approaches and definitions, depending on the discipline. Pre-established codes about attributes relating to culture, values, attitudes and beliefs are common in identity research. The researcher therefore used the initial coding method, namely open coding aimed at breaking down qualitative data into discreet parts (Saldaña, 2013). In addition, descriptive coding, aimed at assigning a label to summarise the meaning, was used. In order to capture emotions and values of participants, the researcher also added affective coding in the latter part of first cycle coding.

During second cycle coding, the researcher collapsed the codes emanating from the first cycle coding into a smaller number, as suggested by Saldaña (2016). Data was re-analysed and it was found that, in some instances, large segments of text are better suited to just one key code rather than several small ones. This part was considered pattern coding as described by (Saldaña, 2013). This assisted in starting to categorise different codes with similar characteristics. Therefore, the researcher adopted a combination of methods in both first cycle and second cycle coding. The coding process is summarised in Figure 11 below:

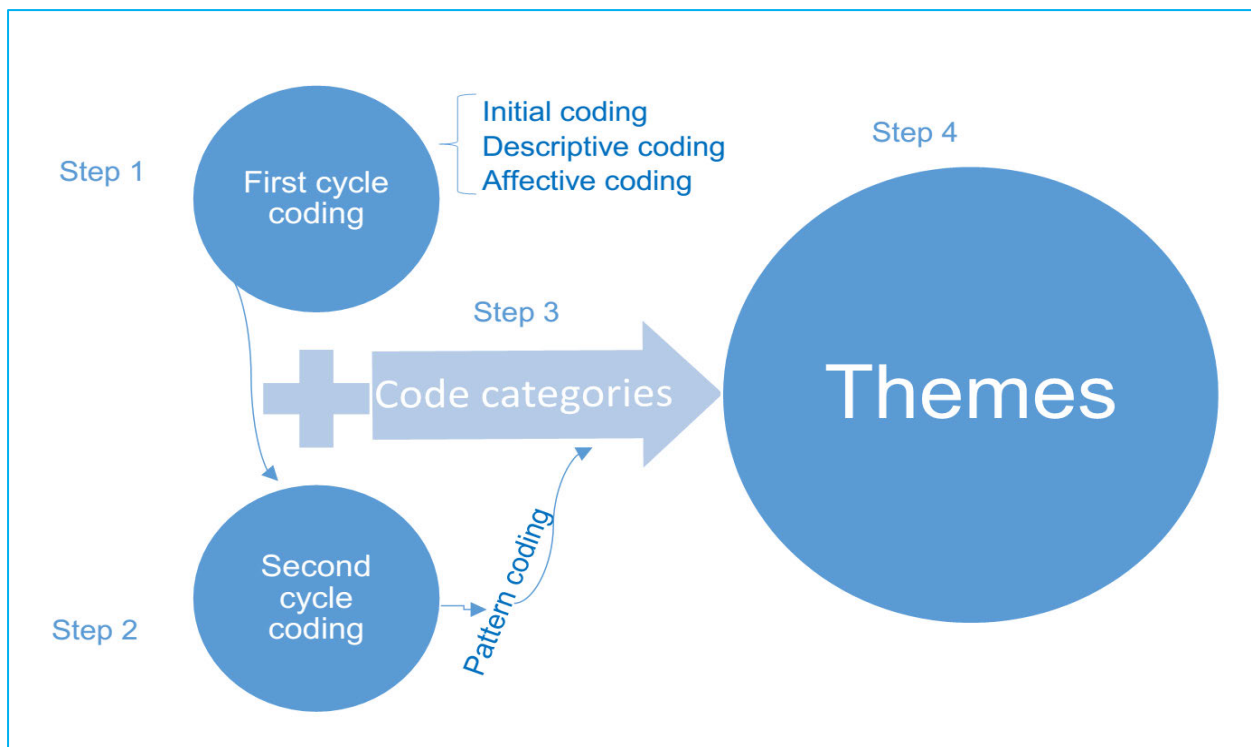


Figure 11: Data coding process
Source: Own compilation

The data coding and development of themes process will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

3.11 Trustworthiness and credibility

Scholars using qualitative inquiry to conduct research are required to consider the aspect of establishing rigour and objectivity in qualitative research. The aspect of rigour in qualitative research is particularly important in order to legitimise the research findings resulting from qualitative research (Lietz, Langer & Furman, 2006). According to Lietz *et al.* (2006), the idea of rigour has been conceptualised differently by different qualitative researchers, with trustworthiness as the commonly used concept. Another important quality concept in qualitative research relates to credibility (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Lietz *et al.* (2006) posit that trustworthiness is established when findings represent, as close as possible, the meanings as described by the participants. Furthermore, trustworthiness is achieved through rigorous research, which follows a predefined set of procedures. Credibility, as part of ensuring qualitative research rigour, relates to the aspect of truth-value in research findings (Lietz *et al.*, 2006). It entails establishing

whether the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants' original data, and is a correct interpretation of the participants' original views (Korstjens & Moser, 2018:121). Scholars must therefore engage in a variety of strategies in order to describe research findings in a way that authentically represents the meanings as described by the participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Therefore, the researcher considered the aspects of trustworthiness and credibility in this study by adopting specific strategies described below.

Strategies to ensure trustworthiness and credibility comprise prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, negative case analysis, audit trail, reflexivity, persistent observation, triangulation and member checking (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lietz *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, in the context of this study, the researcher ensured that the interpretation of the research findings represents the views of the participants as closely as possible. This was done through the data analysis process that represented the voice of participants. The trustworthiness of this research was linked to credibility as the researcher followed a prescribed guide outlined in the research methodology by Salkind (2016). This allowed for triangulation with audit trail or ease of repeating the study (Salkind, 2016).

Carter *et al.* (2014) suggest that triangulation encapsulates the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research strategy to ensure validity through convergence of information. The use of multiple methods or sources assists in developing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being studied as part of qualitative research.

Triangulation refers to using multiple data sources, space (collecting data on the same phenomenon in multiple sites or test for cross-site consistency) and person (gathering data from different types or level of people, e.g. individuals, their family members and clinicians). As such, the current study considered the views of both middle managers and their immediate supervisors in order to delineate the identity of middle managers in the department under study as well as the documents within the department. All data collected for this study was stored on a secure external hard drive. The data comprised the actual interview recordings as well as the transcripts.

Furthermore, the researcher considered reflexivity as part of ensuring credibility. Reflexivity is conceptualised as the acknowledgement by the researcher that his or her own actions, and decisions will inevitably affect the meaning and context of the experience under investigation (Carter *et al.*, 2014). Reflexivity involves reviewing who we are and the ways in which our beliefs, experiences and identity intersect with those of the participant (Lietz *et al.*, 2006:447). Given that the researcher was an employee within the case department at the time of this research, it was important for him to separate himself from the views expressed by participants and to assume a neutral position in order to avoid biasness, as recommended by (Lietz *et al.*, 2006).

An audit trail is also important as part of strategies to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research, as it describes the research procedures and allows for critical thinking in the qualitative inquiry (Lietz *et al.*, 2006). In order to ensure a credible audit trail, the entire process of the research was well documented, including the research methodology followed. This would provide a trail of how the study was conducted, including all facets of the study.

In dealing with the trustworthiness and credibility aspects of the current study, the researcher adopted the strategies as discussed above, as suggested by Shenton (2004) and Lietz *et al.* (2006):

- a) The study addressed credibility concerns through adopting appropriate research methods. This included understanding the culture of the organisation within which the research was conducted.
- b) The researcher provided the background of the study to the participants prior to the interviews to ensure they understood what the research and to aid in transferability of the findings.
- c) To ensure dependability of the study, the researcher relied on prolonged engagement with the participants in order to increase the ability for a qualitative researcher to reach saturation of the data, as recommended by Korstjens and Moser (2018). As such, the researcher spent about 460 minutes with middle managers and about 360 minutes with directors. Therefore, the researcher, as an insider in the case department, spent more time with the participants during and outside the duration of the study. As part of prolonged engagement with participants to ensure credibility, participants were asked distinct but open-

ended questions and the researcher encouraged participants to support their statements with practical examples. The researcher also asked follow-up questions to allow participants to elaborate on their responses.

- d) In addition to the above, the researcher opted to include the verification of codes by an external co-coder to ensure rigour and credibility of the current study.

3.12 Ethical considerations

The Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2016) was used as ethical guideline for this study. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2014), the main ethical issues in research can be categorised as protection of harm, voluntary and informed participation, right to privacy, and honesty.

Furthermore, the Unisa Research Ethics Review Committee (CRERC) approved the study after a thorough risk assessment process (reference number: 2019_CEMS_BM_092). The ethics clearance certificate is attached as Appendix E.

Some of the main principles are respect for and protection of the rights and interests of participants and institutions. This requirement was met by obtaining informed and non-coerced consent. With regard to the institution within which the study was undertaken, a written consent was obtained from the relevant authority.

Regarding the unit of analysis, all participants were informed about the study with the assistance of the research co-ordination section of the DBE. This was done through a participant's information sheet that was developed with the view to notify the participants about the details of the research and its ethical considerations. In line with Salkind (2012), the explanation of the research in the participant information sheet comprised:

- a) the purpose of the research;
- b) the duration of the research;
- c) confidentiality of the study;
- d) a withdrawal option if necessary; and
- e) potential benefits to the participants and society.

As described in the Unisa policy on research ethics (2016) participants were further informed that participation was on a voluntary basis and withdrawal could therefore be sought at any given time. In addition, participants were informed about their protection from any harm and the confidentiality of the information provided. Any disclosure of the data collected to a third party, such as the co-coder or the transcriber, was only done with consent of the participants. Each participant signed a consent form indicating his or her willingness to take part in the study. The researcher further explained the confidentiality issue to the transcriber and the co-coder.

The researcher considered the following principles as contained in the Unisa policy on research ethics:

3.13 Respect for and protection of the rights and interests of participants and institutions

The researcher ensured respect and protection of the dignity, privacy and confidentiality of participants and the institution within which the research was undertaken. The personal information of all research participants used for research purposes was adequately protected to prevent possible loss, damage and/or unauthorised access as required by Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act, No. 4 of 2013 (Unisa Policy on Research Ethics, 2016). In addition, the researcher ensured that research participants and the institution were never exposed to procedures or risks not directly attached to the research project or its methodology. The personal and institutional information was kept safely on a password-protected personal computer as well as on the external hard drive.

3.14 Informed and non-coerced consent

The researcher obtained informed consent, which was not influenced by direct or indirect coercion or any undue inducement of people in the name of research, as described by Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2016). Participants freely signed consent forms to indicate their willingness to participate in the study.

3.15 Respect for cultural differences

The researcher treated research participants as unique human beings within the context of the DBE, and gave respect what could be traditionally sacred and secret. The researcher acknowledged and respected cultural diversity within the case department. However, the research took place within a department with an established organisational culture. The consent of gatekeepers was obtained in addition to that of research participants.

3.16 Justice, fairness and objectivity

The researcher used a fair criterion for the selection of research participants while maintaining scientific rigour, as recommended by the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2016). Furthermore, the researcher opted for easily accessible individuals but made sure that they were not inordinately burdened with repeated demands on their time and knowledge by the researcher. All participants indicated in writing suitable time for interviews. Interviews were conducted once with each participant.

3.17 Non-exploitation

There was no exploitation of research participants, communities, institutions or vulnerable people. The researcher ensured that participants' personal information was used in line with the requirements of the POPI Act, No. 4 of 2013 and that the information was not used for unlawful and secondary purposes incompatible with the original purpose consented to by participants. The participants and the institution within which research was conducted were informed that the research findings would be shared with them after the study is completed.

3.18 Chapter conclusion

The aim of Chapter 3 was to discuss the main research design that guided the study and to describe the research process that was followed. The chapter first discussed the research context within which the study was conducted, and the case study research design as the appropriate approach adopted for the study. For this research, a qualitative research approach was deemed the appropriate approach for use together with the strategy-as-practice research perspective. An explanation of the unit of analysis was provided, and the target sample was discussed, which involved the directors and deputy directors as middle managers. These two groups were selected to participate in the study in order to understand how the identity of a strategy practitioner is perceived and how this shapes strategising work. To explore this, the researcher opted to get the views of participants and thus opted for the constructivist-interpretive research paradigm. The chapter further provided an explanation of the sampling method used for this study, the data collection and analysis as well as the inclusion and exclusion criteria for selection of participants. The chapter concluded by discussing criteria for trustworthiness and the ethical considerations that guided the study. Figure 12 provides the overview of Chapter 4.

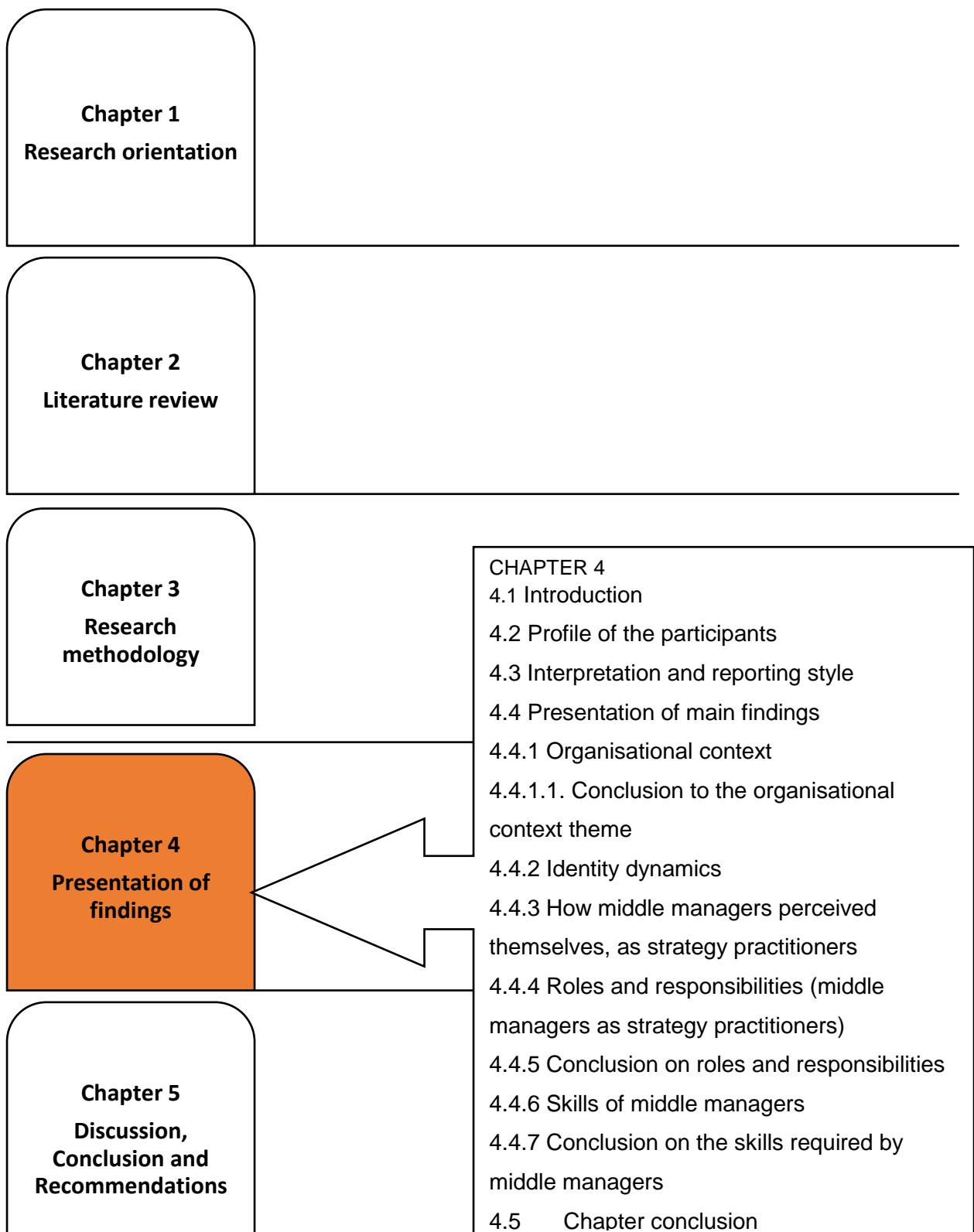


Figure 12: Overview of Chapter 4
Source: Own compilation

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 provided details pertaining to the research design and methodological process followed throughout the study. Chapter 3 offered discussion on the organisational context within which the study was conducted. The middle managers in the context of the study were also clarified followed by discussion on the insider perspective of the researcher. As discussed in Chapter 3, the study was a qualitative research which took a single case study approach. Research paradigm, sampling strategy, data gathering and analysis as well ethical considerations were also discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents a discussion of the data analysis process and the findings of the study. This current study sought to explore certain internal identity dynamics within a single government department, and explored how the identity of middle managers, as strategy practitioners, was perceived by the selected participants and how these identity dynamics influenced the strategising work of middle managers. The findings of this study are based on data gathered through 26 in-depth interviews with participants in the selected government department. As explained in Chapter 3, the selected sample comprised two groups of participants: middle managers and their immediate supervisors (directors) in order to study the multi-level dynamics within this context of a single government department. The sample was purposefully chosen to gather data towards a better understanding of identity dynamics within the specific context. Furthermore, the current study adopted the strategy-as-practice research lens in order to study the doing of strategy at micro level. The strategy-as-practice research lens was particularly useful as it not only allowed for the study of strategising from a middle manager perspective, but also allowed for deep data gathering revealing the dynamic processes and practices associated with strategic activity and issues of identity.

Notably, the data gathering process occurred before the Covid-19 pandemic and all interviews were conducted face to face. At the time of data gathering, the case organisation was in the final stages of drafting the Annual Performance Plan (APP) and the revision of the strategic plan. In addition, at that time, the case department

was consolidating plans for the new academic year (2020). While the data was gathered before Covid, the findings needed to be interpreted in a Covid context. Many of the practices described by the participants, as well as some of the contextual accounts offered by the participants, may have been adjusted since data gathering, given the realities, disruptions and major changes necessitated through the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated coping mechanisms.

Chapter 4 begins by describing the profiles of the selected participants, and then provides a discussion of how data was prepared for analysis and the development of the key themes that emerged from the data. The main themes are discussed in depth, beginning with the organisational context theme. The rich descriptions offered by the participants during the interviews were offered in a specific context, and the purpose of describing the context is directly linked to the research purpose. The organisational context theme sets the tone by providing the unique social context within which the research was conducted. The researcher then discusses the themes associated with identity dynamics and challenges of middle managers. The chapter concludes by providing findings relating to the practices that enable and hinder middle managers in their strategising work. The participants' profiles are discussed next.

4.2 Profile of the participants

This section offers a description of the participants. While the sample was purposely selected according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, it is important to describe the participants in individual terms in order to provide the context in which the data was gathered and analysed. Specifically, the current study set out to gather data on the lived experiences of middle managers as strategy practitioners, focusing on the strategy–identity nexus. The strategy-as-practice research lens allowed the researcher to explore strategy at micro level through understanding the praxis, practitioner and the practices associated with strategising. As already noted, two groups of participants were selected to be part of this study, namely directors and middle managers. As already indicated in the preceding sections, middle managers who participated in this study were appointed in terms of MMS.

In terms of the directors, the study approached directors from different directorates, to ensure a representative sample across the directorates. As presented in Chapter 3,

directors are appointed in terms of the senior management services (SMS) handbook (DPSA, 2003).

Middle managers work with assistant directors and lower-level staff in their day-to-day activities. Part of the responsibilities of middle managers is to provide support to the director or the section in all issues related to the work of the directorate. These middle managers are allocated a sub-directorate, which they manage on their own. However, they get strategic direction from the director.

In the current study, the participating directors were responsible for managing programmes in their respective units. The programmes were derived from the operational plan, the APP and, ultimately, the strategic plan of the department. The directors work with the middle managers in executing their responsibilities. At the time of data gathering, all the participants were permanently appointed within the selected government department. Governmental organisations are typically hierarchical and known for bureaucratic organisational structures (DPSA, 2003b).

To adhere to the agreement for anonymity, the researcher assigned a random pseudonym to each participant. The participants' profiles are summarised in Table 9 (directors) and Table 10 (middle managers). The tables also offer brief descriptions of the interview sessions as contextual background.

Table 9: Participants' profiles (directors)

Pseudonyms	Race and gender	Position	Years of experience	Interview sessions
Rodney	White Male	Director	12	The interview took place on the second floor of the department in Rodney's office. Rodney seemed tense at the beginning but eventually was relaxed and responded to all questions.
Thabo	African Male	Director	27	The interview session took place in Thabo's office on the ground floor. The session started slow and Thabo seemed tired. He had just had provincial visits. After the rapport questions, Thabo started to relax and answered all questions with ease.
Pule	African Male	Director	30	Pule's interview session was exciting. The session took place in his office on the first floor of the department. Pule was very passionate about sharing information on middle managers.
Lwazi	African Male	Director	30	Lwazi's interview session was conducted in his office on the third floor. Lwazi answered all the questions well and offered advice for all middle managers.
Edward	African Male	Director	34	The interview session was conducted in his office in the second floor. Edward sounded familiar with the issues under discussion. His answers were short and precise. The interview went well.
Peter	African Male	Director	29	The interview session took place in his office on the second floor. Peter was very comfortable about the interview and sounded passionate about the questions.
Robert	African Male	Director	13	The session took place in Robert's office on the second floor. He seemed a bit tense until some clarity had been reached about the research and unit of analysis. After that, he was at ease and provided his views.
Sydney	African Male	Director	11	Sydney's session took place in his office on the third floor. Sydney provided short and precise responses and was comfortable with the questions. He also sounded passionate about issues pertaining to middle managers.
Suzan	African Female	Director	10	The interview session with Suzan was conducted on the third floor of the department in her office. Suzan seemed relaxed and felt that her views would change the perception about middle managers in the department. The interview went well and Suzan responded to all the questions and provided detailed responses.
Bongani	African Male	Director	29	The interview took place in Bongani's office on the ground floor of the department. Bongani seemed tense in the beginning but opened up after the assurance about confidentiality of the session. Bongani even shared personal experiences about working with middle managers.

Mark	African Male	Director	38	The session took place in Mark's office on the ground floor of the department. Mark was very excited about the topic under discussion and freely expressed his views. He also offered advice about improving the circumstances. Mark was hopeful that the findings would improve the understanding of middle managers and their work.
Sinazo	African Female	Director	24	Sinazo's session was conducted on the first floor in his office. Sinazo seemed relaxed, responded slowly but briefly, and responded to all questions. The interview went well.
Aluwani	African Male	Director	30	The session took place in Aluwani's office in a second attempt to schedule an interview. Aluwani seemed passionate when responding to the questions. He provided long explanations in responding to the questions. The interview went well and was enjoyable.

Source: Own compilation

Table 10: Participants' profile (middle managers)

Pseudonym	Position	Race and gender	Years of experience	Interview sessions
Mpho	Middle manager	African Male	22	This was the first interview conducted in one of the unoccupied offices in the department. The participant was very calm and provided all the answers to the questions. At first, the responses were short and precise but, as the interview progressed, the participant offered additional explanatory responses.
Sindiso	Middle manager	African Male	13	The interview with Sindiso was conducted in one of the small meeting rooms in the department. Sindiso was very open to share his views about the research questions. He even felt that it was like a job interview and considered the interview was necessary. The interview was very informative and went well.
Steven	Middle manager	African Male	7	Steven's interview took place in the director's office. He was very comfortable although worried in the beginning. After clarifying some details about the research, Steven opened up and shared his views. The interview was informative.
John	Middle manager	African Male	11	The interview with John took place on the second floor of the department. John was also ready for the interview and provided his views about the research questions. The interview went well.
Collen	Middle manager	White Male	26	Collen's interview took place on the third floor of the department in one of the unoccupied offices. He was relaxed and excited about the interview.
Mangi	Middle manager	African Male	8	Mangi was relaxed and expressed his views on the interview questions. The interview took place in an unoccupied office and went well.
Cynthia	Middle manager	African Female	8	Cynthia was excited that we could finally find time to conduct the interview after failed attempts due to conflicting time slots. Cynthia was very comfortable and eager to participate.
Constance	Middle manager	African Female	31	The interview with Constance took place in an unoccupied office on the second floor of the department. Constance was well prepared for the interview and answered all questions with ease.
Ngwako	Middle manager	African Male	33	Ngwako's interview was conducted in the afternoon in one of the unoccupied offices in the department. He was relaxed and did not even worry about time. He seemed to be enjoying the interview as he provided long explanations. It was one of the longest interviews conducted.

Pseudonym	Position	Race and gender	Years of experience	Interview sessions
Kgosi	Middle manager	African Male	32	Kgosi loved the interview session. The session took place in one of the unoccupied offices in the second floor of the department. Kgosi was relaxed and did not show any sign of anxiety.
Thembi	Middle manager	African Male	21	Thembi's interview session took place in the second floor in an unoccupied office. Thembi freely expressed her views on the questions posed to her.
Owen	Middle manager	African Male	11	The interview took place on the first floor of the department in one of the small meeting rooms. Owen enjoyed the interview and answered all the questions with ease.
Dipuo	Middle manager	African Female	24	Dipuo's interview took place in the unoccupied office of one of the directors. This was an emotional interview as Dipuo shared some of the deepest challenges she was facing as a middle manager. Dipuo answered all the questions comfortably.

Source: Own compilation

Middle managers who participated in this study fell within the three categories of MMS referred to as deputy director, chief education specialist and branch coordinator. The directors who participated in this study had between 10 and 38 years of service in the public sector and were appointed in terms of SMS. All participants were selected from various sections in the case department in order to get divergent views about the research questions. In terms of experience, most of the participants had teaching qualifications, and had worked as teachers before joining the department. Most of the participants were Africans as indicated in the Table 9 and Table 10, and in terms of gender, there were more males than females in the final sample.

All interviews were conducted on the premises of the case department. Some of the interviews progressed slowly in the beginning, and as rapport was established, the participants appeared to be more at ease towards the middle and the end of the interview. Participants also showed interest about the findings, and requested the researcher to share the findings with the case department.

When data analysis commenced, the researcher made sure to capture the participants' data separately for middle managers and their immediate supervisors, to ensure data for middle managers could be compared to that of the directors. All the interview recordings were transcribed and the Word files were then prepared for loading onto a software program to ease the data analysis process.

4.3 Interpretation and reporting style

As indicated in Chapter 3, the researcher followed the steps outlined by Saldaña (2013) in terms of data analysis process (see section 3.10).

While the researcher intuitively felt some general themes emerging while doing the interviews, the actual process of analysis, in terms of the creation of codes, only commenced after the transcription of interviews had been completed. However, the researcher kept reflective notes of the themes that were emerging during the interview process. The researcher received the transcripts in August 2020 and data clean up started after that. This entailed the removal of stutters and filler words, such as 'uh-huh' and 'yeah' as well as false starts or unintentional word repetitions that are present in everyday speech and which are sometimes part of the verbatim transcriptions. The researcher used both inductive and deductive approaches as discussed in section

3.10 above. Some themes started to emerge during the initial stages of analysis. However, most of the codes only emerged during the data analysis process. Although the researcher did not use the in vivo codes in the final coding structure, the descriptions were as close as possible to the responses given by participants in order to get the true sense of what was implied in the responses.

The data analysis process was conducted as per the steps outlined by Saldaña (2016). The first cycle coding involved mostly coding for attribute, descriptive, emotion, process and in vivo coding. Codes were continuously revisited and revised throughout the data analysis process. The second cycle of coding was analytical and involved looking for patterns that would make up a category or a theme (Saldaña, 2016). At the end of the first phase involving open coding, a total of 90 codes emerged. These codes were revisited and refined as the researcher felt that they represented categories or themes. At the end of phase 2, 864 codes emerged. The codes were grouped into 98 codes linked to the themes that emerged from the data.

As described in Chapter 3 (see section 3.12), the researcher also engaged an independent external co-coder and qualitative expert to provide an outsider perspective and to add trustworthiness. The co-coder was unfamiliar with the study and worked in a different academic discipline to the researcher. The external coder (co-coder) was involved in the second phase of the analysis process. The researcher organised a briefing session with the co-coder for the purpose of clarifying research questions and data scripts. During the first session, it was agreed that both the researcher and the co-coder would proceed coding data individually and then arrange a consensus session after the first coding session (Saldaña, 2016).

During the consensus meeting, the co-coder admitted that the language used in her work would differ slightly from the language and concepts used by the researcher. Although there were some differences in the language used by both the researcher and the co-coder, all codes and categories showed similar meanings. The understanding of meanings was deduced when both the researcher and the co-coder presented the codes and theme tables during consensus meetings. The pre-coding phase produced a total of 90 codes. However, at the end, both the researcher and the co-coder agreed that the researcher would develop a theme table incorporating the codes from both the researcher and co-coder. The codes and code categories were

then refined and merged, and some were deleted to reflect the consensus codes and categories. The consensus codes emerged when the researcher and the co-coder agreed on the commonalities of codes. Finally, 64 codes were adopted by the researcher and the co-coder. Towards the end of the data analysis process, three main themes emerged, with 11 categories that were made up of 64 codes. The process followed is summarised in Figure 13 below.

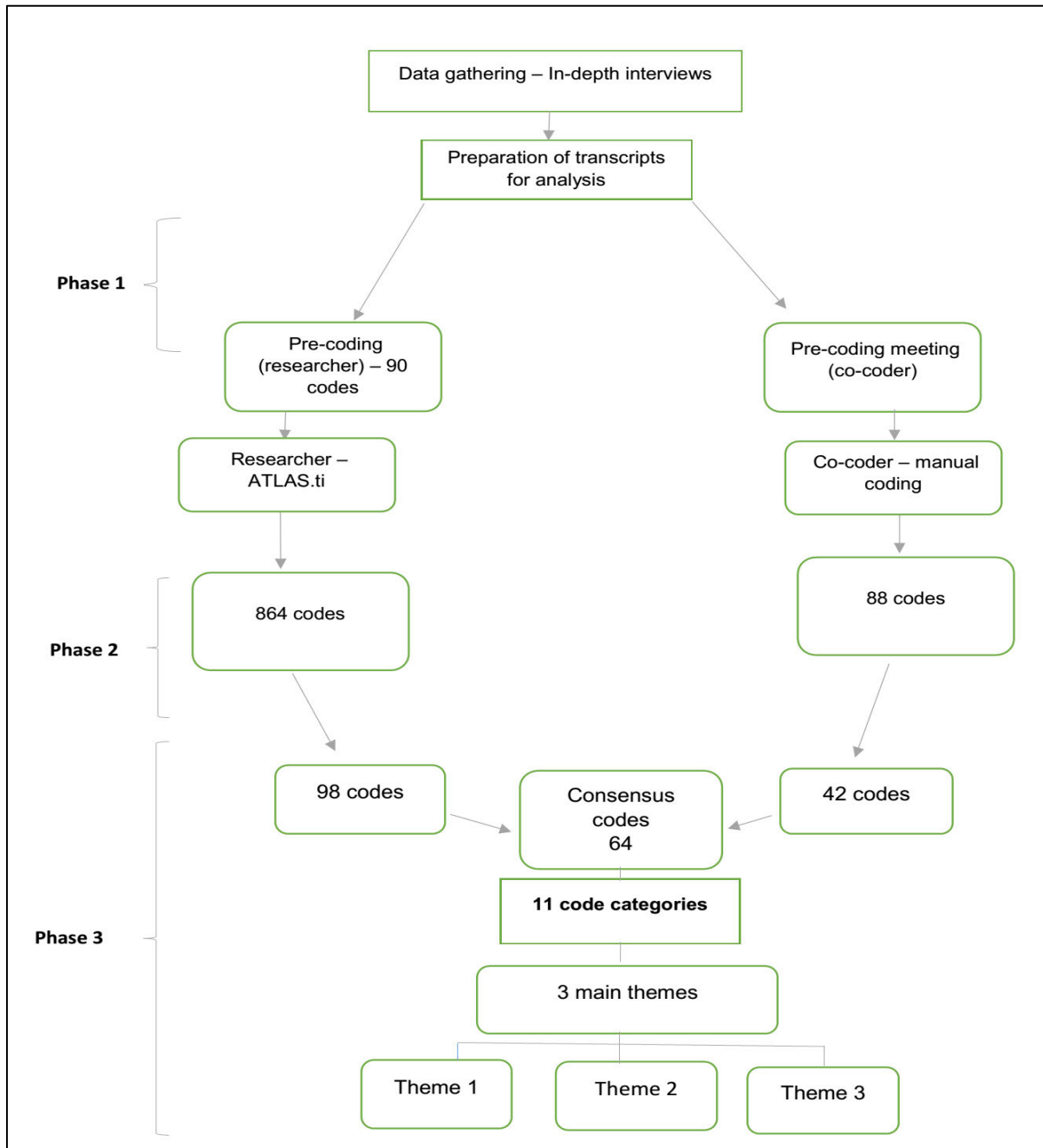


Figure 13: Data analysis process
Source: Own compilation

As mentioned earlier, the first level of coding involved an open-coding phase, which initially generated 90 codes. The researcher then realised that some of the codes were already at some level of a category or theme. This was not surprising, as the researcher expected rich data given that the research focused on two groups of participants. The researcher then continued with the coding process which included the in vivo codes or codes with exact words as described by the participants. These codes were refined and grouped together in categories. Therefore, all codes with similarities in terms of salient meanings were allocated a category, as suggested by Saldaña (2016). During the categorisation of codes, a few new codes emerged. The second level of coding generated 864 codes. The second level of coding also included the integration of coding by an external co-coder. The decision to include the co-coder was made with the view to ensure rigour and maintain integrity of the study. During this phase, themes that were linked to or which were responses to the research questions emerged. The third level of coding included codes and themes from the consensus meeting with the co-coder. The three themes that emerged from the coding process are reflected in section 4.4, table 11.

Before loading onto ATLAS.ti, the files were renamed to protect the identity of the participants. All middle manager files had the MM description as an identifier to assist the researcher in distinguishing between the views of middle managers and the views of directors. The researcher used the same referencing system for both middle managers and their immediate supervisors. All quotes therefore include the title of the respondent at the end of the quote. Note that all excerpts are reproduced verbatim and unedited. For example, the first quote represents the response from a director and the second quote represents the response from a middle manager:

You've got your DG and the DDGs. Then you've got your chief directors and directors in a band (Mark, director).

[T]here are assistant directors and senior administrative officers which are a level below the deputy director level (Steven, middle manager).

4.4 Presentation of main findings

This section presents the findings which emanated from the analysed data. As discussed in the previous section, three key themes emerged from the data. Table 11

presents the three themes and 11 categories that emerged, and provides the overall coding structure that emanated from the study.

Table 11: Theme table

Main themes	Categories	Codes
Organisational context	Organisational environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureaucracy • Top-down approach • Ageism • Red tape • Work scope dynamics • System deficiencies
	Political influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly unionised context • Abuse of political affiliation • Political interference • Changes in political environment
	Negative organisational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suppressed • Working under fear • Side-lined • Forced implementation • Over-worked • Working in silos
	Creating an enabling environment (recommendations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading • Part of planning sessions • Working independently • Shared identity • Shared decision-making • Freedom of expression
	Hindering factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication gap • Power dynamics • Lack of accountability • Authority
Identity dynamics (middle managers as strategy practitioners)	Identity as perceived by directors: How directors perceive middle managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle manager is critical • Occupying strategic position • Specialist • Lack of experience • Must take initiative and ownership
	How middle managers perceive themselves ("I am")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencer • Professional technician • Specialist • Knowledgeable thinker • Supervisor
	Identity as "should be" Expectations of how MM "should be"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must innovate • Being a specialist and strategist • Independent • Acting as director • Taking decisions • Being an analyst
	Identity work: identity construction (self-enhancement)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career aspiration • Career learning • Growth and maturity • Personal development
Roles and responsibilities (middle managers as strategy practitioners)	Roles of middle managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General administrative role • Supportive role • Advisory role • Implementation and monitoring role • Managerial role • Strategy contribution role • Conceptualising role • Planning role • Policy formulation • Programme management role • Project management role
	Skills required by middle managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue-selling skills • Strategic thinking • Communication skills • Content knowledge • Experts

Source: Own compilation

The presentation of findings was done according to the themes that emerged from data. Thus, all findings are discussed under each theme and then linked to the research questions in the subsequent sections (see tables 20 and 21). Section 4.4.1 below discusses the first theme that emerged, which describes the unique organisational context and social setting as described by both directors and middle managers.

4.4.1 Organisational context

This section offers a discussion of the organisational context, as described by the participants in the case department. Table 12 below provides the five categories that made up the organisational context theme and lists the codes that made up each category. The categories that will be discussed are organisational environment, political influence, negative organisational culture, creating and enabling environment and hindering factors.

Table 12: Organisational context theme

Main themes	Categories	Codes
Organisational context	Organisational environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureaucracy • Top-down approach • Ageism • Red tape • Work scope dynamics • System deficiencies
	Political influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly unionised context • Abuse of political affiliation • Political interference • Changes in political environment
	Negative organisational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suppressed • Working under fear • Side-lined • Forced implementation • Over-worked • Working in silos
	Creating an enabling environment (recommendations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading • Part of planning sessions • Working independently • Shared identity • Shared decision-making • Freedom of expression
	Hindering factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication gap • Power dynamics • Lack of accountability • Authority

Source: Own compilation

Offering rich descriptions of the organisational context is particularly important for research using the strategy-as-practice perspective strategy-as-practice (Axelsson, 2016; Whittington, 2012). Specifically, the strategy-as-practice research lens studies the micro level of strategising focusing on the practitioner, praxis and practices in different contexts (Whittington, 2012). The different contexts offer understanding of those experiences and practices that are peculiar to a specific setting. The feedback from participants assisted the researcher in understanding the unique context within which middle managers function, and aided in revealing the nuances and dynamics present within the case department. In this theme, the responses of both directors and middle managers were combined in order to build an understanding of the organisational context within which middle managers operate. Thus, the researcher did not compare or contrast the views of middle managers and their direct supervisors.

(a) Organisational environment

Early in the interviews, participants began describing the organisational environment within which they work. This provided some insight into the dynamic and complex working environment within which middle managers find themselves. Participants acknowledged that the education system in South Africa, which is the organisational context, is a big system. Participants consequently felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of the case department and the expectation in terms of the work. One of the participants said:

[T]he system is big (Kgosi, middle manager).

As could be expected, one of the directors mentioned that, at the time, they were operating in an organisational environment which was aligned to the nature and structures of governmental organisations:

You've got your DG and the DDGs. Then you've got your chief directors and directors in a band (Mark, director).

[T]here are assistant directors and senior administrative officers which are a level below the deputy director level (Steven, middle manager).

In terms of the scope of work, Pule, one of the directors, outlined the key responsibility of the department:

[N]ational [department] is responsible for policy formulation, monitoring and support (Pule, director).

As expected from a public institution, the work of the department under study was guided by government mandate contained in documents such as the NDP, the strategic plan and other planning documents provided by authorities in government. This was indicated in the interviews with Mangi (middle manager) and Sydney (director):

And there have been priorities that have been prioritised based on the National Development Plan and the strategic goals of the department (Mangi, middle manager).

Because, obviously, as you know, we are guided by the strategic plan and as well as the annual performance plan, which has got very clear indicators and timeframes of when work has to be reported on. So, that's what drives us mainly (Sydney, director).

As is typical in a public institution, the data revealed a predominantly top-down approach apparent in its business operation. Thabo, one of the directors added:

[O]n any given day, much of what lands on my desk ... it may be what I have received from the chief director or the DDG but then refer it to them [middle managers] for implementation (Thabo, director).

As such, some middle managers indicated that the scope of work was predetermined as could be expected in a bureaucratic organisation. The quotes below support this claim:

Whatever it is that you conceptualise, strategically or otherwise, it has to be within the confines of ... whether it's legislation, whether it's policy, whether it is frameworks or whatever, those things (Mangi, middle manager).

We are working as far as the prescript requires. So, when the prescript change, then we will change (Owen, middle manager).

The excerpts by Mangi and Owen above suggest that middle managers were required to make sense of the changes in the frameworks and prescripts that guide their work. Some viewed the scope of work as limiting, given that everything was conceptualised within predetermined parameters. Some middle managers referred to the bureaucratic

nature of the case department as indicated in the quote below by Sindiso, one of the middle managers:

Bureaucracy. It's bureaucracy. It's signatures. It's people not understanding that, as a middle manager, you also have a vision. A bigger vision lies somewhere in the age or the number of years in the department or ... you must be old to have a vision (Sindiso, middle manager).

What also became apparent from Sindiso's quote was that there seemed to be a belief that older people might have a better vision for the future than younger ones. However, there was also a view that the department's operational process makes it difficult to innovate or change things. This is because the organisation is required to work within the confines of the strategic plan. Middle managers therefore find it hard to express themselves and innovate, as indicated by Mangi, one of the middle managers.

So, it's kind of difficult to actually innovate (Mangi, middle manager).

The researcher observed that some middle managers felt despondent or disempowered, as one middle manager expressed:

You can't make things happen (Steven, middle manager).

When referring to the bureaucratic nature of the institution one participant explained:

It does not deal with your innovations, address your innovations and creativity, because there's a mandate and you must stick to the mandate (Peter, director).

Another participant said:

Now the negative part is sometimes the ... actually, most of the time the red tape is too long. We take forever waiting for permission about things that should be happening (Kgosi, middle manager).

Yet another participant shared how middle managers do not sit in on strategic meetings:

I think it's just traditions of bureaucracy where middle managers don't sit in those strategy sessions (Suzan, director).

In describing how work was determined, another middle manager explained that work was determined by already established systematic ways:

You [middle manager] have to follow processes because most of the things we [middle managers] do, you'll know, they are systematic, so we have to follow that thing [Mangi, middle manager].

Another director added, "somebody [is] thinking and your job is to execute" (Peter, director), confirming that in a bureaucratic system, a top-down approach is dominant with limited involvement of middle managers. One of the directors in the case department confirmed this:

And, as you know, we get instructions from above and when they come like that you also take them down to the officials (Sydney, director).

The study found that middle managers are often isolated as explained by one of the directors:

[B]ecause of the management culture in the department, we isolate them a bit for them not to know what happened and that's why sometimes they don't ... as I experienced, they're not close to the fire (Mark, director).

Understandably, the isolation of middle managers could be attributed to their position in the hierarchy. The findings revealed that participating middle managers were not involved in executive management meetings where crucial information about the operation of the department was shared.

Mark, a director, added that, apart from isolating middle managers in the case department, there was a tendency of poor information flow in the department. Mark suggested that the lack of proper information flow was a systematic challenge not only for middle managers:

There's no information flow in the department that everyone knows exactly what's happening, what's the experience with top management, and I think that's a problem in the department. And also for the deputy directors as well (Mark, director).

A concerning finding was how some participants referred to responsibility and accountability as lacking features at middle manager level. Mark suggested that it could be the result of a culture developed over the years.

Maybe it's a culture that we develop in our department or in our branch. I don't know what's happening in other departments but that's what happened over years. And we must get back that they can take full responsibility and accountability. That's my honest opinion (Mark, director).

In addition, in the current study, data suggests that in a bureaucratic system, the location of accountability is with directors as they have a direct influence on the work of middle managers who wait for directions from the directors. Steven explains:

You're [middle manager] almost waiting for somebody up there to provide that direction because that's also where the accountability lies, because most of the accountability lies at the senior management levels as opposed to the middle management levels or the junior levels (Steven, middle manager).

Mangi added that, although work is guided by priorities as contained in the NDP and other strategic documents of the department, budget determines priority.

We are guided by affordability, practicality of things. We do things that don't really make educational sense but make financial sense (Mangi, middle manager).

(b) Political influence

The findings revealed that middle managers work within a highly politicised environment. Some directors described the tensions they were experiencing at the time and how labour unions influenced the working environment as such unions play a key role as stakeholders in the education sector:

The problem with the field of the education sector in South Africa is that it's highly politicised ... unionised, let me put it that way. There is nothing wrong with unions. However, there are those who would like to use unions to conceal their laziness (Aluwani, director).

But in the government ... their [middle managers'] space is highly politicised (Peter, director).

Aluwani further suggested that some middle managers who belong to certain political structures tend to abuse their union affiliation:

Some [middle managers] feel that they can do as they wish because they are members of unions (Aluwani, director).

Bongani, one of the directors, shared that one needs to be wary when working with middle managers who belong to a trade union:

[W]hen you are working with a trade unionist you must always be on guard (Bongani, director).

Another participating director felt that middle managers were perhaps using their union standing to influence issues in the department, as expressed in the quote below:

Maybe some of them, they are also using their union standing to have more say in issues of government, especially in the department (Peter, director).

The researcher found this interesting, as it revealed how middle managers use alternative ways of gaining additional power and influence on certain issues, as described by directors.

The researcher also observed how middle managers discussed how changes in the political environment influenced their work either positively or negatively. For example, Owen, a middle manager at the time, suggested that when there are changes in political office bearers, such as the minister, there is a knowledge gap about the work of a particular section in the department:

Now and then, when there are political changes in different ministries, that is when you encounter a little bit of problems because the new minister on that other end may not be well aware of [the unit's] activities (Owen, middle manager).

Another middle manager shared about the struggles they faced when visiting schools as part of their work. Thembi described how she experienced non-cooperation by the union shop stewards:

And whilst we were at the school, the union site stewards came to tell us that we were not welcome at the school because ... what do they call it? Their 'non-cooperation stance towards the department' (Thembi, middle manager).

Thembi further described the tensions experienced between middle managers and unions and how it affected their work:

There's always this attitude that no official should get into the classroom and that is the stance that unions take. And, so, we didn't want to upset them by getting into this territory that is so protected (Thembi, middle manager).

Steven, a middle manager, indicated how the process involved much negotiation and this created a very challenging and complex environment. At times, unions seem to dictate the work done by the department:

[S]o, this process is a process which has to be negotiated with the social partners or the unions and that makes it slightly complex because you can't just run with the process on your own. You have to do what you have to do then wait for them. But the waiting is in the sense that you [middle manager] wait for a time when you can meet with them [social partners] and then you can present the work that you have done. They make inputs, and they may request you to go back and do some extra work which will satisfy their constituency or what they think is appropriate (Steven, middle manager).

(c) Negative organisational culture

The researcher observed how middle managers conducted their strategising work within a negative organisational culture. The factors that contributed towards the negative organisational culture appeared to be inherent and imbedded in the culture of the department under study. Again, the negative organisational culture was framed from the views of both the middle managers and their immediate supervisors.

There was a view by directors that middle managers within the department were not elevated to a position where they could be innovative. Interestingly, one of the participating directors acknowledged that it could be a system deficiency that middle managers appear to be suppressed, as explained by Pule:

[M]aybe it is systemic that they are ... I don't know if ... it will be a wrong concept to use to say they are suppressed. They are not sort of elevated to the point where they initiate things and then, from there, things can happen (Pule, director).

In line with Pule, Peter explained:

[B]ecause in the department, if you are a DCES [deputy chief education specialist] or you are a CES [Chief Education Specialist], whether you are the deputy director, you're almost just a tool to execute the functions without thinking (Peter, director).

Adding to the views of directors, Mangi (middle manager) acknowledged the difficulty to innovate in the department

[I]t's kind of difficult to actually innovate (Mangi, middle manager).

Another participant, Rodney, suggested that there was a culture of managing through fear, which created an environment where middle managers were working under duress.

We tend to stifle and we tend to manage through fear and you're not gonna achieve your broader societal objectives if the people that must implement are guided by principles of fear: fear of failure, fear of making mistakes (Rodney, director).

Rodney added that middle managers are "almost scared sometimes to take that next step" which creates the impression that they work under fear. Bongani, another participant, added that there was a belief that directors viewed themselves as the owners of the directorates, which could exacerbate the perception of managing-through-fear approach. He said:

Like with broad management, I will always say these things to say let us not view ourselves as people who own the directorate (Bongani, director).

Data revealed that middle managers were often side-lined as they were not included in most of the executive decision-making sessions. Middle managers are therefore not privy to certain information about the operation of the department. Suzan, a director in the department, mentioned this could be due to the bureaucratic nature of the organisation:

I think it's just traditions of bureaucracy where middle managers don't sit in those strategy sessions (Suzan, director)

During the latter stages of the data analysis process, a concerning theme emerged associated with forced implementation. Seemingly, middle managers were forced to implement decisions. One participant said:

Sometimes you implement something that you [are] totally against but you have to implement (Mangi, middle manager).

Dipuo, one of the middle managers, suggested that there were instances where directors and other senior managers forced middle managers to do things out of prescripts:

When senior management forces us to do things that are not according to the prescripts (Dipuo, middle manager).

This was an interesting find, which suggested that directors, given their position of power, could overpower middle managers and exert their powerful identities at times. Middle managers consequently resort to 'comply mode' once overpowered, as reflected in the quote below:

And once they have made a decision, you have to ... even if you are against that decision but you have to comply and implement (Mangi, middle manager).

It appears that power dynamics between directors and middle managers had an influence on the work of middle managers.

Middle managers often referred to how overworked they were, and how capacity was an issue in their work space. Some of the middle managers suggested that there was a capacity issue, which was compounded by the workload, as reflected in the quotes below:

But at the same time, there are those crunch times where, yes, work is overloaded, especially now with the two, three branches. It's slightly heavy but I don't mind (Collen, middle manager).

There isn't enough time. There's too much to do. I think what makes my work difficult is I think we don't have enough capacity in our unit (Cynthia, middle manager).

Mpho shared same sentiments that a lack of human resource capacity led to middle managers being over-worked. Mpho was quoted as saying:

I'm saying it's like we work twenty-four hours (Mpho, middle manager).

Based on the opinions of the participating middle managers, there was evidence to suggest that middle managers in the department under study suffered from work overload due to, among others, a lack of capacity.

In this category, middle managers raised concerns about the culture of working in silos. Most of the responses from both directors and middle managers suggested that there was a lot of pockets of work within the department with limited or no synergy, as expressed in the following quotes:

But I think also we can't deny the fact that the system works in silos (John, middle manager).

I've seen that too many people work in silos, protecting the knowledge that they've gained, the intellectual capacity that they've gained, which is actually sad (Collen, middle manager).

But currently, there's this concept of working in silos. But I think it's a common government problem (Steven, middle manager).

Mangi, one of the directors, suggested, "working in silos leads to a lack of synergy in what the various parts of the department are doing" (Mangi, middle manager).

(d) Creating an enabling environment (recommendations)

Many participants, both at director and middle management levels, provided recommendations for ways to improve the working environment to enable a better working relationship between these two levels.

For example, there is a strong view that middle managers in the department should be allowed to "lead" (Peter, director). The recommendation to allow middle managers to lead suggests that middle managers are currently not leading. In addition, one of the participants, added that middle managers "must be allowed to manage in the department" (Lwazi, director).

Data further revealed that middle managers expected directors to guide them from a strategic point of view. Mangi said:

But I have a view that directors should provide strategic guidance on what needs to happen, that they should have sufficient body of knowledge and expertise on what is required (Mangi, middle manager).

As indicated earlier, middle managers in the department are not part of the strategic planning sessions. There was therefore a recommendation that middle managers should be part of the strategic sessions of the department, as indicated by Ngwako:

Deputy directors [or middle managers] are supposed to be part of the strategic planning meetings of the Department of Basic Education, which is not something that is happening now (Ngwako, middle manager).

Moreover, there was a call that middle managers should “be empowered to work independently” (Mpho, middle manager), including having their own sessions with the director-general of the department, as indicated by Dipuo below:

Deputy director[s] [or middle managers] can have their own meeting with the DG as well so that he knows things (Dipuo, middle manager).

One of the directors supported the call for a middle management forum with the director-general. Notably, at the time of the study, the department was in the process of establishing a middle management forum. Lwazi added that this would be a platform where middle managers discuss strategic issues and share views with the accounting officer. Lwazi also indicated that the department was in a process “to establish a forum for deputy directors and to write terms of reference” (Lwazi, director).

Middle managers expressed the need for constant feedback about the work that was delegated to them, as expressed by. Thembi:

Work gets delegated. You never get any feedback on whether you’re done that work well or not, and the only time that you will get to know that you didn’t do well it’s when you sit for the performance assessment (Thembi, middle manager).

The above discussion highlights aspects that directors and middle managers recommend would improve the functioning of middle managers. The next section highlights the efforts of some directors in creating a more enabling environment.

Some directors discussed how they believed in frequent meetings with their middle managers (deputy directors), which would allow middle managers to add their views before decisions are taken. This is what Bongani and Rodney said:

I (usually) believe in meeting every Monday, especially with the [middle manager] (Bongani, director).

And then I believe in fairness. I need to hear the other voice before I can form my own opinion. Walking in the shoes of somebody else is something that's important for me before I make a judgement (Rodney, director).

As data analysis continued, the researcher noted that some directors encouraged shared decision-making, and one of the directors explained that some of the sections in the department allow middle managers to make some of the decisions. Sinazo and Bongani said:

So, I think working with them on a daily basis you also give them room to decide on some of the things based on their vision but also based on their safety elements and caution and avoiding of risk and things like that (Sinazo, director).

Every Monday we sit down and we set out some kind of ... our plan for the week and indicate whether ... how committed am I or are there any conflicting dates and so forth, ... (Bongani, director).

This view was supported by one of the middle managers who suggested that there should be joint ownership of strategic outputs of the section. Steven said:

I'm just saying it [middle management position] could possibly be sharpened if there was joint ownership and joint responsibility for the outputs, based on the work that we're doing (Steven, middle manager).

There is a view that middle managers must be given freedom of expression and allow them to operate the best way possible. Thabo, as the director, said:

I allow them to operate as best as they deem fit (Thabo, director).

Some of the middle managers supported this view by suggesting the need to allow them (i.e. middle managers) to operate the best way they deem fit. This would make it easy and there is an element of growth as well:

[A] smart manager should be able to say develop your subject improvement plan, the strategic plan, meaning where they are, where they want their subjects to move to, what is it that they think will work for improving their subjects (Mpho, middle manager).

So, when you have a situation in which you are allowed to do things the best of your capacity, it's much easier because then it enables you to grow much faster (Owen, middle manager).

The researcher further noted that closing the communication gap between middle managers and directors as well as other senior managers has some added benefits. Steven, a middle manager, suggested that constant feedback provides a sense of awareness in terms of workflow:

I found that when there was constant feedback between me and my supervisor in the past, the work flowed more smoothly and we were always aware of what I'm doing and what the expectations are (Steven, middle manager).

Another middle manager added that communication with middle managers on progress and shortfalls should be on a monthly basis. Mangi added by saying:

They probably should, on a month-to-month basis, communicate that assist [middle managers] as to know this month we did not do well here, how can we improve so that? And don't wait for after three months and then say, no, in August this did not happen (Mangi, middle manager).

What became apparent is that middle managers wanted the communication to be at individual level. Apart from the generic meetings, there should therefore be meetings with individual middle managers to assess progress and chart the way forward. Thembi said:

But I think with [middle manager] who have this mammoth role to play, those one-on-one engagements will help us to also improve in the way in which we execute our duties (Thembi, middle manager).

The responses from participants under this section revealed some of the recommendations shared by middle managers and their immediate supervisors on how certain practices could enable middle managers' strategising work. In the next section, the researcher discusses hindering practices.

(e) Hindering practices

This section sets out to discuss those practices that serve as hindrances to middle managers' strategising work.

One of the middle managers explained how the lack of accountability at the level of middle manager hinders the work of middle managers:

[Y]ou're almost waiting for somebody up there to provide that direction because that's also where the accountability lies, because most of the accountability lies at the senior management levels as opposed to the middle management levels or the junior levels (Steven, middle manager).

Middle managers therefore rely on the directors for direction on what needs to be done. Steven further suggested that when there is no ownership at middle management level, there is an effect on their attitude when doing their work. Steven added:

[E]ven though you may play a role in addressing a question or finding a solution to a challenge or responding to a question, the ownership does not lie with you; it lies with someone who's at the senior management level. And that's a bit of a challenge for me, I think, because I think that may impact on your attitude and your approach to work (Steven, middle manager).

Certain power dynamics between directors and middle managers seem to create an environment where middle managers feel disempowered. For example, Bongani, one of the directors, suggested that directors could impose themselves as the most powerful person:

But I know that sometimes directors now they've got also their own shortcomings in the sense that a director sees himself or herself most of the time as the person who's the alpha and the omega, the person to say that I'm Bongani, I'm the director, and my word is final (Bongani, director).

In addition, a view was expressed, that middle managers, in the absence of a director, are powerless and cannot make things happen, leading to their frustration.

But, lastly, you also have a challenge of authority around themselves [middle managers] that, when you are not in office, unless it is clearly a delegated and written

text, they get frustrated because they don't have a delegated powers of the director (Collen, director).

Collen added:

But on a daily basis the powers of the director are not delegated to the [middle manager] deputy director. They are not. The deputy directors remain with their programme work but they don't assume the authority of the director because a director is not in the office. That's the frustration that they might also be undergoing (Collen, director).

One of the middle managers also indicated that the views of a middle manager, considered to a limited extent:

But, having said that, I've also learnt that in the public service, if you are not a director upwards, if you're not a senior manager, I think they call them senior managers in the public service, your input is valued but it is to a limited extent. You can't make things happen. So, you need approval or support from people above you to make things happen or for things to move in a particular way to the extent that you are not able sometimes to provide the direction which you think is appropriate to be taken (Steven, middle manager).

4.4.1.1. Conclusion to the organisational context theme

The organisational context theme discussed above presented a complex environment, and at times, the researcher observed how participants described a rather hostile environment, which emanated from various political influences.

As could be expected, the department under study followed a top-down approach in conducting its business with middle managers at operational level, given the bureaucratic nature of the organisation. The researcher observed how middle managers in the department were concerned about the lack of accountability or responsibility of middle managers in the department. The pre-existing practices that were either deliberate or emerging as the department continued to evolve, influenced the work of middle managers. Some of those practices were typically inherently bureaucratic and politically inclined. Such practices included the deliberate exclusion of middle managers in strategic sessions, and the lack of power and authority given to middle managers. Therefore, it can be said that, at the time of this study, the

department had a set of established practices within the organisational environment that had an influence on how things were being done. There was evidence to suggest that the bureaucratic system had systematic deficiencies that influenced the work of middle managers.

In addition, middle managers also faced an array of factors that contributed towards a negative organisational culture as they engaged in strategising work. Middle managers shared that they felt overworked at times, and also felt they did not always receive the support they needed. Middle managers shared how they were affected by a 'silo' way of doing work and that they felt suppressed due to the lack of accountability and responsibility given to them. Finally, the hierarchal isolation of middle managers was evident as confirmed by the responses from both directors and middle managers.

Many of the participants, both middle managers and their immediate supervisors, shared the challenges they experienced within their department openly and provided recommendations on how to improve the working relationship between the various levels within the department. The key aspects they highlighted, which could improve their working situation included: being able to share their views openly, and creating an environment where constant feedback and ongoing communication were encouraged in order to make their workflow seamlessly. In addition, middle managers believed that, if they could form part of a bigger whole, including participation in strategic sessions, they would be enabled to do their strategising work. Finally, a shared identity between middle managers and the department under study was also seen as an important enabling factor.

Factors that hindered middle managers in their day-to-day work reflected three main issues, namely –

- a lack of communication between directors and middle managers;
- power dynamics, which reflected directors exhibiting a powerful and at times imposing individual identity;
- a lack of accountability of middle managers; and
- lack of authority to act independently.

It was further noted that, at the time, middle managers were understood to have limited or no authority to act or perform certain tasks on their own without the approval of their

supervisors. This finding resonated with practices in a typical bureaucratic organisation (Ashard, Ullah, & Malik, 2021).

Section 4.4.2 discusses the identity dynamics evident within the department and described by the participants.

4.4.2 Identity dynamics

A key part of this study was to observe identity dynamics within the department under study, and how these were revealed through stories shared by both middle managers and their immediate supervisors that were interviewed. Subsequently, the theme 'identity dynamics' was central to the current study. The main categories that emerged at this point of the analysis were:

- how directors perceived middle managers as strategy practitioners;
- how middle managers perceived themselves ('I am');
- the expectations of what middle managers 'should be'; and
- the category 'identity work', which related to how middle managers constructed their identity in terms of career progression and self-enhancement.

Table 13 presents the main theme and the four categories that emerged from the data.

Table 13: Identity dynamics theme table

Main themes	Categories	Codes
Identity dynamics (middle managers as strategy practitioners)	Identity as perceived by directors: How directors perceive middle managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle managers are critical • Occupy strategic position • Specialists • Lack of experience • Must take initiative and ownership
	How middle managers perceive themselves ('I am')	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencers • Professional technicians • Specialists • Knowledgeable thinkers • Supervisors
	Identity as 'should be' Expectations of how middle managers 'should be'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must innovate • Be specialists and strategists • Independent • Act as directors • Take decisions • Analysts
	Identity work: identity construction (self-enhancement)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career aspiration • Career consolidation • Growth and maturity • Personal development

Source: Own compilation

In this section, the researcher focused on the dominant pattern of codes that emerged relating to the multi-level dynamics between directors and middle managers in the case department. Section 4.4.2.1 first discusses the key findings relating to the perception of middle managers by their immediate supervisors, the directors.

4.4.2.1 Identity of middle managers as a strategy practitioners, as perceived by directors

This sub-section discusses the categories and codes that emerged when directors shared their perception of the middle managers as strategy practitioners and discussed the middle manager's role within the department. Table 14 below presents the codes and categories associated with this theme.

Table 14: Identity as perceived category and codes

Main themes	Categories	Codes
Identity dynamics	Identity as perceived by directors: How directors perceive middle managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle managers are critical • Occupy strategic position • Specialists • Lack of experience • Must take initiative and ownership

Source: Own compilation

As explained in Chapter 1 (see section 1.1), the directors are the immediate supervisors of middle managers in the department under study. When describing middle managers within the department, directors used descriptors such as “work horses”, “where content knowledge resides”, “middle managers as specialists”, “a position which is both strategic and operational but most importantly an influential position” and finally “an engine room”. Some of these directors indicated that middle managers are crucial in the sense that without them the department would cease to exist. This signifies the importance of these strategy practitioners in the operation of the department under study, as expressed by one of the participants:

I often refer to them as the engine room that does the work (Rodney, director).

The response by Rodney suggested that, at the time, middle managers were at the heart of operation, which is what most of the directors understood them to be.

Thabo, a director, shared similar sentiments and expressed:

[M]iddle managers are actually the engine of government; they are the engine of the bureaucracy. It is on their shoulders that we all stand or fall (Thabo, director).

Suzan, another director said it was not surprising that “the work of the department is literally driven by its middle managers” (Suzan, director).

A number of directors highlighted the critical role that middle managers played in the department.

These are workhorses. These are the people who make things to happen (Aluwani, director).

So, they carry the department (Suzan, director).

No middle management, no department. We wouldn't exist (Suzan, director).

So, the long and short of it now is that middle managers are quite critical (Bongani, director).

I think they are very crucial level of management within the department (Sydney, director).

There was a view that middle managers are “essential to the department” (Rodney, director). One of the directors indicated that it would not be easy to operate without the middle managers in the department:

My view is that, as for me, life will be very much difficult operating without middle managers (Aluwani, director).

Rodney indicated:

[W]ithout middle managers, I don't think we will be able to achieve our objectives (Rodney, director).

Peter, one of the participating directors, viewed middle managers as “key ... but also strategically positioned to influence decisions”. Pule added to the view of middle managers as strategic –

They are the bedrock for policy formulation, for support and anchoring the directorates (Pule, director).

Most of the directors therefore shared the same sentiments about how critical middle managers were in the department. Middle managers occupied strategic positions, which influenced the strategic outcome of the organisation.

As data analysis continued, there seemed to be consensus among the directors that middle managers were the specialists in their areas of work. Most of the responses expressed similar sentiments. See, for instance, remarks by Mark and Sydney below:

[B]ecause actually they are the specialists in an institution (Mark, director).

[I]n most instances, these are your specialists and therefore their role is very critical (Sydney, director).

Another director went on to label middle managers as strategists who manage strategy from the development phase right through to its implementation:

In my area of work, my strategists are my deputy directors and my assistant directors. They are my strategists (Suzan, director).

Suzan added:

[M]iddle managers are part of the strategy developers of the department and, in this case, in this one ... they are part of delivering on that strategy (Suzan, director).

From the onset of the interviews, Mark and Robert appeared to be worried about the lack of experience of some of the middle managers in their current role:

But the problem is I'm sitting with thirty-nine years' experience. Some of these deputy directors are young guys and I cannot expect them to have the same kind of background knowledge that I am. So, what I'm trying to do every day is to transfer this knowledge to them because I'm not going to be here forever (Mark, director).

Because most of the deputy directors that I'm working with are people who have not been in this department for quite a very long time (Robert, director).

While directors emphasised the crucial role the middle managers played within the department, they also shared areas where they felt middle managers could improve and where work is needed. One director expressed how often middle managers in the department were just tools to execute decision without thinking. Peter said:

[B]ecause in the department, if you are a [DCE] or you are a [CES], whether you are the deputy director, you're almost just a tool to execute the functions without thinking (Peter, director).

Other participating directors felt that middle managers were not putting enough effort into their work, which resulted in a lack of ownership from their side:

My biggest challenge is that I sometimes feel people don't really put enough effort, that there is typically lack of ownership of the programmes that they do (Edward, director).

[M]iddle managers do not always realise the importance and how critical a[n] issue is if I'm going to say will you please do this for me, this is the return date, I want this to be finished by such a date (Mark, director).

Various directors discussed the dynamics within the department and how this affected the middle managers negatively. Peter explained:

[T]here are many of the deputy directors who are clever but, because they are quiet, they just do what they are told and keep quiet (Peter, director).

Another participating director suggested that middle managers work in an environment where they felt scared:

They are almost scared sometimes to take that next step and that, for me, is therefore important as a director because I don't want people to be scared to make mistakes (Rodney, director).

One of the directors referred to the middle managers as "glorified clerks":

A deputy director – nowadays I see them [become] a glorified clerk. That's my honest view that I see happening, especially in our department (Mark, director).

This signals that middle managers are not at the level where they are expected to be in terms of their work as indicated below:

Many of them here not there, they are redundant because their brains have been removed by the nature of the operations of the system. And the unfortunate part is that that is how government operates (Peter, director).

Managers further indicated an array of negative views about middle managers, which were mostly operational and also about their professional conduct. Some managers felt that middle managers struggled to meet deadlines but acknowledged that the environment within which they worked exacerbated the problem. Another negative view related to their availability and coming late. It was clear that middle managers were not always available when needed. Aluwani added:

You can still find a deputy director who is lazy, who doesn't even come to work (Aluwani, director).

There was also a view that, although these middle managers were seen as specialists, they did not understand other management issues, such as managing conflict or performance assessment of lower-level staff. Middle managers were therefore

focused on their core functions while they neglected the auxiliary functions that came with the post, as explained by Lwazi:

[W]hen you ask middle managers about soft matters, how to deal with conflict, how to manage, they don't have ... especially in here (Lwazi, director).

Lwazi also indicated that middle managers "are lacking in other areas, areas of management. Not the technical part of it but the management part of it, managing resources". One of the directors added that middle managers often compete for promotion, which then affects teamwork.

The other challenge [is that] you'll find it very difficult to make them work as a team ... It's like people are already in a succession planning that says I'm better than this, so if this director moves I'll be the next one (Edward, director).

One participant suggested that middle managers could submit work of poor quality because they might not be the accountable persons, knowing that the manager concerned will carry the responsibility.

So, one can give you a poor quality of work knowing that they are not the final authority in that (Edward, director).

The researcher noted that middle managers in the department, even when afforded opportunities to be part of the meetings, did not actively participate in meetings. Peter added to this by saying:

Because the element, the syndrome that we have created of dependence, that they depend on the directors and the chief directors, make them not to respond to some of these things, make them not to be effective in meetings because they were taught that only the director and the ... (Peter, director).

This suggested that middle managers might not have embraced their identity as strategists optimally because of practices or culture in the department under study. This was confirmed by Mark who suggested that hierarchy segregated middle managers:

I think they are too far removed from fire (Mark, director).

4.4.2.2 Conclusion to identity dynamics

In the current study, middle managers were perceived by directors as critical in meeting the strategic obligations of the department. They were often referred to as the ‘engine room’ of the operation and more explicitly, the strategists who occupy strategic positions of influence. The findings revealed that the middle management level required occupants of the position to act strategically within the department from conception of a plan until implementation of strategies. However, directors expressed areas where they felt middle managers struggled and lacked certain competencies required of them and their role as strategy practitioners, such as the ability to manage certain aspects of discipline. Although middle managers have limited authority, they are referred to, by their immediate supervisors, as ‘strategists’ occupying positions of influence, up and down the hierarchy.

4.4.3 How middle managers perceived themselves, as strategy practitioners

This sub-section focuses on how middle managers perceived themselves, in their role as strategy practitioners. Table 15 below provides the codes that made up the category linked to the main theme:

Table 15: Identity as perceived by middle managers

Main themes	Category	Codes
Identity dynamics	How middle managers perceive themselves ('I am')	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Influencers• Professional technicians• Specialists• Knowledgeable thinkers• Supervisors

Source: Own compilation

Section 4.4.2.1 discussed the perceptions of middle managers as viewed by directors, who were their immediate supervisors. This section discusses the perception of how middle managers viewed themselves as strategy practitioners.

During the interviews, middle managers were asked to share about their role as a deputy director and how they viewed themselves as strategists. Ngwako emphasised the importance of their role:

My role here as a [middle manager] it's fundamental in the sense that...you must realise that when you are a [middle manager] at a national office, there is no other

[middle manager] in the whole country who is tasked with doing what you are doing for the country,... (Ngwako, middle manager).

One of the middle managers referred to three groups of middle managers within the department under study, linked to the type of job they do within the department. Sindiso differentiated between these groups:

In the department, we have different middle managers. There are those who are purely on administration, there are those that are purely on content, and there's a hybrid. I would consider myself as a hybrid. How do they see you? They see you how well do you know your content? That's the determining factor. If you are just a person who processes things, if you are just a person who receive an email and forward, receive a document without engaging, don't conceptualise things, that's how they will see you (Sindiso, middle manager).

Although there are no formal documents describing the three groups of middle managers referred to above, people within the department seemed to distinguish between these three groups.

From the onset, one of the middle managers expressed an interesting view regarding the management role of middle managers. In essence, there is a view that middle managers are not managers but rather project coordinators, as described by Mangi:

I'm coordinating particular projects, but I don't see myself as being, in a true sense of the word, a manager. But I do manage particular functions (Mangi, middle manager).

Another view by a middle manager is that middle managers influence the work of the department under study through innovation and policy discourse. Cynthia further indicated that middle managers represented government well:

I see myself as a contributor to the other side, the people who do work, who can think, who innovate, who influence good policy, who can present well, who speak well, who write well. So, for me, being in the DBE means representing government well, the way I hope everyone aspires to do (Cynthia, middle manager).

As data analysis progressed, some middle managers confirmed the views of the directors who see middle managers as specialists. This is what John said about how he views middle managers:

Then become the specialist in that particular field. So, that is how I see my job, as the specialist in that field of [subject] (John, middle manager).

Sindiso added that the main defining factor in middle management is the specialisation cap, as expressed below:

A metrics is ... it has three elements. One, you are an administrator. You are a manager with a coating of specialisation. That's how I view a middle manager. The overlaying coating is your specialisation. Because, as I was saying before, I'm a generalist but now I can tell you, I was able to specialise on something, that's what government does. You are able to be pushed into something that you will eventually become a master (Sindiso, middle manager).

Cynthia expressed the diverse roles that middle managers play:

[A] professional technocrat, I'm a researcher, I'm an evaluator, I'm a public servant (Cynthia, middle manager).

The view by Cynthia above suggests that the identity of middle managers, as strategy practitioners, could be viewed from the perspective of the role they play within the organisation.

Middle managers viewed themselves as valuable human capital. For example, Ngwako (middle manager) viewed himself as "an intellectual". Kgosi added by saying

We [middle managers] are thinkers. We [middle managers] can think, we can apply our mind, if the DBE can respect that (Kgosi, middle manager).

The findings highlight the supervisory role of middle managers and how they are situated as the layer between lower-level and high-level management, as described by Sindiso (middle manager):

So, your role as a middle manager is to ... you are a layer between your lower-level administration and a bit higher-level of management, so in between [...].

As a result of their position within the hierarchy, Cynthia (middle manager) added that middle managers manage up and down. From below, there are lower-level staff members and upward, there are senior managers. Another middle manager added to this observation:

Sometimes, you [middle manager] need to manage your own supervisors (Mangi, middle manager).

Findings confirmed the traditional view, which suggests that middle managers are implementers (Salih & Doll, 2013). One of the middle managers expressed his frustration at being viewed as an implementing agent only:

Organisationally we're called middle managers but, from where I'm at, I just think we're just implementing agencies but not really on a strategic level (Mangi, middle manager).

Sindiso highlighted the implementation role when it comes to policy

One of the requirements of the deputy director is policy development, policy implementation, policy monitoring (Sindiso, middle manager).

Most of the responses from middle managers confirmed that participating middle managers were at implementation level.

4.4.3.1 Conclusion to how middle managers viewed themselves

A dominant theme that emerged was that the middle managers viewed themselves as the link between the lower-level and high-level management structures. There is a common understanding among middle managers that they hold a crucial position with the ability to influence the outcomes of the department. Most importantly, middle managers see themselves as specialists who have expert knowledge about production level. Again, the responses by middle managers suggested that middle managers have strategic influence towards the work of the department. However, commonalities between the responses of middle managers and their immediate supervisors confirm that middle managers are valuable strategy practitioners within the department under study. The middle managers' views of themselves were at personal level with some middle managers describing themselves as 'professional technocrats'.

Throughout the interviews, both middle managers and their immediate supervisors often referred to how middle managers were expected to behave or the roles they were expected to play and therefore the theme 'identity as should be' relates to the core competencies that directors and middle manager believed middle managers were

required to have. Section 4.4.3.2 discusses the theme related to the expectations of how middle managers 'should be'.

4.4.3.2 Identity as 'should be'

Table 16 provides codes that make up the identity as it 'should be' category:

Table 16: Identity as it 'should be' theme

Main themes	Category	Codes
Identity dynamics	Identity as "should be": Expectations of how middle manager 'should be'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must innovate • Be specialists and strategists • Independent • Act as directors • Take decisions • Analysts

Source: Own compilation

This section presents the findings relating to how middle managers are expected to behave and function within the department. At this point in the analysis, the researcher could compare the views of how middle managers were functioning at the time of the study in terms of the expectations that directors had of middle managers in relation to their role.

This current section first presents the expectations of middle managers by their immediate supervisors.

There is a view, as expressed by one of the directors, suggesting that at the time of this study, middle managers did not represent the specialist role, including making independent decisions as expected. Mark, one of the directors, said:

And I think we need to go back to that situation where your deputy director is really the specialist, kind of a person who can make an independent decision.

Interestingly, Peter suggested that middle managers should be allowed to be part of strategic decisions:

Let's allow the [middle managers] to be part of the strategic decisions (Peter, director).

Mark cited that middle managers should be innovative and understand what is happening around the department:

I think they must be innovative, they must know what's happening in the department, they must know what [are] the needs of the department, and become innovative and take charge, take the lead, because they should be the specialist (Mark, director).

In addition to being innovative, directors mentioned that they wanted to see middle managers taking initiative, aligned with the vision and the strategic intent of the department, as expressed by Rodney:

I would like to see a situation where middle managers are not scared to take initiative, but it is initiative that has a solid foundation on the [the vision and the strategic intent of the department] (Rodney, director).

Responses from directors also suggested that, at crucial times where directors are not available, middle managers should be elevated to perform at the level of the director. Directors expressed the need for middle managers to feel empowered to assume the responsibilities of the director. This was expressed by a number of participants:

I do feel that they can possibly be at a level of a director (Sinazo, director).

We need to rely on them in the absence of the directors (Lwazi, director).

[I]n the absence of the director they [middle managers] are supposed to take a certain limited responsibility (Robert, director).

Thabo was one of the directors who supported the view that middle managers should assume the full responsibilities of a director and ensure continuity of operational functions of the directorate:

They should do that and, if the director is not in the office, it is incumbent on them as the middle managers to function at the level that should be seen here so that they are able to steady the ship and work must proceed as if the director is in the office (Thabo, director).

Directors also indicated that middle managers should not be shy to use their authority in the absence of the director:

[M]iddle managers [...] must act with the authority that they are accorded and that authority must not ... they must not be shy to use that authority and say this is a

decision that I have taken at the time when you are not here and I will have to deal with it, I'll have to support [...] (Thabo, director).

In addition, Mark (director) also wanted to see a middle manager who has more responsibilities. He said:

[Middle managers] should have more responsibilities because many years ago, a deputy director was the person in the department who's actually doing the job.

There was a suggestion that middle managers should be given more authority and be empowered to manage processes such as assessments of lower-level staff.

So, therefore, you [middle managers] must be given responsibilities, management [...] you must go to your supervisor and say that here are the assessment documents of all the staff, if you are the only deputy director (Lwazi, director).

There was an interesting view that middle managers should take ownership of the work of the directorate, suggesting that there has been a lack of ownership by middle managers. Lwazi said:

I think they must assume more responsibilities in terms of taking ownership of the targets, of the deliverables, of the directorate (Lwazi, director).

Edward (director) added to the view above, namely that middle managers "should run their projects like they are their own directors in that area and forget about anybody above them".

Mark (director) added an interesting view, namely that a middle manager should be a "kind of a person who can make an independent decision". Mark suggested that middle managers should be allowed to be independent decision-makers.

The researcher noted a pattern of responses aligned to the view that middle managers should be independent. There seemed to be consensus that middle managers should not wait for their managers to tell them what to do, as Peter and Mark added:

You don't have to wait for a manager to tell you this is how you can solve a problem (Peter, director).

They should not wait for a director or chief director to instruct them what to do (Mark, director).

These were the expectations from the directors about how they see the role of middle managers in the department.

There was a call for parity in post levels among middle managers who are professional specialists. John, one of the middle managers, said:

[E]ven in our posts, we should not be deputy directors, we should be CESs because it's a professional function.

Apart from the call for parity in middle managers' positions, middle managers are hoping to be strategists in their area of work, as expressed by Mpho:

So, if they are empowered to develop a strategy that will improve their subjects, so I think that will work, rather than being told what to do as that is the order of the day (Mpho, middle manager).

Sindiso (middle manager) added that middle managers, "need to be more at a strategic level from [conceptualising]...". Dipuo (middle manager) echoed these sentiments by saying, "they should be at a strategic level". The responses by both Sindiso and Dipuo suggested that there was limited involvement of middle managers at the time of this study, in particular during initial stages of strategising.

Ngwako, a middle manager, argued that middle managers should be part of the strategic planning session of the department:

[D]eputy directors are supposed to be part of the strategic planning meetings of the Department of Basic Education, which is not something that is happening now.

Cynthia (middle manager) indicated that middle managers should become analysts rather than just administrators.

I think they could elevate their work and become analysts rather than just administrators.

Contrary to the views of directors, there was a view that middle manager should be driving policy:

At policy level, deputy directors should be the one driving policy (Sindiso, middle manager).

In addition, data revealed that middle managers should be independent, and act with authority in relation to their strategising work:

I think if deputy directors can be empowered to work independently ... (Mpho, middle manager).

I think deputy directors should exercise more authority ... (Cynthia, middle manager).

4.4.3.3 Conclusion to identity as it should be

When participants discussed the expectations within the department, certain identity dynamics were revealed, particularly in relation to their roles and the functions they perform in the department under study. Interesting dynamics associated with how middle managers are expected to perform versus what they are capable of doing. This exposed certain ambiguities and tensions evident in the department. While middle managers are performing at the level they were at the time of this study, there is a different understanding in terms of the level at which they should perform. There was therefore a perceived misalignment between what middle managers were doing at the time of the study against what they were expected to do and this revealed certain ambiguities and tensions evident in the department. However, there were common practices that were generally acceptable and which encapsulated what should be the ideal identity of middle manager in the department. There was also justification for middle managers to be part of executive meetings but most importantly for middle managers to be given information. Interestingly, middle managers were expected to sometimes assume the identity of directors in terms of authority and level of independence. Subsequently, middle managers felt that their position within the department needed to be elevated to embrace a more powerful identity in terms of independence and authority.

The divergent views about middle managers' identity as strategy practitioners brought to the surface some of the dynamics to which this group of professionals is subjected and revealed some of the ambiguities and tensions within the department.

4.4.3.4 Identity work: identity construction (self-enhancement)

Table 17 provides the codes under the category ‘identity work: identity construction’, which is discussed next.

Table 17: Identity work category

Main theme	Category	Codes
Identity dynamics	Identity work: identity construction (self-enhancement)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career aspiration • Career learning • Growth and maturity • Personal development

Source: Own compilation

When middle managers spoke about their position within the organisation, and their experience within this role, they often referred to their career aspirations and their career journey. As they spoke about their career journey, they mentioned the need for growth and personal development. The theme ‘identity work’ emerged as participants spoke about their self-enhancement related to identity work, the processes middle managers undergo in becoming what they are or what they want to be. Data revealed that many middle managers as strategy practitioners have career aspirations to progress to a director level, as expressed by Constance and Steven:

Yes, I think I do want influence – maybe for my own personal reasons. I could move up and become a director (Constance, middle manager).

But there’s that ambition. Maybe it’s taking more responsibility by stepping up to the next level (Steven, middle manager).

The researcher noted that even middle managers who were nearing retirement still considered a change in position, as expressed by Thembi:

Yes. I’m close to retirement. Of course, I’m not going ... I will still go beyond. But I really do see myself as a director one day (Thembi, middle manager).

Another participant confirmed that middle managers “are management in training” (Sindiso, middle manager), suggesting the continuous state of becoming, referred to as ‘identity work’. Brown (2020) suggests that people engage in activities of identity work for self-enhancement; thus, becoming or embracing improved identity as part of self-enhancement.

Data revealed that there were middle managers who were striving to improve themselves in their current positions. The researcher described this code as 'career learning' to depict a process of learning new skills not by seeking promotion but by improving in the current position as middle manager.

So, in particular, I'm no longer looking at occupying a different position but I'm looking at what is it in terms of the role that I'm playing, what is it that I can perfect and fine-tune (Kgosi, middle manager).

Middle managers especially referred to the valuable experience they had gained through the years. This refers to the tacit knowledge linked to their role as middle managers, and the experience they gained within this position. Thembi said:

I think now having been in this role for the past five years, I've gained a lot of experience. I understand the ins and outs of being a middle manager, the demands of this work (Thembi, middle manager).

Participating middle managers believed that they were in a process of becoming managers, as stated by Sindiso below:

... [middle manager] are management in training (Sindiso, middle manager).

Data revealed that some middle managers wanted to develop themselves personally in certain areas of their work. For example, Sindiso (middle manager) identified areas of development as follows:

I want to expand on policy development. As I said before, I want to expand on research. As a consequence, probably I'll become a better manager. That's what I think my future hold because I want to expand on what I already have.

Their identity as strategy practitioners was therefore not static, but always evolving – referring to the dynamic nature of identity (Brown, 2020).

Data revealed that directors corroborated the views of middle managers. Some directors suggested that middle managers required to be developed in certain areas of their work, as mentioned by Lwazi:

[M]ost of them still need to be capacitated (Lwazi, director).

Sydney added that capacity building was a challenge and urged directors to provide platforms for personal development of middle managers:

But it's a challenge that I've learnt to work with because you've got to make available opportunities for development and capacity building for the officials on an ongoing basis (Sydney, director).

As stated by Sydney above, it appeared that middle managers were expected to be in a process of improving their identities through personal development. The data revealed that participating middle managers had careers aspirations, and many referred to their role as "management in training", suggesting an "in-between" or transitioning phase in their journey as middle managers.

The data further confirmed that many of the middle managers had many years of experience in their role, which had enriched their identity as strategy practitioners through gaining tacit knowledge.

There was evidence to suggest that middle managers grow in terms of the learned experience in their position. As such, accumulated experience might assist middle managers to do better and prepare them for the next career level.

4.4.3.5 Conclusion on identity work

The findings revealed that the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners is not static but is constantly evolving. In addition, this identity of middle managers is influenced by their aspirations as they engage in what is referred to as 'identity work'.

What became apparent during the current study was that participating middle managers engaged in a process of self-enhancement which involved practices of continuous career development. The process of self-enhancement constitutes identity work (Brown, 2020). In addition, there was evidence to confirm that middle managers had careers aspirations, encapsulated in 'management in training'.

Similar to findings by Brown *et al.* (2019), the current study suggested that identity is not static and people continuously work towards their preferred identities through processes such as talks, serving self-meaning and through impression management

purposes. In the same way, strategising work is a continuous recursive process that is understood forward and future-oriented (Thompson & Martin, 2010).

Section 4.4.4 below discusses the specific roles and responsibilities of middle managers within the unique context.

4.4.4 Roles and responsibilities (middle managers as strategy practitioners)

The third and final theme refers to the vast range of roles and responsibilities that middle managers are expected to juggle in their position as middle managers. This theme was divided into two categories, as participants spoke specifically about the different roles they were required to play as well as the skills they are required to have in order to manage the various roles successfully. Table 18 presents the theme ‘roles and responsibilities’ and the two categories associated with this theme.

Table 18: Middle managers as practitioners’ theme table

Main themes	Categories	Codes
Roles and responsibilities (middle managers as strategy practitioners)	Roles of middle managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General administrative role • Support role • Advisory role • Implementation and monitoring role • Managerial role • Strategy contribution role • Conceptualising role • Planning role • Policy formulation • Programme management role • Project management role
	Skills required by middle managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue selling skills • Strategic thinking • Communication skills • Content knowledge • Expert knowledge

Source: own compilation

In this part of the study, the researcher observed how participants (both directors and middle managers) spoke in depth about the large variety of roles that middle managers play within the department. In presenting the findings in this section, the researcher identified the main roles of middle managers in the department under study, as noted in the responses from both the directors and middle managers.

Data revealed that, at the time, middle managers had a key administrative role to play in the department, which was said to be part of the job description of middle managers.

Ngwako and Sindiso, as middle managers, suggested that the work was administrative in nature:

The job description will then be more administrative in nature: writing, sending letters, securing meetings, strategically writing thank you letters to them (Ngwako, middle manager).

Then you've got administrative things that must just be done on a typical day (Sindiso, middle manager).

Lwazi, one of the directors, confirmed this by saying:

[Y]our middle manager must make sure that those particular things happen because most of them are purely administrative (Lwazi, director).

The administrative role of middle managers, as it appears, therefore becomes a daily process ranging from meetings to other routine administrative processes as it largely involves aspects such as writing reports and document development.

As analysis of data continued, the researcher noted a pattern of responses relating to the important support role that middle managers are understood to play. The researcher noted that middle managers appeared to be the support structure of the director. Both middle managers and directors seemed to agree in this regard. For example, two participants were quoted saying:

Then I also support the director in terms of all the other reporting obligations of the directorate, planning and reporting obligations of the directorate as a whole (John, middle manager).

So, my role as a [middle manager] is to support my director to help her achieve her objectives as a senior manager and in a larger picture then to say that my role is to enable the department to also achieve its bigger objectives in a small way in the environment that I'm working in (Steven, middle manager).

Constance added that her role was to support the work of the director as contained in the contract of employment:

Mine is to support the successful implementation of his contract (Constance, middle manager).

Lwazi and Aluwani shared the view of the middle managers:

[T]here to support the directors in everything that they are doing within the directorate (Lwazi, director).

In my view, these are the support structure to directors (Aluwani, director).

Middle managers are also expected to play an advisory role within the department under study. The advisory role appeared to be expected by directors, but at the time of the study, it seemed not to be played as expected.

I think deputy directors should be at the level where they are able to advise in their area of work, assess risk, and advise the manager and the department (Sinazo, director).

Bongani, a director in the department, supported the view above by imploring middle managers to play an advisory role:

[T]hey must try to play a role of ... an advisory role to the director and the directorate (Bongani, director).

However, Mangi, a middle manager, suggested that the advisory role was entrenched in the kind of work they do. For example, part of the work Mandi was doing at the time involved training officials, including at provincial level. Mangi had to monitor the effectiveness of training and advise the sector on the next course of action:

So, once training takes place, we have to monitor and then, through monitoring, you draw a report with the lessons learnt so as to advise on what needs to be done, needs to be improved on, what needs to be strengthened, what are the lessons learnt, and all that thing (Mangi, middle manager).

Therefore, it appeared the advisory role of middle managers was well understood although it seemed not fully established.

The analysed data confirmed the traditional view that middle managers were agents of implementation. Most of the responses from both directors and middle managers suggested that middle managers were indeed implementing agents as quoted below:

The rest of the days, it's them putting into practice what we have planned for, implementing, and I just follow up there and there (Edward, director).

I just think we're just implementing agencies but not really on a strategic level (Mangi, middle manager).

One of the requirements of the deputy director is policy development, policy implementation, policy monitoring (Sindiso, middle manager).

In addition to the implementation role, data revealed that middle managers were involved in monitoring of programmes, including policies of the sector. The role of monitoring is entrenched in legislation as it gives effect to the mandate of the department under study "in terms of the National Education Policy Act, we are expected to monitor and support schools" (Kgosi, middle manager). The department under study therefore has an obligation to monitor work of the department mostly at provincial level. John confirmed this view by saying:

The DBE's obligation [is] to monitor provinces, so we're also involved in monitoring (John, middle manager).

Thembi added that middle managers monitor the implementation of policy, and the role of middle manager is in part to:

[M]onitor the implementation of the policy (Thembi, middle manager).

Some of the responses relating to the monitoring role are included below:

In other days, we do conduct monitoring (Mangi, middle manager).

So, I monitor that within the directorates, in the branch as a whole. I have to ensure that our risks are submitted, signed off, strategic and operational plans [...] (Collen, middle manager).

It is clear that, based on the legislative mandate of the department, the roles of middle managers are dominated by implementation, which is linked to the monitoring of programmes. It is not surprising that middle managers in the department under study play important implementation and monitoring roles, given that the department is a national sphere of government, responsible for policy formulation, implementation of flagship programmes, and monitoring. The implementation and monitoring roles of

middle managers are important in the context of the core functions of the department under study.

At this point of analysis, data revealed that participating middle managers also played a core managerial role within their sections. Owen confirmed this in his responses:

What we do is that we run a directorate of about nine, eight staff which is headed by a director whom I deputise, then that means now and again I will be doing some of his responsibility in his absence (Owen, middle manager).

Edward, a director, added that middle managers managed parts of the directorate:

So, instead of me managing the entire directorate, you can then break down the directorate into sections and allow them to manage certain sections.

Edward also highlighted the important role that middle managers played in managing the lower-level staff:

They are important because they also have to manage officials below them.

Steven added that middle managers assumed a supervisory in terms of their subordinates:

So, mostly, the experience has been that it is a supervisory role in a way in that there are assistant directors and senior admin officers, which are a level below the deputy director level (Steven, middle manager).

The researcher noted that, within the management role, middle managers needed to manage specific functions as explained by Mangi:

But I do manage particular functions (Mangi, middle manager).

Sindiso also pointed out that managing finances is part of what middle managers do:

[M]anaging finances as part of a cash flow process, as part of budgeting, as part of monitoring the finances (Sindiso, middle manager).

Rodney, one of the directors, acknowledged that middle managers had a role in maintaining the culture and interpersonal relations within the department:

So, I think a middle manager has a very big role to play as well in establishing the culture of work within a directorate, the relationships (Rodney, director).

This finding suggests that, at the time of this study, directors and middle managers were sharing in the managerial functions of the directorate. The data revealed that middle managers played a crucial role in both strategy implementation and strategy crafting. In this section, the discussion focused on how middle managers were involved in strategy implementation.

Thembi and Kgosi highlighted the role middle managers were playing in supporting the strategic goals of the department:

I will say to support the DBE to reach its strategic goals (Thembi, middle manager).

So, my role is firstly to support, as I indicated, strategies of the department that pertain to our mandate of the directorate (Kgosi, middle manager).

Kgosi further indicated that, as a middle manager, he had been part of creating strategy by committees of the department:

I will be part of committees that contribute for strategies of a particular topic, like we played a very important role in designing a strategy for discipline across the country and played a role in that (Kgosi, middle manager).

The findings also revealed that middle managers were part of designing those strategic objectives that eventually find their way into the strategic plan of the department. Sindiso said:

One is that, for any strategic objective to be put into the strategic plan, I must be the one crafting it first, as a draft, to give it to my director (Sindiso, middle manager).

Data revealed that conceptualising is an important role adopted by middle managers, as they are involved in the drafting of documents, which give effect to the operational requirements of the department:

Your deputy directors are the people who conceptualise (Pule, director).

Suzan and Rodney added to the view that middle managers are central to the conceptualisation of programmes in the department:

They think it, then after that conceptualisation they put together plans to birth what they have conceptualised, and they operationalise it (Suzan, director).

I believe a deputy director is the one that responds to the directives that comes from the director and the directives that come from the strategic plans of the department as well as of broader government and generates the concept documents to give effect to that strategic directions (Rodney, director).

In addition, Constance, as a middle manager, confirmed that doing conceptual work is core to the work of middle managers and explained:

My work is very conceptual at this point because I'm writing.

Therefore, in addition to strategic contribution, middle managers play a crucial role in conceptualising documents that ultimately lead to strategies of the department. The researcher noted another interesting role, which seemed to be well established within the department under study. It appeared that work – such as developing project plans, developing strategic indicators, plans and reporting – in the department starts with middle managers. Although there seemed to be a top-down approach within the department, the work landed at the desks of middle managers for processing. Work, however, may start with the middle managers in order to persuade senior executive in terms of a particular path that needs to be followed. For example, Sindiso suggested that, as a middle manager, he provided options for directors after doing groundwork. The researcher understood the groundwork to be in relation to the conceptualising role as quoted by Sindiso below:

So, I'm the one who does the groundwork for managers or directors to have options.

The role of conceptual work, although said differently, was supported by Aluwani, one of the directors:

These are people who do the spade work.

In addition, Sinazo shared these sentiments by suggesting that middle managers start the work as drafts, which is then taken forward. He said:

The drafting of documents happens at that level.

There therefore seemed to be a view that middle managers are at the operating level, a level that gets things done, and they play an important role in policy formulation and implementation within the department. The finding on the role of middle managers confirmed what is already known in the literature in terms of middle managers' roles, which included the drafting of documents and doing the spade work. As noted in Chapter 2 (see 2.7), Freek *et al.* (2020) noted championing strategic roles as part of the roles played by middle managers.

Responses from participants, both directors and middle managers, indicated that, at the time, middle managers were involved in planning of work within the department, as indicated in the following quotes:

So, there's an element of planning in the work that you do (John, middle manager).

So, throughout the year, we are planning (Owen, middle manager).

Then I also support the director in terms of all the other reporting obligations of the directorate, planning and reporting obligations of the directorate as a whole (John, middle manager).

[I]f I'm in the office, obvious it will be planning, other related things of the secretariat, checking where we are, updates, progress (Owen, middle manager).

Most of the middle managers who were interviewed included planning as part of their roles.

Another core role relates to the development and management of policy. Most participants shared similar views around the role of middle managers towards policy implementation. This role does not only relate to policy implementation but also to policy formulation or development as well as policy monitoring. Sindiso confirmed that policy-related work involving development, monitoring and implementation of policy is one of the core functions middle managers are required to do within the department.

One of the requirements of the deputy director is policy development, policy implementation, policy monitoring (Sindiso, middle manager).

Constance explained how she was involved in developing policy:

Actually, I developed that policy because the people that came after me they put together the document out of a framework that was this big, that needed to be cleaned up (Constance, middle manager).

Mpho, a middle manager in the department confirmed the policy role by saying:

I can start with the policy part of it, that we formulate curriculum policies.

There seemed to be an understanding that the programme management role is one of the roles played by middle managers, as noted from Ngwako's response below:

My core duties as a middle manager is to develop programmes in the curriculum, extra-curriculum space of the department, what we call enrichment in our own jargon here.

In addition to policy work, middle managers are understood to play role of leading programmes as John, a middle manager, puts it:

The expectation was that you're going to have to take the lead in that particular programme and I think that is the current scenario now

Another participant added, "[b]ut I manage a programme" (Mangi, middle manager).

Some middle managers viewed the project management role as challenging in terms of administration and support, as indicated below:

Fourthly, which is now one of those challenging roles, is being a project manager for learner admissions (Kgosi, middle manager).

Moreover, one of the middle managers suggested that project management is one of the fundamental roles:

Project management is key to what I do (Ngwako, middle manager).

Rodney, a director, added that middle managers manage projects of the directorate, as indicated in the quote below:

[T]hey can manage two or three things at the same time and keep tabs on what is happening in those three projects (Rodney, director).

The roles of middle managers in relation to project management appeared to be prominent and well defined. There seemed to be agreement in responses provided by participants regarding the role of middle managers as project management.

4.4.5 Conclusion on roles and responsibilities

The findings discussed above revealed that, at the time of the study, middle managers were expected to fulfil a diverse range of roles and responsibilities within the department, which are linked to the strategic outcomes of the department under study. Middle managers are habitually expected to wear many different hats, which can be overwhelming. Most importantly, the roles of middle managers in the department under study confirmed that middle managers were at a crucial level in the department. This finding is consistent with the views of Mantere (2005), Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014), Yimer (2020), Freek *et al.* (2020) and Garlick (2021) who all confirm the strategic role played by middle managers, as noted in Chapter 2 (see Section 2.7). At multi-level, there is consensus, to a large extent, about the roles middle managers play within the case department.

4.4.6 Skills of middle managers

Table 19 provides a summary of the discussion of the findings in terms of the skills required by the middle managers theme:

Table 19: Skills required by middle managers

Main themes	Categories	Codes
Roles and responsibilities (middle managers as strategy practitioners)	Skills required by middle managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue selling skills • Strategic thinking • Communication skills • Content knowledge • Expert knowledge

Source: Own compilation

Middle managers are expected to possess or learn a wide range of skills in order to perform effectively. Findings from the current study have already revealed that middle managers, when strategising, use established practice such as selling issues to the top layer and strategic contribution over and over again. Using the same practice may lead to middle managers acquiring skills and competencies in a particular area of operation.

The findings revealed five key skills that middle managers were required to have while performing the many roles within the department, namely issue selling skills, strategic thinking skills, communication skills, content knowledge and expert knowledge in a subject. The sections below therefore discuss these skills associated with the work of middle managers within the department under study.

(a) Issue selling skills

The researcher noted that, as middle managers seemed to be at the centre of operation, there was a need for issue selling skills. These relate to the ability of middle managers to persuade executive management on aspects of their work that need to be done, as any work conceptualised would have to be presented to the executive management for approval. One of the middle managers explained that middle managers must have the skill to sell ideas to the authorities:

But you should have a skill to ensure that this thing goes through because whatever it is that you conceptualise, whether in your submission, it's still a product of yourself and it is almost like a baby. You have to see it through (Mangi, middle manager).

The practice of seeking approval from the executive before proceeding with any work appeared to be established practice within the department under study. Mangi explained how this could be a daunting and frustrating process:

You have to see it through. It's quite a difficult thing to conceptualise something and to make it in a format of whatever – a concept paper, a document, whatever – and to have it rejected. It brings with it some level of frustration and discontent. So, in order to reduce that, you have to have that way to persuade people or powers that be to look in your favour (Mangi, middle manager).

Sindiso explained the process that middle managers had to follow in order to convince their immediate supervisor if they had an idea they wanted to implement:

The disadvantage therefore is that you must always plead your case if you have a solid idea. And, if you have a manager who is not as ... I don't want to use the wrong word ... who doesn't engage with what you produce, they want to pass it on, pass it on, you'll have a problem because you must always provide options. You say option one, this is what we can do, this is the motivation. Option B, option three. That's a disadvantage (Sindiso, middle manager).

Mangi suggested that, in order to minimise frustrations, middle managers must have persuasion skills. The persuasion skill would then assist in ensuring that the conceptualised documents get approval by the authorities.

So, you need to recommend in a manner that is going to make sense and makes it difficult for people to not to take those recommendations (Mangi, middle manager).

The researcher noted that, at the time, an issue selling skill was an integral component of the middle manager's work within the department.

(b) Strategic thinking skills

As data analysis continued, the researcher found that middle managers are required to think in a strategic manner in order to contribute towards strategising from formulation to implementation. In line with the competency framework, (see section 3.4) middle managers are required to have strategic thinking skills as well as skills relating to strategic leadership and management. Sydney, a director, suggested that middle managers should show strategic leadership and management skills, among others when he said:

In terms of the competency framework, according to the public service regulations, you've got to have people that have got skills, strategic leadership and management, complex analysis of problems and problem solving (Sydney, director).

Another director, Suzan, added:

To drive the vision of that area ... needs someone who thinks strategically and it needs someone who operates and implements their vision in a strategic manner.

Understandably, given the roles that middle managers play or are expected to play within the department under study, it was not surprising that strategic thinking was among the requisite skills mentioned.

(c) Communication skills

In addition to strategic thinking, data revealed that middle managers require good communication skills at different levels of the work. Much communications takes place between the different forums within the department, both horizontally as well as

vertically between the directors, executive management and lower level staff, as explained in the quotes below:

Good communication skills. Be able to articulate yourself because the work of a deputy director ... there's a lot of communicating in terms of your workshops, work sessions, doing presentations, and all (Thembi, middle manager).

Communication skills, report writing is also very key as part and parcel of my role as a deputy director (Thembi, middle manager).

So, once that is out of the way, it's easy to communicate with directors and chief directors (Collen, middle manager).

Communication skills are among the key requisite skills for middle managers as they lead operations within the department, which require them to communicate to the top layer and lower-level staff.

(d) Content knowledge management skills

In addition to the skills discussed above, data revealed that middle managers must have content knowledge about the education system, in particular, the specific work area. This was viewed as very critical by one of the directors, Bongani who said:

Like I indicated that the most critical one aspect of the three is the issues of content knowledge. That is where the content should reside.

Sindiso stated that content is what makes middle management an important layer in the case department:

So, for me, that role is more important than the next layer because that's where you engage with content (Sindiso, middle manager).

4.4.7 Conclusion on the skills required by middle managers

Section 4.4.7 highlighted the main skills required by middle managers, to accomplish the various roles they play. Some of the skills identified are articulated in the Guide to the Middle Management Competency of 2006, issued by the DPSA but some, such as issue selling and communication skills emerged as a learned custom or way of doing things. For example, middle managers said they were expected to have

conceptualising skill, strategic thinking, and communication skills as well as issue selling skills, among others. It was therefore clear that participating middle managers utilised some skills that were not necessarily prerequisite or articulated practice. This is in line with Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2016) who state that practices are those established ways or norms of doing things that, even if not articulated, can be recognised even when they are done unconsciously (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2016). The skills requirement appeared to be prerequisite in the position of middle managers in the case department, even if not articulated. However, it was apparent that the skills middle managers require or gain in the doing of strategic work become part of their identity as middle managers.

4.5 Chapter conclusion

Chapter 4 presented the key findings of the study, bringing to the fore the voices of the participants and their lived experiences. The chapter provided a description of the profile of all the participants and then proceeded with in-depth discussions of the key themes that emerged from the data.

All thematic areas identified were synthesised based on the views of participants and were presented as findings of the study. The chapter first reflected the organisational context theme, which provided the setting within which the participating middle managers operated. The organisational context comprised five categories, namely the organisational environment, political influence, negative organisational culture, creating an enabling environment, and hindering factors. A number of key contextual issues were identified, which influenced the work of middle managers, and illustrated the dynamic and complex environment within which middle managers are working. The chapter presented various identity dynamics and multi-level dynamics present within the department, bringing to the fore some of the tensions and complexities participating directors and middle managers were facing within their work environment at the time of this study. Data under this theme was rich and provided a broader understanding of the identity dynamics of middle managers.

Chapter 4 also focused on the challenges middle managers come across in their day-to-day operation. Most of these challenges were understood to be inherent and embedded in the organisational culture of the department under study.

The chapter concluded by presenting the middle managers as practitioners, focusing on the skills required by middle managers. In this theme, the findings revealed the key roles and responsibilities of middle managers as part of exploring the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners. Chapter 5 provides an interpretation of the findings as well as the conclusions and recommendations. Figure 14 below provides overview of Chapter 5.

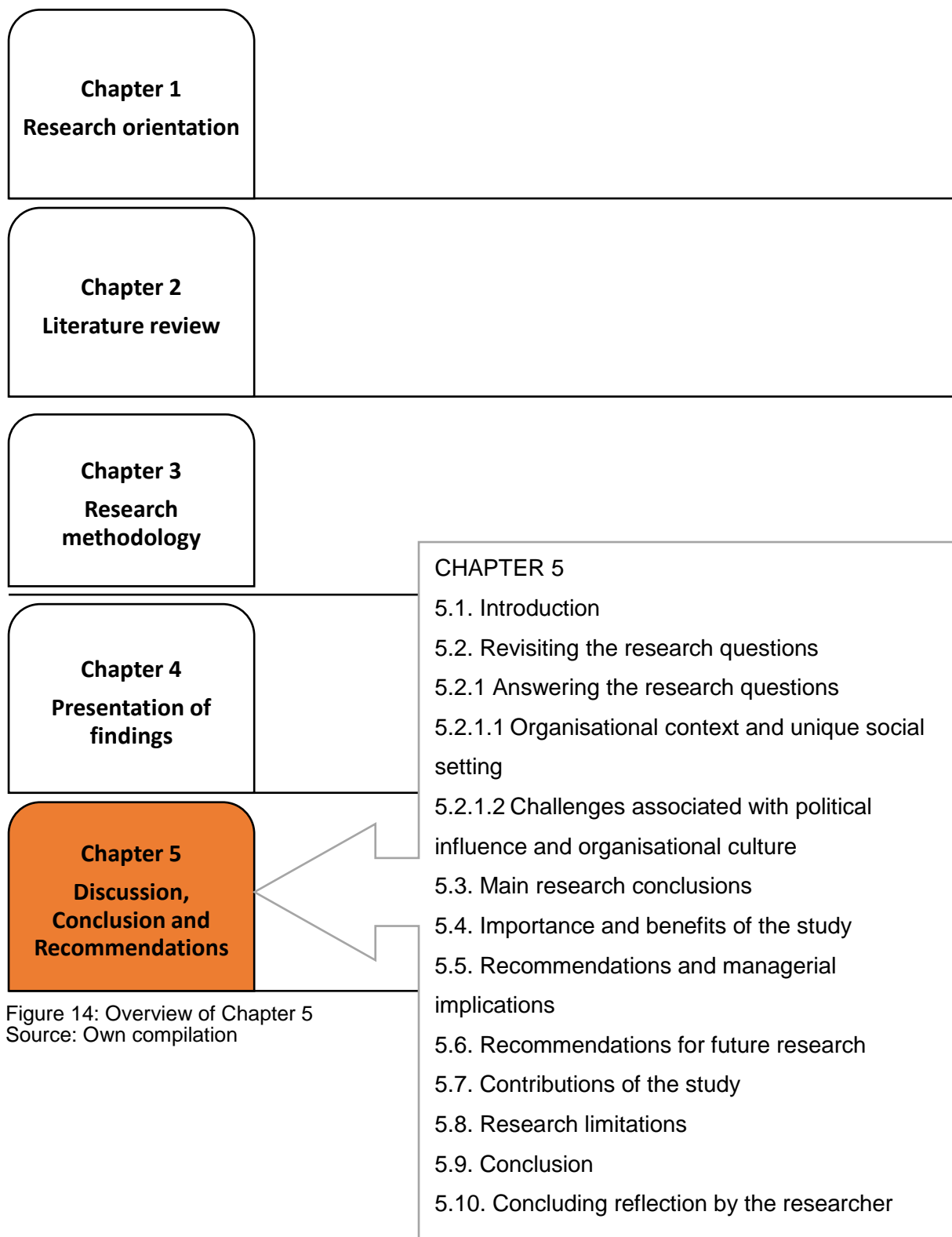


Figure 14: Overview of Chapter 5
Source: Own compilation

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Introduction

The current study set out to explore how the internal identity dynamics of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a government department influence and shape the strategising work of middle managers. The previous four chapters covered the research orientation, the literature review positioning the study, the research methodology followed and the findings of the study. The purpose of this chapter is to present the main conclusions as well as the recommendations emanating from the study.

In exploring the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners, the research adopted a strategy-as-practice research lens. The strategy-as-practice perspective was necessary in order to study the detailed processes and practices involved in the making of strategy, focusing on the actors in the organisation (Burgelman *et al.*, 2018; Lê & Jarzabkowski, 2014) – specifically how those actors influence strategic activity through who they are (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007).

Chapter 4 discussed the findings of the study emanating from the analysed data. The findings were presented based on the three main themes that emerged during the data analysis process. The research context theme presented the unique context, and described the social setting and dynamics present within the department at the time of the research. The identity dynamics theme offered multi-level identity dynamics that were present within the department under study. The third and last theme presented an array of roles middle managers are expected to play as well as the requisite skills necessary for middle managers to do their strategising work. The chapter shared the lived experiences of the participants, focusing specifically on the dynamics of identity at individual level.

While the findings, as expressed in Chapter 4, were important in answering the research questions, it was also necessary to interpret the findings in the context of the organisation under study and the broader body of knowledge. Chapter 5 focuses on the interpretation of the findings, and presents the conclusions and recommendations

of the study. The strategy-as-practice perspective was the main lens through which the study was conducted and enabled the researcher to explore identity dynamics from a practice perspective focusing on middle managers and their immediate supervisors within a single government department. The strategy-as-practice perspective also enabled the researcher to explore factors that were reported to serve to enable or constrain middle managers within their unique organisational context.

A key aspect of the study was to understand the identity dynamics of middle managers in relation to being strategy practitioners; therefore, how being a middle manager affected the strategising work of participants as perceived by themselves and by their immediate supervisors. In tackling this research, three sub-questions were developed, namely:

1. How are middle managers as strategy practitioners within a government department perceived from the perspective of their immediate supervisors?
2. How do middle managers perceive themselves as strategy practitioners?
3. How do internal identity dynamics constrain or enable strategy practitioners in their strategising work in a government context?

The interpretation of the findings will therefore be presented as responses to the main research question and the three secondary research questions.

The chapter first discusses the findings in relation to the identity of middle managers in a government department. It then proceeds to present the research findings under each of the three research questions. Chapter 5 further provides discussion on the research conclusions followed by the benefits of the study, recommendations and conclusions. The next section discusses the middle manager identity in a government department, with reference to the research questions.

5.2. Revisiting the research questions

The purpose of this research was to explore the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners in a government department. The interpretation of the findings was done through linking the secondary research questions and the thematic areas

emerging from data with the literature, presented in Chapter 2. Table 20 below provides the main and secondary research questions:

Table 20: Research questions table

Main research question		
How do the internal identity dynamics of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a government department influence and shape the strategising work of a middle manager?		
Secondary research question 1	Secondary research question 2	Secondary research question 3
How are middle managers as strategy practitioners within a government department perceived from the perspective of their immediate supervisors?	How do middle managers perceive themselves as strategy practitioners?	How do internal identity dynamics constrain or enable strategy practitioners in their strategising work in a government context?

Source: Own compilation

The research questions were answered by combining strategy and identity research as discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2 as well as the empirical data emanating from the study. The qualitative research analysis provided the findings that are linked to each of the three research questions. The researcher linked the research questions to the main findings, as indicated in Table 21 below:

Table 21: Linking research questions with the findings and literature review

Secondary questions	Main themes	Literature review in Chapter 2	Section in Chapter 2	Section in Chapter 4	Main finding(s)
How are middle managers as strategy practitioners within a government department perceived from the perspective of their immediate supervisors?	Identity dynamics: How directors perceive middle managers	Bryson and George (2020), Garlick (2021), Jansen van Rensburg <i>et al.</i> (2014), Venter (2014), Rouleau and Balogun (2011), Ravasi <i>et al.</i> (2017), Yimer (2020), Wooldridge <i>et al.</i> (2008)	2.7 2.8	4.4.2	Middle managers are critical strategy practitioners who contribute to the strategic outcomes and ultimately the survival of the department. Although they have limited authority, they are referred to as 'strategists' occupying a position of influence, up and down the hierarchy. However, middle managers are expected by their supervisors to take more responsibilities and accountability. Thus, there is tension between what middle managers are doing and what they are expected to do.
How do middle managers perceive themselves as strategy practitioners?	Identity dynamics: How middle managers perceive themselves ("I am")	Brown (2020a), Brown and Toyoki (2013), Harding <i>et al.</i> (2014), Jarzabkowski <i>et al.</i> (2016), Jansen van Rensburg <i>et al.</i> (2014), Surju <i>et al.</i> (2020), Tsuda and Sato (2020), Wooldridge <i>et al.</i> (2008), Yimer (2020)	2.7 2.9 2.10	4.4.2 4.4.2.4	Middle managers perceive themselves as influential practitioners, knowledgeable in their area of work, and managing lower-level staff. In addition, middle managers engage in identity work as they are always in a process of "becoming."

Secondary questions	Main themes	Literature review in Chapter 2	Section in Chapter 2	Section in Chapter 4	Main finding(s)
	Middle managers as strategy practitioners	Harding <i>et al.</i> (2014), Jansen van Rensburg <i>et al.</i> (2014), Venter, 2014), Oliver (2015), Salih and Doll (2013), Surju <i>et al.</i> (2020), Wooldridge <i>et al.</i> (2008), Yimer (2020)	2.2 2.3 2.7 2.8 2.9 2.11	4.4.4	Middle managers are perceived as skilful strategy practitioners who play an array of strategising roles within the department. Middle managers interpret strategic intent from the top echelons and translate it into implementable plans.

Secondary questions	Main themes	Literature review in Chapter 2	Section in Chapter 2	Section in Chapter 4	Main finding(s)
How do internal identity dynamics constrain or enable strategy practitioners in their strategising work in a government context?	Identity dynamics: perspectives of both middle managers and directors	Balogun <i>et al.</i> (2015), Cordier <i>et al.</i> (2014), Cuganesan (2017), Jansen van Rensburg <i>et al.</i> (2014), Jarzabkowski, <i>et al.</i> (2007), Oliver (2015), Ravasi <i>et al.</i> (2017), Cordier <i>et al.</i> (2014), Van den Steen (2013)	2.5 2.5.2 2.9 2.10	4.4.2.1 4.4.2.2 4.4.2.3	The view of middle managers as perceived internally in an organisational setting has a bearing on their strategising practice, given the divergent views of who middle managers are and what they should be doing against the generally acceptable middle manager nomenclature.

Secondary questions	Main themes	Literature review in Chapter 2	Section in Chapter 2	Section in Chapter 4	Main finding(s)
	Organisational context	Axelsson (2016), Ferguson (2019), Höglund <i>et al.</i> (2018), Jansen van Rensburg <i>et al.</i> (2014), Mookherjee and West (2013), Ravasi <i>et al.</i> (2017), Venter (2014)	2.10 3.3	4.4.1	The organisational context represents a typical bureaucratic public institution dominated by political influence, and has an established organisational culture that negatively affects the work of middle managers. The organisational context also presents an opportunity to influence the work of middle managers positively by adopting enabling practices, such as involving middle managers in the planning sessions. Finally, the organisational context within which middle managers operate has a bearing on their strategising work and their identity. The strategising work of middle managers is shaped by the prevailing and embedded factors within the organisational context of the department under study, such as power dynamics, working in silos, and a lack of accountability and authority.
		Bryson and George (2020), Bryson <i>et al.</i> (2018), Gomez (2007), Jansen van Rensburg <i>et al.</i> (2014), Jarzabkowski <i>et al.</i> (2016)	2.5 3.3	4.4.3	The identity of middle managers embraces a less powerful strategy practitioner, which is prone to identity challenges influenced by power dynamics. The negative organisational culture within the department under study exposed middle managers to an array of challenges that were set to affect and influence their strategising work.
	Middle managers as strategy practitioners	Harding <i>et al.</i> (2014), Jarzabkowski <i>et al.</i> (2007), Whittington (2006), Wooldridge <i>et al.</i> (2008), Jansen van Rensburg <i>et al.</i> (2014) De Souza Santos (2021), Freek <i>et al.</i> (2020), Gjerde and Alvesson (2020), Jalonon <i>et al.</i>	2.7 2.8	4.4.3 4.4.4.1 4.4.4.2	Middle managers as strategy practitioners embrace roles depicting them as critical strategic contributors within the department under study. Furthermore, middle managers as strategy practitioners reported being required to possess skills for the strategising work, such as issue selling and communication skills.

Secondary questions	Main themes	Literature review in Chapter 2	Section in Chapter 2	Section in Chapter 4	Main finding(s)
		(2018), Jalonen, Schildt and Vaara (2018), Tsuda and Sato (2020), Surju <i>et al.</i> (2020), Vaz (2019)			
	Identity dynamics: (a) identity as 'should be' expectations (b) identity work and/or construction (self-enhancement)	Brown (2021), Brown and Toyoki (2013), Mainemelis <i>et al.</i> (2010), Ravasi <i>et al.</i> (2017), Surju <i>et al.</i> (2020)	2.7 2.8 3.3	4.4.2.3 4.4.2.4	While there is an understanding of the identity of middle managers by both groups of participants in relation to strategic work, the expectations of what the identity of middle managers should be, add to the identity dynamics of how middle managers are perceived in relation to strategic work. Specifically, middle managers are perceived as critical actors who are also expected to be analysts and to be independent, and who are sometimes elevated to the director level. However, middle managers continuously construct their identities in a self-enhancement activity through the process of identity work. This was revealed when they shared their career aspirations and the need to learn and for personal development.

Source: Own compilation

Section 5.2.1 presents a discussion on the findings in terms of the three secondary research questions.

5.2.1. Answering the research questions

Before answering the specific research questions of the current study, it was necessary to gain an understanding of the unique context where the study was conducted. The research context was particularly important as it offered a unique context to advance strategy and identity research. In the current study, the public sector was identified as a particularly under-explored context in terms of strategy research, especially when exploring the strategy–identity nexus (Höglund *et al.*, 2018; Ravasi *et al.*, 2020). As indicated in Chapter 2 (see Section 2.4), the substantive origin of research using the strategy-as-practice perspective is concerned with meticulous studies of strategy in different organisational contexts (Whittington, 2012). However, to date, the majority of research on issues pertaining to identity and its link to strategy, from the strategy-as-practice still focuses predominantly on the private sector (Höglund *et al.*, 2018; Ravasi *et al.*, 2020). Through the strategy-as-practice research perspective, the researcher was able to expose how aspects of strategising were enabled and constrained by prevailing organisational and societal practices within a government department (Whittington, 2012). This perspective allowed the researcher to identify these practices and to explore the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners, and the multi-level dynamics between them and their immediate supervisors in the context of this study. In this section, the researcher first describes the unique organisational context, shedding light on some of the complexities and dynamics that were present within this setting. By explaining the context first, the study provided some insight into the social setting within which middle managers and their immediate supervisors conduct their day-to-day work. The discussion then proceeds with the findings relating to how the directors perceived middle managers as strategy practitioners.

5.2.1.1 Organisational context and unique social setting

The unique organisational context reflected a distinctive social setting where various dynamics and complexities influenced how middle managers conducted their work within the department, and which ultimately also influenced their identity as strategy

practitioners. As is typical within public sector institutions, the organisational context of the department under study reflected a hierarchical and/or bureaucratic structure that predominantly adopts a top-down and deliberate approach to strategy. The organisational context also reflected those embedded practices that were influencing how strategising work was conducted in the department under study at the time of this research.

The 'embedded practices' included those inherent practices that were characteristic of a public institution. Political influence was evident within the department under study as unions were considered key stakeholders creating a political environment involving power dynamics in the strategising work of the department. The organisational context also appeared to have a negative organisational culture, described through working in silos, forced implementation of decisions and side-lining of middle managers. A number of hindering factors were revealed that influenced the work of middle managers within the organisational context. The main hindering factors included communication gap, power dynamics, and a lack of accountability and authority at the level of middle managers. The organisational context findings also offered what could be done in order to create an enabling environment through the recommendations by both middle managers and directors. The recommendations for creating an enabling environment included allowing middle managers to lead and becoming part of the planning sessions. This is also coupled with giving middle managers freedom of expression but most importantly allowing them to work independently.

The finding is consistent with Mookherjee and West (2013), who suggested that strategy activity or the doing of the strategy is shaped by the organisational context within which it takes place. The set of rules and the manner in which work is done in the department under study has a bearing on how middle managers conduct their strategising work. In Chapter 2 above, it was noted that the work of strategy practitioners is guided by specific values, interests and concerns (Rouleau, 2013). Therefore, the organisational context of the department under study offered some of those concerns that were shaping the work of middle managers at the time of this research, or which could shape such work. The findings revealed that the work of participating middle managers was influenced by their organisational context, the way they "do things", and the way they were conducting their work in the department at the

time. The findings revealed some unique challenges associated in this organisational setting, as explained in depth in the next section.

5.2.1.2 Challenges associated with political influence and organisational culture

Given that the department under study was a government department with key stakeholders, such as labour unions, work was reported as often approached on a negotiated basis. This is in line with Ferguson (2019) who studied the growing interest of trade unions on business continuity outside labour action. Findings confirmed that labour unions play an important role in the strategic discourse of the department under study. The finding confirms the assertion by Axelsson (2016) who found that strategies in public institutions emanate from government or top-level management of public authorities. From the findings, it was evident that the department under study is a unique context in which the middle managers function, and which regards middle managers as less powerful strategy practitioners. Findings indicate that the level of experience and position within the department under study determines the power of influencing strategic actions or decisions in relation to strategising practices (Gomez, 2007; Lumby, 2019). This was evident when both middle managers and directors discussed power dynamics and how middle managers felt frustrated about the lack of responsibility and authority. This finding is in line with Rouleau and Balogun (2011) who noted that, compared to senior managers, middle managers have limited authority to act strategically. In addition, the finding is supported by Gomez (2007) who asserts that the strategising territory reveals the struggle for power in which agents disagree about the power to influence the direction of the organisation. Furthermore, Bryson and George (2020) acknowledge power dynamics within public institutions and argue that strategising takes place on a negotiation basis. In addition, Lumby (2019) suggests that the concept of power embraces the ability of influencing the thinking and actions of others to act along the lines of those in power. This was evident when middle managers described the political environment, which represented a terrain of power struggle in which those with more political powers wanted to influence the direction of the department. In addition, the findings presented evidence suggestive of power dynamics between middle managers and the directors in the department under study.

5.2.2. Secondary research question 1 – How are middle managers as strategy practitioners within a government department are perceived from the perspective of their immediate supervisors?

The researcher proceeded to answer the first secondary research question by looking at how middle managers within the department are perceived by their immediate supervisors. The findings revealed various identity dynamics when directors were asked how they perceived middle managers as strategy practitioners. Consequently, the theme 'identity dynamics' became a key theme within the study as it revealed the various inter-level dynamics between directors and middle managers.

The current study added a multi-level perspective to identity research, by exploring the identity dynamics apparent within the unique organisational setting and at multiple levels, and the way these identity dynamics influenced what middle managers in the department were doing at the time (Ravasi *et al.*, 2017). The findings confirmed that middle managers were integral strategy practitioners and engaged in activities important for the strategic outcomes of the department under study. This was augmented and well summarised by the responses, from both directors and middle managers, which depicted middle managers as a critical group that carries the work of the department under study. This was evident in the responses by directors who referred to middle managers as "work horses", "[middle manager] does the groundwork" "where content knowledge reside", "middle managers as specialists", "a position which is both strategic and operational but, most importantly, an influential position" and finally "an engine room". This is in line with Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014) and Freek *et al.* (2020) who suggest that middle managers are critical strategic actors.

These descriptors signify that participating directors viewed middle managers as important strategic players whose contribution was important for the success of the department under study. Furthermore, participating directors acknowledged that the middle managers in the department under study played a significant role as strategists, as they influenced the strategising work of the department. For example, middle managers were viewed as strategy practitioners who occupied strategic positions of influence. This finding was consistent with Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014) who suggest that middle managers are critical in making strategising work. Moreover,

Freek *et al.* (2020) add that middle managers are involved in strategy formulation, a role that is linked to performance improvement. The current findings revealed that middle managers also played a crucial role in the implementation and initiating of policies as well as facilitating programmes and projects. This could be regarded as in line with four strategic roles (championing, synthesising, facilitating and implementing) identified by Freek *et al.* (2020). Therefore, the researcher concluded that middle managers in the department were perceived as important strategic players by the immediate supervisors.

The data revealed that middle managers in the department played a range of fundamental roles, including a core managerial role, which involves supervising lower-level staff. Middle managers also played an important implementation and monitoring role and supported their immediate supervisors. Freek *et al.* (2020:17) regard middle management as “a strategic asset”, suggesting that middle managers and their role are critical. Mantere (2005) also recognised middle managers as strategy champions (see 2.7). However, in the context of the current study, middle managers were not as involved as they would want in order to be regarded as strategic champions. Nonetheless, this finding affirms the identity of middle managers as critical strategy practitioners, as they were involved in core activities that were important for the strategic outcomes of the organisation.

This finding is well aligned with the middle management perspective introduced by Wooldridge *et al.* (2008), in that this perspective places middle managers at the centre of strategy delivery. Similar to the findings by Surju *et al.* (2020), the current study found that middle managers are the link in between lower-level staff and top management (Surju *et al.*, 2020). One of the motivations for the middle management perspective is that middle managers occupy an intermediate position within organisations and serve as important interfaces between otherwise disconnected actors and domains, such as top and operating-level managers (Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008). This was evident in participants’ responses placing middle managers as playing a critical role which included supervising lower-level staff but also selling strategic issues to the top layer. The next section discusses the second secondary research question.

5.2.3. Secondary research question 2 – How do middle managers perceive themselves as strategy practitioners?

In this section, the researcher discusses how middle managers perceive themselves as strategy practitioners. The findings revealed that middle managers understood their identity as largely a layer between lower-level staff and top management, which is consistent with research by Wooldridge *et al.* (2008) and Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014). The researcher noted some divergent views by middle managers in relation to strategising work. The divergent views pointed to the identity dynamics, which affirms that identity at individual level is indeed a self-defined construct. Some middle managers see themselves as influencers of policy direction through who they are. Therefore, in doing the strategic work, middle managers have to influence the process by doing the conceptual ground work and presenting the work to managers (Harding *et al.*, 2014; Jansen van Rensburg *et al.*, 2014). At the time of this study, middle managers were influencing the strategy discourse in the department under study by managing from the bottom (Freek *et al.*, 2020). There was also a view by middle managers that they were not managers in the true sense of the word but rather implementing agents or functionaries (Surju *et al.*, 2020). The reason for this was that middle managers in the department under study mostly found themselves translating strategies from the top into plans within their different functional areas. As such, emphasis is placed on a much more individual level where descriptions, such as specialist and professional technocrat, are prominent.

Furthermore, it was evident that middle managers understood the essence of being a middle manager, expressed in the roles and the requirements attached to the position. For example, there is an understanding that middle managers should know about policy development, implementation and monitoring. Gjerde and Alvesson (2020:125) note that the burgeoning stream of research has taught us what middle managers should do, what they actually do, and which skills they need for this managerial role. Similarly, the current research found that, while there is general consensus about who middle managers are in the department under study, there are also expectations of what middle managers should be. This was seen through statements such as middle managers should be innovative, should initiate and middle managers should take decisions in the department under study.

The current findings revealed the dynamic nature of the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners from a multi-level perspective as well as at individual level. While middle managers understood their identity as strategy practitioners, the gap between what middle managers are perceived to be and what they should be, signal the dynamic nature of identity. For example, participating middle managers understood themselves as innovative specialists. Directors however felt that middle managers lacked in areas such as managing lower-level staff and other human resource-related issues. The areas identified by middle managers as lacking are related to taking initiative, ownership of programmes, and having authority to act without fear. There was recognition of middle managers as key role players in strategic work, and ultimately their influence on the strategic performance of the department. Through exploring the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners, the current study revealed how middle managers described the roles they were playing in the department under study. The finding is in line with the views of Brown (2021) who notes that the core of identity is the identification of self as an occupant of a role. This was evident in responses by middle managers describing themselves as “specialists”, “influencers” and “supervisor”, signifying the recognition of being an occupant of a role, which is core in the concept of identity at individual level (Brown, 2021). The next section discusses the third secondary research question.

5.2.4. Secondary research question 3 – How does internal identity dynamics constrain or enable strategy practitioners in their strategising work in a government context?

The findings revealed that there are different ways of understanding the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners in the department under study. The researcher concluded that there are three categories of middle managers in the department under study, namely pure administrators, specialists, and hybrid (administration and specialist) middle managers. However, at the time of this study, there was no document clearly articulating these categories and their purpose within the department under study. However, it was understood that there was a category superior to the others, namely chief education specialist (CES). This was clear in the call for parity in relation to middle manager levels by one of the middle managers. Understandably, there is a rationale behind these categories, which would then

determine the functions and roles of each category. For example, a CES specialises in a particular education field, such as mathematics or languages. The administration category focuses on the administrative activities related to the functional area known as 'the branch' within the department under study. The hybrid combines both the administration and specialist categories but also becomes a generalist in the sense that he or she could be allocated any programme without necessarily looking at the specialisation ability. Ultimately, all the categories contribute differently to the strategic outcome of the organisation. Therefore, the strategising work of middle managers can be influenced by the category of middle management level they represent. For example, the specialist category in a particular field, which also bring in the element of being versatile in roles such as support, supervision and project management.

Through exploring the identity of the middle manager as strategy practitioner, as perceived by both immediate supervisors and middle managers themselves, the study was able to bring to the fore the multi-level dynamics present between these two levels. The researcher concluded that, although there is general consensus regarding middle managers as strategy practitioners, there are various views about who middle managers are in relation to strategic work. Some directors thought that middle managers lacked experience and did not take initiative or ownership of programmes, adding to the dynamic nature of identity as self-defined.

Again, this could be based on the individual experience of middle managers and also on how they self-define themselves. After all, identity at individual level focuses on self in relation to others (Oliver, 2015). The researcher observed that the identity of middle managers was largely understood in terms of the roles they play or ought to play.

While middle managers were perceived as critical within the department under study, directors felt that middle managers were not functioning at the required level. This could be linked to a number of constraining factors that affect middle managers in their day-to-day work, such as communication gap and a lack of accountability. Participants pointed to a need to allow middle managers to act strategically and – most importantly – independently in order to realise their full potential in terms of strategising work. Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014) warn that, while middle managers have the potential to influence the strategy agenda and the strategies of organisations, if they are constrained by traditional perspectives of what middle managers are supposed to

do, this potential will not be realised. Arguably, middle managers embrace a less powerful individual identity than directors and they embark on issue selling as a way of influencing strategic direction.

It was evident from the findings of the study that the way middle managers are perceived by their immediate supervisors, may also influence their strategising work. For example, where middle managers are perceived as less experienced because of their age, it is unlikely that their suggestion will be considered. This results in middle managers often feeling disempowered, affecting the way they conduct their work. Just as identity is relational, powerful practitioners have more influence than those embracing less powerful identities in determining the strategic direction of the organisation (Lumby, 2019). Middle managers are typically viewed as 'less powerful', given their position in the hierarchy. The study confirmed that the strategic discourses provide a space for power struggles representing a dialectical battle (Gomez, 2007; Lumby, 2019:7) between competing groups, which can be corporate management and less powerful agents, such as middle managers or project managers.

The findings also revealed how participating middle managers were using some practices to influence their strategising work at the time. Notably, middle managers used issue selling in order to sell ideas to top management. This is in line with the assertions by Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) who remark that middle managers have to put together a convincing story about what they are doing for the benefit of top managers. In line with Brown (2020a), middle managers in the department also reported undergoing what is referred to as 'identity work' as they were engaged in the process of constructing their preferred identity. According to Brown (2020b), practitioners in various organisations continuously engage in the process of identity work. Brown (2020a:8) further suggests that identity work activities are prominent during specific events, such as times of transition, when there are conflicts, misunderstandings or tensions around roles, and in the face of threats that make identity issues more salient. Therefore, the identity dynamics that were prevalent within the case department formed part of the contributing factors compelling middle managers to engaging in practices of constructing their identity as strategy practitioners.

It is possible for the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners to be influenced by their career aspirations (Brown, 2021). Participating middle managers viewed themselves as “managers-in-training” as did directors. Subsequently, there was an expectation that middle managers were continuously developing themselves. This implies that identity is not static but is continuously evolving depending on the aspirations and changes in the organisational settings (Brown, 2020a). The researcher observed how some participating middle managers spoke about the experience they had accumulated over the years. Brown (2021) likened identity work to identity play, which refers to people engaging in provisional but active trial of possible future selves, and which emphasises the extent to which identities are made through processes of spontaneity, enjoyment, discovery and intuition. This was evident among participating middle managers in the current study engaging in activities related to career learning, aspiration, as well personal development. This then represents the elements of identity work or construction.

In addition, middle managers face an array of hindering factors that affect their work as middle managers (Lê & Jarzabkowski, 2014; Venter, 2014). One of the key hindering factors is that of the power dynamics between directors and middle managers, where middle managers are perceived as “less powerful actors” who lack authority to act strategically. Interestingly, despite the power tensions between participating middle managers and directors, the directors indicated that they wanted to see middle managers taking initiative and showing more ownership in terms of certain aspects, and even expected middle managers to “act as directors” in their absence.

The findings revealed that a key hindering factor was the silo mentality that participating middle managers experienced, which prevented them from getting a holistic view of the bigger whole. A silo mentality directly affects the work of middle managers given the lack of information on other parts on the department under study. In addition, the researcher concluded that participating middle managers were missing out on critical information because they were side-lined by virtue of their position in the organisational structure. In certain cases, middle managers were expected to implement certain activities they did not necessarily support or want to implement;

however, they felt compelled to follow through with these activities due to the power dynamics they experienced between themselves and the directors.

The findings further revealed aspects that contributed towards a negative organisational culture. Participating middle managers reported often feeling suppressed in their role as middle manager as they were not allowed to freely express themselves. Participating directors shared how they observed that middle managers seemed to work under fear. When middle managers are working under fear, their strategising work is limited to doing what they are told to do by those with more powerful identities (Gomez 2007). This could be the reason why middle managers sometimes do not take initiative or do not take ownership of programmes. Again, this conclusion links back to the concerns and theorisation that, if middle managers feel constrained, their potential to influence strategy will not be realised (Garlick, 2021; Jansen van Rensburg *et al.*, 2014; Mantere, 2005; Whittington, 2012).

5.3. Main research conclusions

This section summarises the research conclusions of the study and addresses the gaps that the study set out to respond to, as identified in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

Firstly, the study aimed to understand the unique organisational context and social setting within which middle managers and their immediate supervisors conduct their day-to-day work. This was in line with the assertion that the strategy-as-practice research perspective has the ability to expose how strategy making is enabled and constrained by prevailing organisational and societal practices within the organisation (Whittington, 2012).

Based on the rich descriptions by the participants and the qualitative analysis of the data, the organisational context could be described as a typical bureaucratic public institution dominated by political influence, revealing a rather hostile organisational culture that had a negative effect on the work of middle managers. The social setting reflected an embedded set of rules that guided the way work was being done at the time. The organisational context, a typical bureaucratic system, followed a top-down approach, which was perforated by system deficiencies, red tape as well as work scope dynamics. According to Axelsson (2016), strategies in public institutions emanate from government or top-level management of public authorities. Therefore,

as noted in Chapter 2, public strategising tensions are seemingly inherent in the public sector and lead to the development of various bureaucratic organising practices and processes to deal with those tensions (Höglund *et al.*, 2018).

Data also revealed that the organisational context dictates the work of middle managers and ultimately the department (Mookherjee & West, 2013; Venter, 2014). The findings revealed that participating middle managers were at times disempowered as accountability was with directors and thus, middle managers acted with limited authority. Participating middle managers indicated that the limited authority they had been given, affected the quality of their work and even their attitudes towards their work. In addition, the political environment within which middle managers operate has a bearing in the work of the department (Bryson & George, 2020; Mookherjee & West, 2013; Venter, 2014). Finally, participating middle managers were affected by the scope of the work or how work is determined given that the department under study is a public sector. As a result, middle managers find it difficult to innovate. The organisational context also presents an opportunity to influence the work of middle managers positively by adopting enabling practices such as involving middle managers in the planning sessions. Middle managers' strategising work can therefore be enabled by closing the communication gap, and by ensuring that middle managers are involved in strategic sessions. Finally, the organisational context within which middle managers operate has a bearing on their strategising work and their identity (Axelsson, 2016; Brown, 2021; Mookherjee & West, 2013; Venter, 2014).

The strategising work of participating middle managers was shaped by the prevailing and embedded practices within the organisational context of the department under study. The reason here is that the organisational context has been found to be influencing the work of middle managers by its nature, i.e. its bureaucratic nature, political nature and also the set of rules that are already established, whether articulated or inherently adopted as acceptable practices (Axelsson, 2016; Brown, 2021; Bryson *et al.*, 2018; Mookherjee & West, 2013; Venter, 2014). There are therefore those practices that are inherently adopted, such as working in silos, and such practices have a bearing on the strategising work of middle managers.

Secondly, the study adopted a multi-level perspective in an attempt to shed light on the dynamics between middle managers and their immediate supervisors.

The perception of middle managers as perceived internally in an organisational setting has a bearing on their strategising practice given the divergent views of who middle managers are, what they should be doing in terms of the generally acceptable middle manager norms. Middle managers are critical strategy practitioners who contribute to the strategic outcomes and ultimately the survival of the department. Although they have limited authority, they are referred to, by their immediate supervisors, as 'strategists' occupying positions of influence, up and down the hierarchy. However, various identity dynamics, encapsulated in the identity as 'should be' as well as power dynamics between middle managers and directors, are prominent, and can be seen in the divergent views of directors and middle managers. While middle managers may see themselves as the link between the top layer and lower-level staff, and are also understood as critical by their immediate supervisors, more was expected from them in terms of their roles. Through studying the multi-level dynamics between middle managers and their immediate supervisor, the study responds to calls for more studies that focus on identity at cross-level (Ravasi *et al.*, 2017).

Based on the above, the researcher concluded that middle managers engage in a process of 'becoming', as they are in a continuous process of self-enhancement, which is linked to the notion of identity work. Brown (2021) states that, central to the process of identity work and in part, is the process of self-enhancement, which involves processes of identity construction (Brown, 2020a; 2021). Therefore, the participating middle managers' identity, as strategy practitioners, was constructed over time through their career journey and the experiences they had gained in their position as a middle manager. Middle managers seemed to continue to construct their identity, mostly for self-enhancement (Brown, 2020a). Having spent many years in this position, many participating middle managers shared that they were aspiring to become directors eventually. The study further found that the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners was not static but evolved over time as they sought to improve their current identities (Brown, 2021).

The roles played by middle managers in the department affirmed them as strategy practitioners, although with limited authority. The views offered by both directors and middle managers suggest that the perception of others as strategy practitioners can be viewed differently, depending on the role one is expected to play. The study

concluded that participating middle managers were not only perceived based on their position in the hierarchy, but also in terms of the roles they play. This is in line with Gjerde and Alvesson (2020:125) who note that middle managers play an important part in organisational hierarchies on account of their position placed between the operating core and the apex. From the findings by the current study, it became apparent that there was misalignment between what directors expected of middle managers regarding their strategising work and what middle managers were accomplishing in their day-to-day work. For example, participating directors expected middle managers to be independent and at times to act as directors; however, middle managers reported feeling rather disempowered in their position and that they lacked authority.

The researcher further concluded that, in the department under study, middle managers' strategising practices were influenced by the prevailing factors embedded in the context within which they worked as discussed in the organisational section above (Axelsson, 2016; Brown, 2021; Bryson *et al.*, 2018; Mookherjee & West, 2013; Venter, 2014). Factors, such as the communication gap, power dynamics and working in silos were either articulated or adopted as daily norms (see Section 4.4). Because of their identity as strategy practitioners, middle managers have limited authority and face exclusion from various meetings that are understood to be decision-making sessions of the department. Middle managers reported being disadvantaged by a lack of information emanating from such strategic meetings. As a result, their strategising work was also affected. Furthermore, the government context under study had a set of rules that made it difficult for middle managers to innovate. It appeared that middle managers were mostly used as implementing agents rather than as innovators. While both directors and middle managers acknowledged the important role middle managers play in terms of strategic influence and supervising lower-level staff, directors felt that middle managers were not taking initiative or ownership of programmes. Participating middle managers however seemed to be working under fear, which might have been the reason why they did not take initiative or ownership of the programmes or any work.

The research further concluded that participating middle managers had different self-identities embedded in the category and role which they had been assigned (Brown

2021). The individual identities they embraced constituted fundamentally different experiences in how they shaped strategy (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). The identity of 'being less powerful' could have an effect on how middle managers conduct their work affecting, their strategising work (Gomez, 2007; Lumby, 2019).

When middle managers spoke about the three different types of middle managers within the department, certain dynamics and tensions were evident. For example, the role of a pure administrative middle managers would differ fundamentally from that of a 'hybrid' middle manager. A hybrid middle manager has both administrative and specialisation identities and these roles would be linked to the specialisation and administrative function. Interestingly, what emerged from the findings was a perceived inequality among middle managers in relation to specialist middle managers in comparison with other categories of middle managers. The other categories of middle managers, the hybrid and administrative, believe that the specialists category has more benefits than the other two categories. This further revealed the complex nature of the context within which participating middle managers in the department under study were functioning at the time and the various tensions they needed to navigate.

Lastly, the study affirmed that participating middle managers were playing a crucial strategic role within the department under study, and subsequently contributed towards the organisational outcomes of this department. This was confirmed by the perspectives of both middle managers and their immediate supervisors (directors). Directors mentioned that middle managers were the people carrying out the work and "[had] almost the entire weight of government [on] their shoulders". The directors felt that the department would not exist without middle managers.. This is in line with the middle management perspective introduced by Wooldridge *et al.* (2008). According to Wooldridge *et al.* (2008), the middle management perspective acknowledges that middle managers and their activities are important in terms of key organisational outcomes. For example, some of the core roles participating middle managers were playing in supporting the directors were:

- influencing the work of the department;
- conceptualising and writing crucial documents, such as policy;
- serving at both strategic and operational level; and
- managing sub-sections, such as supervision of lower-level staff.

The findings further showed how horizontal and vertical communication was crucial in the role of middle managers, and that middle managers play an important role in strategic alignment between the lower-level staff and the senior management level.

While there were views by participating directors that middle managers in the department under study had to innovate and take initiative, in part, the researcher concluded that the changes implored should be preceded by changes in the organisational context.

In conclusion, middle managers as strategy practitioners are understood differently, depending on the category and the roles they are expected to play. They are however also perceived as skilful strategy practitioners who play an array of strategising roles within the department. Middle managers not only interpret strategic intent from the top echelons and translate it into implementable plans but they also conceptualise the work of the department under study. The identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a government is therefore perceived using both the traditional and the contemporary perspectives of studying middle managers. The traditional view projects middle managers as mere strategy implementers (Surju *et al.* 2020; Wooldridge *et al.* 2008), while the contemporary view adopts a more comprehensive stance which places middle managers at the centre of strategy making from its formulation to implementation (Surju *et al.* 2020; Wooldridge *et al.* 2008).

Lastly, a summary of the main conclusions linked to the three secondary research questions is presented in Figure 15 below:

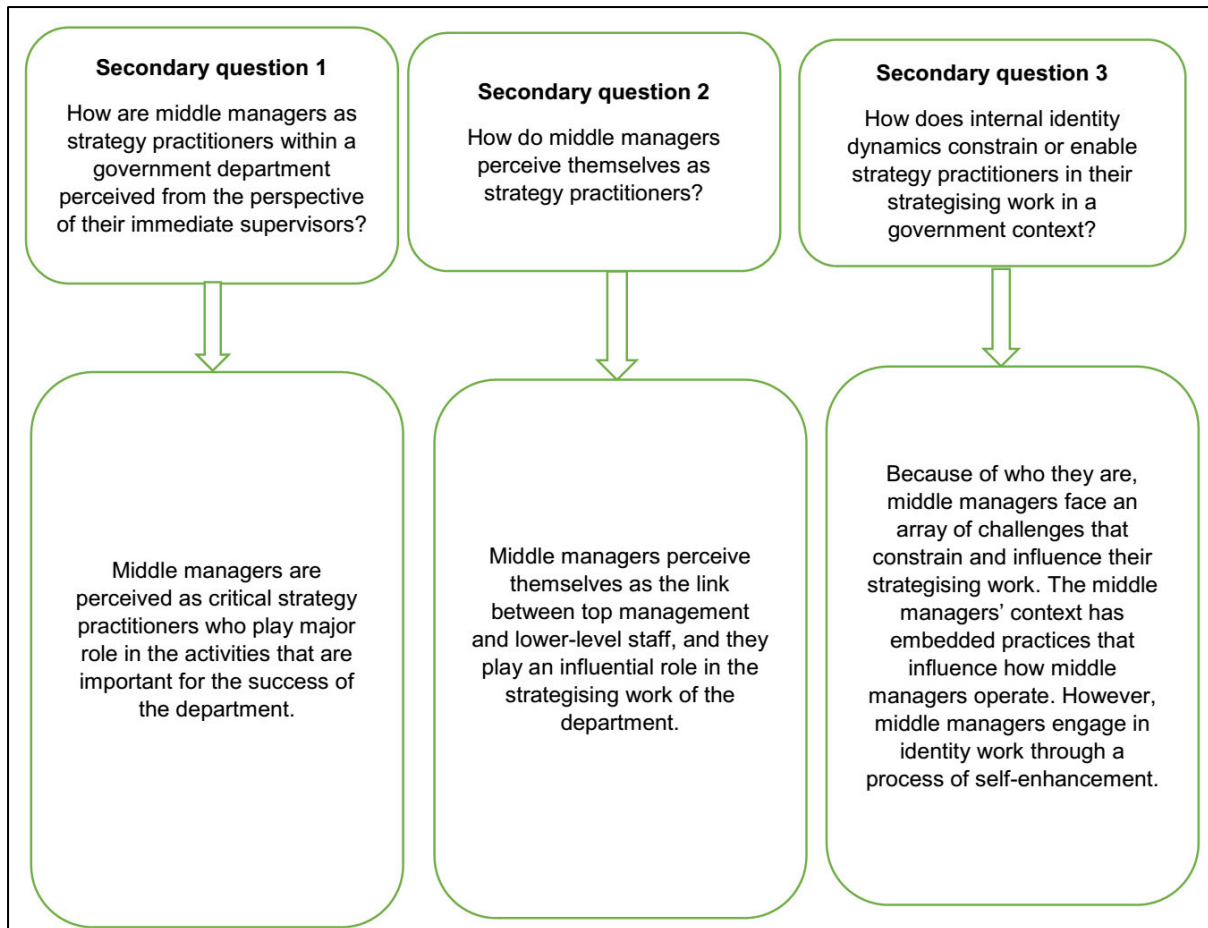


Figure 15 : Summary of main conclusions linked to research questions
Source: Own compilation

5.4. Importance and benefits of the study

The current study shed light on the link between identity and strategy within a public sector context, and from a multi-level perspective. The strategy–identity nexus is still under-researched, particularly in a public context, and most previous studies have focused on the private sector. By looking at multi-level dynamics and exposing the messy reality of strategy as well as the dynamic and ambiguous nature of identity, the study was able to reveal some of the dynamics and tensions of the strategy-identity nexus. This offered an understanding of how middle managers function within a complex system, such as a government department, which is a unique research context because under researched. The study aimed to expand on the growing literature that focuses on the strategy–identity nexus, and adopted a novel approach by incorporating a multi-level perspective, focusing on both middle managers and their immediate supervisors.

The findings of this study provided an understanding of how middle managers perceive themselves as strategy practitioners within a public sector context. Through the strategy-as-practice, the researcher was able to identify factors that enable and constrain the strategising work of middle managers. The findings of the current study may be useful in providing insight into how middle managers can be utilised to the best of their ability within a public sector department, and the findings may be transferrable to other government departments. By bringing to the fore the voices of both middle managers and their immediate supervisors, the study provided multi-level insights and attempted to provide a holistic view of the realities within a unique context. Both middle managers and directors provided rich stories of their unique context and shared useful recommendations on how to improve the strategising activities within the department under study. The study provides an opportunity for scholars in the strategy-as-practice research perspective to explore the strategy–identity nexus further by undertaking studies in this domain.

5.5. Recommendations and managerial implications

This section provides possible recommendations on improving the strategising work of middle managers to managers within a public sector context, and discusses the managerial implications of the findings of the study.

The findings confirmed a need for middle managers to be afforded more authority in their positions. Such authority can be assigned through involving middle managers in decision-making processes within the department. While the government department under study followed a predominantly top-down approach at the time due to its bureaucratic nature, incorporating consultative and engagement sessions between directors and middle managers during formulation of plans may prove to be a useful method to engage and enable middle managers in their strategising work.

The findings identified a need for a forum for middle managers, which not only discusses operational issues but which would also be a forum where top management could share the vision and key decisions of the department in terms of the strategic intent of the department. In this way, middle managers will have first-hand information about the strategic intent of the department under study, and will experience a sense of belonging. This may translate into a better sense of ownership of the key activities

for which middle managers are kept responsible. This will potentially improve their strategising work and ultimately contribute to the strategic effectiveness of the department.

Participating middle managers reported often feeling overloaded and over-worked due to all the various roles they had to play over and above key strategic activities for which they were responsible. Providing additional support in the form of a comprehensive lower-level staffing structure, may assist middle managers in juggling their different roles effectively and would allow them to focus on key strategic activities, such as conceptualising documents, running programmes and doing other strategic work.

A need was expressed for directors to support middle managers better in executing their strategising work. The findings also revealed a lack of communication as a key constraint that affected how middle managers conducted their work. Communication could be improved through frequent meetings where ideas are shared and where issues are deliberated between middle managers and directors. This would provide a platform for middle managers to provide their inputs and which might empower them in their role as middle managers and aid them in conducting their activities more effectively.

It was evident in the findings that middle managers use the practice of issue selling in order to bring strategic issues to the attention of top managers. Middle managers could however be afforded more inclusive platforms to share their ideas. This would encourage open discussion and innovative dialogue, and allow for a more inclusive strategic management process and encourage innovation within the department.

5.6. Recommendations for future research

There are still limited studies combining strategy and identity, particularly from a multi-level perspective and within a public sector context. The current study focused specifically on the identity dynamics between directors and middle managers. Further research could focus on other levels, such as lower-level staff.

A study could also be done to explore how the identity of top leaders, as strategy practitioners of the organisation, affects the strategising work of other strategy actors within the organisation. Such study would add to the body of knowledge on how the

personal traits of an individual influence his or her strategising work, and how one person's strategising affects other actors.

Further studies could be conducted on identity work of strategy actors in public and private entities in order to identify their learned experience and knowledge of strategising. This has the potential to add to the body of knowledge in terms of understanding those practices that are learnt over time and which are necessary for strategising, specifically addressing the question of acceptable practices, values and norms necessary for actors to understand the strategising work.

The practice of issue selling is a growing area of interest, which is becoming an strategy-as-practice research terrain for exploration (De Souza Santos, 2021). There is a link between issue selling and strategising practices, which is open for scholars for further exploration within the strategy-as-practice research perspective. While the current study explored some of the dynamics associated with issue selling, it would be interesting to explore strategising through issue selling as a practice, including different categorisations and levels of issue selling as an expansion to the current body of knowledge on issue selling.

5.7. Contributions of the study

The study aimed to contribute towards the body of knowledge on literature within the strategy-as-practice research perspective, the middle management perspective as well as the strategy–identity nexus. Specifically, the study shed light on the link between strategy and identity in order to understand the lived realities of middle managers within a public sector department, and how their identity as strategy practitioners influenced their strategising work.

First the study makes a contribution towards the study of strategy within a unique organisational context. The study was undertaken within a government department, which remains an under-explored research context. By exploring how the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners was perceived by their immediate supervisors, the study provided a multi-level perspective, which enabled a dynamic and holistic view of how strategising takes place within a government department. The study revealed that, while participating middle managers were critical strategy practitioners, there was a misalignment of expectations between directors and middle

managers, and this reflected an ambiguous and complex environment in which middle managers were situated. In addition, the study makes a contribution by answering the research question in relation to how middle managers perceive themselves as strategy practitioners. The study revealed that participating middle managers perceived themselves as a link between lower-level staff and the top echelons. Some of the tensions and power dynamics evident between these two levels and the way in which middle managers responded to or were influenced by such tensions confirmed the dynamic nature of identity at multi-level.

The current study contributes to strategy–identity studies using the strategy-as-practice research perspective in an under-explored government context. The study contributes towards a better understanding of the role middle managers play as strategy practitioners within the government context. The study was also able to identify key enabling and constraining factors that influenced the strategising work of middle managers within the department under study. Academically, the study encourages further studies combining strategy and identity so as to understand the nexus between these two constructs and identity from a multi-level perspective.

The study brought to the fore the diverse array of roles and responsibilities that middle managers within a government department are required to have. The current study also revealed the dynamics and tensions associated with these roles, and the skills middle managers were required to have in terms of these roles. The study revealed the dynamic and complex nature of the organisational environment within which middle managers and director function.

5.8. Research limitations

The current study was conducted within a single government department in South Africa. Research focused only on middle managers with the title of deputy director, and their immediate supervisors (directors) and excluded any other participants that might have fallen under the middle management definition or any other levels. Given that the researcher had an insider’s perspective, he continuously had to be aware of his own biases. This was mitigated through keeping reflective notes and journals. Although the findings cannot be generalised, the aim of the study was to provide an in-depth account of middle managers and their immediate supervisors and the identity

of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a single government department. The findings may be transferable to other government departments sharing the same organisational context by conducting a similar study.

5.9. Conclusion

This chapter built on the findings reported in Chapter 4, by presenting the main conclusions that emanated from the findings and by providing recommendations for management and future research. This chapter affirms that the research problem identified in Chapter 1 was addressed by answering the primary and secondary research questions.

The current study sought to address the research gap in relation to the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a government department.

The study answered the primary research question through 26 in-depth interviews with two groups, namely directors and middle managers. The main purpose of having two groups was to get a multi-level perspective of how middle managers were perceived as strategy practitioners within the department under study. Using a multi-level perspective, the current study revealed some of the dynamics and tensions present within the department at the time of the research. What emerged signified the dynamic nature of identity at individual level. Because of their identity as middle managers, this group of strategy practitioners were at times disempowered as accountability lay elsewhere and they therefore act with limited authority. Although they had limited accountability and authority, their immediate supervisors referred to them as 'strategists' occupying a position of influence, up and down the hierarchy. Middle managers play a crucial strategic role within the department and therefore contribute towards the organisational outcomes of the department. As such, middle managers were perceived as critical strategy practitioners within the department under study. Middle managers were not only perceived by their position in the hierarchy, but also by the roles they were playing at the time of this research.

The organisational context, within which participating middle managers were operating, presented those factors that constrained middle managers in doing their work. In addition, middle managers were also affected by the political environment of the department under study. However, the organisational context also presented an

opportunity to influence the work of middle managers positively by adopting enabling practices, such as involving middle managers in the planning sessions and allowing them to lead. The identity of 'being less powerful' could have had an effect on how participating middle managers were conduct their work affecting their strategising task. The researcher further concluded that participating middle managers were engaged in a process of 'becoming' as they were in a continuous process of self-enhancement, which was linked to the notion of identity work.

Finally, participating middle managers perceived themselves as a link between lower-level staff and the top echelons. The current study revealed the tensions and power dynamics evident between these two levels and the way middle managers responded to or were influenced by such tensions.

5.10. Concluding reflection by the researcher

This has been the most punishing but at the same time most rewarding journey I have ever embarked on, one that was never spared of moments of despair and discouragement. As I embarked on this journey, I was not confident to tackle such a difficult topic, which to this end, I find it confusing but challenging at the same time. To combine strategy and identity in one study has never been easy for me. It has been a gruelling three years of juggling family, work and studies. In between, there was always social life that had to suffer moments of pause in the interest of academic life. Of course, it took much commitment and discipline together with the support from the supervisors to whom I am forever indebted. I could not afford to disappoint Prof Davis and Dr De Metz. I have much respect for these academics. Their writing was never easy to comprehend but with a persistent quest for learning, it all makes sense. The Covid-19 pandemic brought with it many uncertainties and much despondency. I was never sure whether I would pull it off and be counted amongst those rewarded with a master's degree. However, I was driven by the same passion for education my mother had shown when she resumed her Grade 12 in the same school and in the same year I was doing Grade 8. I dare not disappoint the wish of my late father who implored me to further my studies while I have the opportunity to do so. May his soul rest in peace! Indeed, I have gained much knowledge which will surely form the basis for my further studies. At least, it is that point where it has to conclude and it feels rewarding. However, the greatest is yet to come.

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Appendices

Appendix A : Interview guide for directors

INTERVIEW GUIDE (DIRECTORS)

Good morning/afternoon and thank you very much for making time to meet with me.

I will be **recording** this interview, is that fine with you?

The aim of the research is to explore how the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners is perceived and how it influences their strategising work within the department.

I want to have a conversation with you about your experience and understanding of working with middle managers.

Just to assure you that everything we talk about is completely confidential, however if you don't feel comfortable talking about something, please feel free to tell me and we will then move on to a different topic.

Do you **have any questions** for me before we get started?

General questions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about yourself and your background? • Tell me about your job as a Director. 	
Main objectives	Questions
Objective 1: To establish how the identity of a middle manager as a strategy practitioner is perceived within a government department	1. In your own view, how do you see a DD/MM and their work within the Department? Probe: in your understanding, <i>define a middle manager and their work in the context of government.</i>
Objective 2: To explore how identity dynamics influence the work of a middle manager as a strategy practitioner?	2. Tell me about your typical day working with middle managers? 3. Please tell me more about the challenges you experience as a Director working with and through middle managers in executing your day-to-day functions. 4. What should DD/MM do differently? 5. What are your views on middle managers?
Objective 3: exploring the identity of a practitioner	6. What does being a member of your department where you work, mean to you? 7. In your work context – who are you?

INTERVIEW GUIDE (DEPUTY DIRECTORS)

Good morning/afternoon and thank you very much for making time to meet with me.

I will be recording this interview, is that fine with you?

The aim of the research is to explore how the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners is perceived and how it influences their strategising work within the department. I want to have a conversation with you about your journey as a middle manager.

Before we start, I want to assure you that everything we talk about is completely confidential, however if you don't feel comfortable talking about something, please feel free to tell me and we will move on to a different topic

Do you **have any questions** for me before we get started?

General questions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about yourself and your background? • Tell me about your job as a middle manager. • Why did you decide to work in the public sector? 	
Main objectives	Questions
Objective 2: To establish how middle managers perceive themselves as strategy practitioners?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell me about the journey you went through in becoming a Deputy Director/middle manager. 2. How do you see your role as a DD? 3. Tell me about the work that you do as a middle manager?
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. What are the best/worst things about being a middle manager? 5. How do you think others in the department see you as a MM?
Objective 3: To explore how identity dynamics influence the work of a middle manager as a strategy practitioner?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Explain to me what a typical/average work day is like. 7. What makes your work difficult? 8. Think back to a day where you experienced a particular challenge – tell me about this experience and how you dealt with the challenge 9. What should DDs do differently? 10. Think about your interaction with the Director? What should change and what should stay the same? 11. What is the most important lesson you learnt in your position as DD? 12. Where do you see yourself as a MM in the future?
Objective 4: to explore identity of practitioners	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. What does being a member of your department where you work, mean to you? 14. Think back to when you were first hired as a middle manager - what was your initial expectations of your role as a middle manager? 15. What is your experience currently as a middle manager when compared to your expectations when you started the role? 16. In your work context – who are you?

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

I, _____ (participant's name), confirm that I am aware of the details of the study and participate voluntarily. The nature of the study was explained to me prior to the interview session.

I have further read the information pertaining to the study and understood the information provided to me.

I have had sufficient time to assess whether or not to participate in the study and therefore prepared to take part in the study as a participant.

I further understand that I can withdraw at any time should I wish to do so before or during the study.

I give consent for the interview to be recorded using a voice recorder.

I further confirm that I received copy of this agreement.

.....

PARTICIPANT

Full Names _____

Signature _____ Date _____

.....

RESEARCHER

Full names _____

Signature _____ Date _____

.....

Confidentiality Agreement for transcriber

This is to certify that I, _____, the transcriber of the research project exploring the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a South African government department, agree to the responsibilities of the transcription of data obtained from participants during the interviews.

I acknowledge that the research project is conducted by Mr ME Mamburu from the Department of Business Management in the University of South Africa.

I understand that any information (written, verbal or any other form) obtained during the performance of my duties must remain confidential and in line with the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.

This includes all information about participants, their employees/their employers/their organisation, as well as any other information.

I understand that any unauthorised release or carelessness in the handling of this confidential information is considered a breach of the duty to maintain confidentiality.

I further understand that any breach of the duty to maintain confidentiality could be grounds for immediate dismissal and/or possible liability in any legal action arising from such breach.

Full Name of Transcriber: _____

Signature of Transcriber: _____ Date: _____

Full Name of Primary Researcher: _____

Signature of Primary Researcher: _____ Date: _____

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

RESEARCH TOPIC: Exploring the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a South African government department

Dear participant

My name is Mishumo Emmanuel Mamburu, a postgraduate student at the University of South Africa. I am currently conducting a study titled: exploring the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners, under the supervision of Dr Nadine De Metz and Prof Annemarie Davis. The study is towards a Master of Commerce in Business Management qualification. We therefore invite you to take part of the study as a participant.

WHAT IS THE AIM OF THE STUDY?

The study sets out to explore how the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners is perceived and how it influences their strategising work within the department.

WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY?

The study focuses on the middle managers in salary on salary 11 and 12. In addition, the also includes getting the views of the immediate supervisors of middle managers who are tilted Directors. All other employees of the department are excluded.

NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

Your participation is on voluntary basis and will be through one-on-one interview session at the premises of the Department. The interview will be semi-structured questions and will be conducted by myself. Details of the interview will be communicated with you in due course. It is important to note that your participation will be kept confidential and the researcher will protect your identity at all times.

CAN THE PARCIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY?

As indicated above, your participation is voluntarily and you can withdraw at any time should you wish to do so.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THE STUDY?

The practical benefit that can be derived from the study is an understanding of how middle manager shapes strategy work through who they are. In addition,

understanding of the enabling and constraining factors affecting the strategising work of middle managers can also be derived.

WHAT IS THE LEVEL OF INCONVIENCE OF TAKING PART OF THE STUDY?

Time arrangement may be one of the inconveniences, however, the researcher intends to have the interviews during lunch time or breaks. In addition, any time arrangement that could suit the participant would be appreciated. The interview is planned to take only up to an hour. Furthermore, although questions can seem unfamiliar, the intention is only to get your views. There is no right or wrong answer in all the questions.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER ENSURES CONFIDENTIALITY?

Names of the participants will not be recorded and therefore your privacy will be protected. All participants will be assigned pseudonym and files will be saved in a password protected folder in a password controlled computer. The use of examples in the dissertation will be on anonymous basis.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND FOR HOW LONG?

As indicated above, the information will be stored in a password protected computer. The information will be stored for a period of five years, after which the information will be destroyed completely. All the notes from the interviews will be destroyed through shredding.

IS THERE ANY PAYMENT OR INCETIVE FOR PARTICIPATIONIN THE STUDY?

There is no payment nor incentive for participation in the study.

HAS THE STUDY BEEN APPROVED BY THE DEPARTMENT?

The researcher has obtained a written consent to conduct the study in the department.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL CERTIFICATE?

Yes

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED ABOUT THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY?

You can contact the researcher at 012 357 3438. Alternatively, you can contact Dr N de Metz at 012 429 4935 or Prof A Davis at 012 429 8357.



basic education

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Mr M Mamburu
12 Amur Falcon
Elandspoort
PRETORIA
0183



Dear Mr Mamburu

RESPONSE TO A REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO INTERVIEW DBE OFFICIALS

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) received your request to interview DBE officials for research purposes.

The research request is approved on condition that you, as the applicant of the research, adhere to the conditions set in the research protocol of the Department and to the ethical conduct of using research data and information. Please note that even if the Director-General approved your request, at a personal level officials can still decline to participate in the study.

It is emphasised that the information collected from the DBE should solely be used for the purpose of this research. The Research Co-ordination, Monitoring and Evaluation (RCME) Directorate will liaise with the DBE officials on your behalf.

We recommend that you submit this letter as evidence that the Department is aware of your research.

We request that you share the findings of the research with the DBE at the conclusion of your study.

Yours sincerely

DR G WHITTLE
ACTING DIRECTOR-GENERAL

DATE: 20/10/18



**UNISA DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT RESEARCH ETHICS
REVIEW COMMITTEE**

28 October 2019

Dear Mr Mishumo Emmanuel Mamburu

ERC Reference #: 2019_CEMS_BM_092
Name: Mishumo Emmanuel Mamburu
Student #: 46095551
Staff # N/A

**Decision: Ethics approval
from 28 October 2019 to
27 October 2024**

Researcher(s): Mr Mishumo Emmanuel Mamburu
[REDACTED]

Supervisor(s): Ms Nadine de Metz
E-mail: dmetzn@unisa.ac.za
Tel: (012) 429-4935

Exploring the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a South African Government Department

Qualification: M Com degree

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the UNISA Department of Business Management Ethics Review Committee for the above-mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for 5 years, from 28 October 2019 to 27 October 2024.

*The **low risk application** was **reviewed** by the Department of Business Management Ethics Review Committee on 15 October 2019 in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment. The decision will be tabled at the next Committee meeting on 6 November 2019.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.



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2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the Department of Business Management Ethics Review Committee.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.
5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's Act, no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (27 October 2024). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

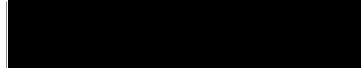
Note:

*The reference number **2019_CEMS_BM_089** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

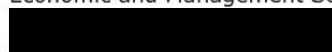
Yours sincerely,



Chairperson: Prof Thea Visser
Department of Business Management



Executive Dean: Prof. Thomas Mogale
Economic and Management Sciences





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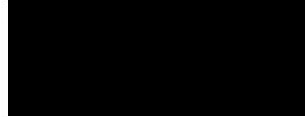
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Abstract

The traditional views in strategy research place strategising as the domain of top management. The middle management perspective has however gained prominence as middle managers are recognised as significant strategy practitioners. The current study sought to explore the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners in a government department, through the strategy-as-practice lens. A single case study approach was followed and data was gathered through in-depth interviews with middle managers and their immediate supervisors as the participants. Findings are presented through three main themes. The first theme describes the unique organisational context within which participating middle managers were situated. The second theme reveal the internal multi-level dynamics between participating middle managers and their immediate supervisors. The final theme highlights the diverse roles and skills of middle managers. The research findings provide insight into the multi-level dynamics present between middle managers and their immediate supervisors and expose some of the enabling and constraining practices that influenced participating middle managers in their day-to-day work environment. The findings revealed that middle managers are considered critical strategy practitioners and the link between the top management and lower level staff. The findings also revealed that middle managers engage in identity work as a process of self-enhancement, confirming that identity is not static. The current research sought to make a contribution to research using the strategy-as-practice research perspective by exploring the link between strategy and identity from a multi-level perspective and within a public sector context.

Key words: identity, middle managers, identity work, strategising, strategy-as-practice perspective, practices, middle management perspective

Jackie Viljoen
Language Editor and Translator



Accredited member of the South African Translators' Institute
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DECLARATION

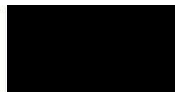
I hereby certify that the thesis by **MISHUMO EMMANUEL MAMBURU** was properly language edited but without viewing the final version.

The track changes function was used and the author was responsible for accepting the editor's changes and for finalising the reference list.

Title of thesis:

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