

DRIVING TEACHER SATISFACTION: THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF GRADE HEADS IN SPECIAL SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Teacher job satisfaction remains a critical concern in education due to its influence on teacher retention, well-being, and instructional effectiveness, particularly within special schools where teachers face complex pedagogical and emotional demands. In such contexts, the leadership role of grade heads becomes pivotal in shaping teachers' professional experiences. This study aimed to explore the roles of grade heads in enhancing teachers' job satisfaction in special schools. The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design because it aimed to gain insight into participants' perceptions, feelings, and interpretations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews involving a purposive sample of ten participants comprising grade heads. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that grade heads enhance teachers' job satisfaction through multiple interconnected roles, including instructional leadership, emotional and professional support, facilitation of collaboration and team cohesion, motivation, and resource coordination. These roles contribute to improving teachers' competence, emotional well-being, sense of belonging, and professional fulfilment, thereby directly addressing the research aim. The study concludes that grade heads play a multifaceted and transformative leadership role in special schools, significantly influencing teachers' job satisfaction. It recommends strengthening leadership development programmes, institutionalising emotional support systems, promoting collaborative practices, implementing recognition strategies, and improving resource allocation mechanisms. The study underscores the need for context-responsive leadership approaches that support teacher well-being and enhance educational outcomes in special school environments.

Keywords: Collaboration, emotional support, grade heads, instructional leadership, teacher job satisfaction, transformational leadership, special schools

Research Background

Teacher job satisfaction has increasingly become a critical area of focus within educational research due to its direct influence on teacher retention, instructional quality, and overall school effectiveness. In complex educational environments such as special schools, teachers are often confronted with unique pedagogical, emotional, and resource-related challenges associated with supporting learners with diverse and often severe learning needs. These contextual demands intensify the need for effective school leadership that is responsive, supportive, and contextually grounded (Motitswe, 2025; Nomtshongwana & Manyakaza, 2025). Within this leadership structure, grade heads occupy a pivotal middle-management role, acting as a bridge between school management and classroom teachers and directly influencing teachers' professional

experiences and well-being. Emerging literature highlights that leadership practices such as instructional guidance, emotional support, collaboration facilitation, motivation, and resource coordination significantly shape teachers' job satisfaction (Manyaka & Simui, 2026). Transformational leadership theory provides a useful lens to understand these dynamics, as it emphasises leaders' ability to inspire, support, and intellectually stimulate staff while addressing their individual needs. In special school contexts, where teachers often experience heightened emotional labour and professional demands, the leadership role of grade heads becomes even more critical. The uploaded study confirms that grade heads contribute to teachers' job satisfaction through multiple leadership functions, including instructional leadership, emotional and professional support, fostering collaboration, motivation, and resource coordination. However, despite growing recognition of leadership influence on teacher outcomes, there remains a need to further explore how these roles manifest specifically within special education settings.

Research Problem Statement

Despite the acknowledged importance of leadership in enhancing teacher job satisfaction, teachers in special schools continue to experience high levels of stress, emotional exhaustion, and job dissatisfaction due to the complex demands of their work environment. These challenges are often exacerbated by inadequate support structures, limited resources, and insufficient context-specific leadership practices (Masike & Mahomed, 2025; Shimaneni & Kiley, 2025). While school leadership is generally recognised as a key determinant of teacher well-being, much of the existing research tends to focus on principals and senior management, with limited attention given to the role of middle-level leaders such as grade heads. In special schools, where the nature of teaching requires specialised instructional strategies, emotional resilience, and collaborative problem-solving, the absence of effective leadership at the grade level can negatively impact teachers' professional experiences and job satisfaction. The uploaded manuscript demonstrates that grade heads play significant roles in supporting teachers, yet these roles are often underexplored and not adequately theorised within the broader discourse on educational leadership. Thus, there is a lack of in-depth understanding of how grade heads influence teachers' job satisfaction in special school contexts, thereby necessitating focused research in this area.

Research Gap

Although existing studies have established a strong relationship between school leadership and teacher job satisfaction, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the specific roles of grade heads in special schools. Most leadership studies have predominantly concentrated on principals and senior leadership teams, often overlooking the contributions of middle leaders who interact more directly and frequently with teachers (Kubheka et al., 2025; Oloba & Mzimba, 2025). Furthermore, while studies such as Neumerski et al. (2025) and Ralebese et al. (2025) emphasise instructional leadership, they do not sufficiently address how such leadership is enacted within specialised contexts like special education. Additionally, current literature tends to generalise teacher experiences across mainstream educational settings, thereby neglecting the unique challenges faced by teachers in special schools, including the need for differentiated instruction, multidisciplinary collaboration, and emotional support. The

uploaded study extends existing knowledge by highlighting the multifaceted roles of grade heads—such as providing emotional support, facilitating collaboration, motivating teachers, and coordinating resources—in enhancing job satisfaction within special schools. However, there remains a need for more context-specific empirical research that integrates these roles within a coherent theoretical framework such as transformational leadership theory.

Research Rationale

The rationale for this study is grounded in the need to address the persistent challenges related to teacher job dissatisfaction, burnout, and attrition, particularly within special school contexts. Understanding the role of grade heads in enhancing teachers' job satisfaction is essential for developing contextually relevant leadership practices that support teacher well-being and improve educational outcomes. Given that grade heads operate at the intersection of policy implementation and classroom practice, their influence is both immediate and significant in shaping teachers' daily experiences. This study is further justified by the limited scholarly attention given to middle leadership in special education, despite its potential to transform teaching and learning environments. By examining the roles of grade heads through the lens of transformational leadership theory, the study contributes to both theoretical and practical knowledge by providing insights into how leadership practices can be adapted to meet the unique demands of special schools. Moreover, the findings can inform policy development, leadership training, and professional development programmes aimed at enhancing teacher support systems and promoting sustainable job satisfaction.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to explore the roles of grade heads in enhancing teachers' job satisfaction in special schools.

Methodology

This study is located within the interpretivist research paradigm, which seeks to understand social phenomena through the subjective experiences and meanings constructed by participants within their specific contexts. Given that the study explores the roles of grade heads in enhancing teachers' job satisfaction in special schools, the interpretivist paradigm is appropriate as it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interactions within their professional environments (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent, thereby allowing the researcher to capture the nuanced and complex dynamics of leadership practices and teacher satisfaction in specialised educational settings. The interpretive stance further aligns with the study's emphasis on meaning-making, particularly in understanding how leadership practices such as instructional support, emotional care, and collaboration influence teachers' professional well-being. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, which is suitable for exploring complex social processes and gaining rich, descriptive insights into participants' experiences. This approach allows the researcher to examine how grade heads enact their roles and how these roles are perceived by teachers in relation to job satisfaction within special schools. Qualitative research is particularly effective in capturing depth, context, and meaning,

which are essential for understanding leadership practices in education (Tenny et al., 2022). The approach facilitates flexibility and responsiveness during data collection, enabling the researcher to probe emerging themes such as instructional leadership, emotional support, collaboration, motivation, and resource coordination as identified in the findings.

A phenomenological research design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of grade heads regarding their roles in enhancing teachers' job satisfaction in special schools. Phenomenology is concerned with exploring and interpreting how individuals make meaning of their experiences within a particular phenomenon (Oranga & Matere, 2023). This design was appropriate because the study sought to understand the essence of participants' experiences as grade heads and how they perceived their leadership practices in relation to teachers' job satisfaction. By focusing on participants' subjective interpretations and lived realities, the phenomenological design enabled the researcher to uncover rich and nuanced insights into the ways instructional leadership, emotional support, collaboration, motivation, and resource coordination contribute to teachers' professional well-being. The phenomenological approach further allowed for a deeper exploration of the meanings participants attached to their leadership roles within the unique context of special schools, thereby enhancing the depth, authenticity, and contextual relevance of the findings. The population of the study comprised teachers and grade heads working in special schools, with a purposive sample of ten participants selected based on their direct involvement in teaching and leadership within these settings. Purposive sampling was utilised to ensure that participants possessed relevant knowledge and experience related to the phenomenon under investigation, thereby enabling the collection of rich and information-rich data (Ahmed et al., 2025). The selection criteria included participants who were actively engaged in special school environments, had experience working with learners with diverse needs, and were serving as grade heads. This sampling strategy ensured that the study captured diverse perspectives while maintaining relevance to the research objectives.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided participants with the opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives in a flexible yet guided manner. This method was appropriate as it allowed the researcher to explore key themes such as instructional leadership, emotional support, collaboration, motivation, and resource coordination in depth. Semi-structured interviews enable probing and clarification, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of participants' views (Robinson, 2023). The use of open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences, while the flexibility of the interview process allowed the researcher to explore emerging issues relevant to teachers' job satisfaction in special schools. The study employed thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data, following the systematic process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, developing themes, reviewing and refining themes, and producing the final report. Thematic analysis was appropriate as it enabled the identification of recurring patterns related to the roles of grade heads, including instructional leadership, emotional and professional support, collaboration, motivation,

and resource coordination. This method allows for both inductive and deductive analysis, ensuring that themes emerge from the data while also being informed by the theoretical framework of transformational leadership theory. The approach enhances the depth and rigour of qualitative data interpretation.

Findings

1. Instructional Leadership

Participants indicated that grade heads play a significant role as instructional leaders by guiding teachers in curriculum adaptation, differentiation, mentoring, and continuous professional support. They emphasised that such support enhances teachers' competence, confidence, and ultimately their job satisfaction in special school contexts. Participant 7 highlighted the importance of curriculum guidance and adaptation to meet diverse learner needs: *"As a grade head, I make it a priority to guide teachers on how to adapt the curriculum to suit learners with different abilities. When teachers feel supported in planning and delivering lessons that actually work for their learners, they become more confident and satisfied with their teaching."* Participant 5 stated the value of classroom observation and constructive feedback in improving instructional practices: *"I regularly observe lessons and provide constructive feedback, not to criticise but to support growth. Many teachers have told me that this ongoing guidance helps them improve their instructional practices, and it gives them a sense of achievement, which boosts their job satisfaction."* Participant 3 focused on the role of differentiation and collaborative strategy development in addressing diverse learning needs: *"In our school, differentiation is key, so I work closely with teachers to develop strategies that address diverse learning needs. When teachers see positive learner responses as a result of these strategies, they feel more competent and fulfilled in their roles."* Participant 10 further highlighted the importance of mentoring and professional dialogue in reducing isolation and enhancing capability: *"I also organise informal mentoring sessions where we discuss challenges in teaching learners with special needs and share practical solutions. These sessions help teachers feel less isolated and more capable, which contributes significantly to their satisfaction at work."*

2. Emotional and Professional Support

Participants strongly emphasised that grade heads play a vital role in providing emotional and professional support to teachers in special schools, where the demands of working with learners with diverse and complex needs can be overwhelming. They highlighted the importance of empathy, availability, and creating supportive environments that enhance teachers' well-being and job satisfaction. Participant 1 emphasised the importance of being approachable and offering a listening ear to teachers experiencing emotional strain: *"In a special school environment, teachers often carry emotional stress because of the learners' complex needs. As a grade head, I make myself available to listen and support them. Sometimes, just being heard and understood makes a big difference in how they feel about their work."* Participant 8 highlighted the role of regular check-ins and encouragement in boosting morale and reducing feelings of being overwhelmed: *"I see part of my role as providing emotional support to teachers, especially after difficult days. I check in with them regularly and encourage them, which helps them feel valued and less overwhelmed. This kind of support improves their morale and job satisfaction."*

Participant 2 focused on the importance of creating a safe and non-judgemental space where teachers can openly express their challenges: *"Teachers in our school face unique challenges, and I try to create a safe space where they can openly share their frustrations without fear of judgement. Offering reassurance and guidance helps them cope better and remain positive about their roles."* Participant 4 further noted the significance of recognising teachers' struggles and providing ongoing encouragement to build resilience: *"Beyond professional guidance, I often act as someone they can turn to for encouragement and motivation. When teachers know that their struggles are recognised and that they are supported, they are more resilient and satisfied in their jobs."*

3. Facilitating Collaboration and Team Cohesion

Participants posited that grade heads play a crucial role in fostering collaboration and building team cohesion among teachers in special schools. Participants highlighted that creating structured opportunities for collaboration, promoting peer support, and encouraging open communication contribute significantly to teachers' sense of belonging, professional growth, and job satisfaction. Participant 9 emphasised the importance of regular collaborative engagements where teachers can share experiences and strategies: *"I make sure that teachers in my grade meet regularly to share strategies and discuss challenges they experience in the classroom. These collaborative sessions help them realise they are not alone, and that sense of teamwork improves their job satisfaction."* Participant 6 highlighted the value of team teaching and peer learning in strengthening professional relationships and confidence: *"In our school, we encourage team teaching and peer support. I coordinate these activities so that teachers can learn from one another. When they collaborate, they feel more confident and connected, which makes their work more fulfilling."* Participant 3 focused on the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration involving other professionals such as therapists and support staff: *"As a grade head, I create opportunities for teachers to work together with therapists and other support staff. This multidisciplinary collaboration helps teachers feel supported and better equipped, which positively influences how they feel about their jobs."* Participant 7 further highlighted the need to cultivate a safe and open environment that promotes the sharing of ideas without fear of criticism: *"I actively promote a culture where teachers can openly share ideas and solutions without fear of criticism. This has built strong team cohesion, and teachers often express that this supportive environment makes them happier and more satisfied in their roles."*

4. Motivation

Participants reveal that grade heads play a significant role in motivating teachers by recognising their efforts, celebrating achievements, and providing consistent positive feedback. In the context of special schools, where learner progress may be gradual, such motivational practices are essential in sustaining teachers' morale, commitment, and job satisfaction. Participant 10 highlighted the importance of recognising incremental progress and celebrating small achievements: *"In a special school, progress can be very slow, so I make it a point to celebrate even the smallest achievements. When teachers see that their efforts are recognised, they feel encouraged and more satisfied with their work."* Participant 8 emphasised the value of acknowledging teachers' dedication and effort in their daily practices: *"I always acknowledge the extra effort teachers put into*

supporting learners with special needs. A simple word of appreciation or recognition during meetings goes a long way in boosting their morale and motivation." Participant 5 pointed to the importance of reinforcing purpose and meaning in teachers' work to sustain motivation: *"Part of my role is to keep teachers motivated, especially when they feel discouraged. I constantly remind them of the impact they are making in learners' lives, which helps them stay positive and committed."* Participant 7 further stated the role of continuous positive feedback in building confidence and a sense of value among teachers: *"I provide regular positive feedback to teachers, highlighting what they are doing well. This not only builds their confidence but also makes them feel valued, which increases their job satisfaction."* Participant 5 additionally highlighted the importance of collective recognition through team celebrations: *"We celebrate successes as a team, whether big or small. These moments of recognition create a positive atmosphere in the school and motivate teachers to continue giving their best."*

5. Resource Coordination

Participants opined that grade heads play a critical role in coordinating and advocating for resources necessary to support effective teaching and learning in special schools. They emphasised that ensuring access to appropriate materials, assistive devices, and support personnel reduces teachers' frustration and enhances their ability to perform their duties effectively, thereby improving job satisfaction. Participant 3 highlighted the importance of providing adequate teaching and learning resources to support instructional effectiveness: *"One of my key responsibilities is to ensure that teachers have the necessary resources, such as assistive devices and specialised teaching materials. When teachers are properly equipped, they feel more confident and less frustrated, which improves their overall job satisfaction."* Participant 9 emphasised the intermediary role of grade heads in communicating teachers' needs to school management: *"I act as a link between teachers and school management by communicating the specific resource needs of our classrooms. When these needs are addressed, teachers are able to perform their duties more effectively and feel supported in their work."* Participant 3 further stated the importance of advocating for both material and human resources to support teachers: *"In a special school, access to the right support staff and materials is critical. I advocate for my teachers by pushing for these resources, and when they receive them, it makes their work easier and more rewarding."* Participant 1 highlighted the role of fair distribution and resource management in reducing stress among teachers: *"Teachers often feel overwhelmed when resources are limited, so I make it a priority to source and allocate what is available fairly. This reduces stress and helps create a more positive and satisfying work environment."*

Discussion

Participants' opinions show instructional leadership as a pivotal mechanism through which grade heads enhance teachers' job satisfaction in special schools. By providing guidance on curriculum adaptation, supporting differentiated instruction, and facilitating ongoing mentoring and feedback, grade heads contribute to the development of teachers' professional competence and confidence. This suggests that teachers' job satisfaction is closely tied to their perceived ability to meet the diverse and complex needs of learners, particularly in specialised contexts. Interpreted through transformational leadership

theory, these practices reflect elements of intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration, where grade heads encourage innovative instructional approaches while addressing the specific developmental needs of teachers. This form of leadership not only enhances instructional quality but also nurtures teachers' sense of professional value and efficacy, which are key determinants of job satisfaction.

These findings are consistent with existing literature that links instructional leadership with improved teacher outcomes. Hsieh et al. (2025) found that leadership practices centred on supervision, feedback, and instructional support significantly enhance teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction. Similarly, Ramadhona et al. (2025) demonstrate that sustained instructional coaching positively influences teachers' instructional practices and professional fulfilment. The present study extends these insights by highlighting the heightened importance of such leadership practices within special schools, where differentiated instruction and collaborative problem-solving are integral to effective teaching. Furthermore, the findings align with Fosco et al. (2023), who argue that leadership focused on teaching and learning has the strongest impact on teacher motivation and well-being. In this context, the data suggest that instructional leadership by grade heads not only confirms established understandings but also deepens them by illustrating how context-responsive support in special schools can mitigate professional challenges and enhance teachers' overall job satisfaction.

The findings highlight emotional and professional support as a critical leadership function through which grade heads enhance teachers' job satisfaction in special schools. By fostering empathetic relationships, maintaining open communication, and creating psychologically safe spaces, grade heads help mitigate the emotional demands associated with teaching learners with complex needs. This support appears to strengthen teachers' resilience, sense of belonging, and overall well-being, which are closely linked to job satisfaction. Interpreted through transformational leadership theory, these practices align with individualised consideration, where leaders attend to the emotional and professional needs of their staff. Such leadership not only acknowledges the human dimension of teaching but also reinforces teachers' sense of value and professional worth, thereby contributing to a more positive and sustainable work experience.

These findings are consistent with existing research emphasising the importance of supportive leadership in enhancing teacher well-being and job satisfaction. For instance, Schaal et al. (2024) found that leaders who demonstrate emotional support and care significantly reduce teacher stress and burnout while promoting job satisfaction. Jensen et al. (2025) also highlight that perceived support from school leadership is a strong predictor of teacher motivation and emotional well-being. The present study extends these insights by illustrating how such support is particularly crucial in special school contexts, where emotional labour is often intensified. Moreover, the findings resonate with Olivier et al. (2024), who argue that leadership practices that prioritise relationships and staff well-being have a profound impact on organisational effectiveness. In this regard, the data suggest that emotional and professional support provided by grade heads not only confirms established literature but also underscores the need for context-sensitive

leadership approaches that address the unique emotional challenges faced by teachers in specialised educational settings.

Participants' responses show that facilitating collaboration and team cohesion is a significant leadership practice through which grade heads enhance teachers' job satisfaction in special schools. By creating structured opportunities for interaction, encouraging peer learning, and fostering open communication, grade heads contribute to a collegial environment where teachers feel supported and professionally connected. This sense of collective efficacy and belonging appears to mitigate feelings of isolation often associated with the demands of special education, thereby enhancing teachers' morale and satisfaction. Interpreted through transformational leadership theory, these practices reflect inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation, as grade heads promote shared goals, collaborative problem-solving, and the exchange of innovative teaching strategies. Such an environment not only strengthens interpersonal relationships but also enhances teachers' professional confidence and engagement, which are essential components of job satisfaction.

These findings are consistent with existing literature that highlighted the importance of collaboration in improving teacher outcomes. Marcedula et al. (2026) argue that teacher collaboration fosters professional learning, reduces work-related stress, and enhances job satisfaction. Similarly, Christensen and Jerrim (2025) emphasise that collaborative professionalism strengthens trust, collective responsibility, and sustained improvement in teaching practice. The present study extends this body of knowledge by highlighting the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration in special schools, where engagement with therapists and support staff is critical for addressing diverse learner needs. Furthermore, the findings align with Yulianti et al. (2026), who assert that collaborative leadership practices significantly influence teacher motivation and organisational effectiveness. In this context, the data suggest that grade heads' efforts to build cohesive and collaborative teams not only confirm existing research but also demonstrate how context-specific collaboration in special schools can enhance both professional fulfilment and job satisfaction among teachers.

The findings position motivation as a central leadership function through which grade heads enhance teachers' job satisfaction in special schools. By recognising effort, affirming incremental progress, and reinforcing the value of teachers' work, grade heads cultivate a sense of purpose and professional worth among staff. In contexts where learner progress may be gradual and emotionally demanding, such recognition appears to sustain teachers' morale and commitment, thereby strengthening their overall job satisfaction. Interpreted through transformational leadership theory, these practices align closely with inspirational motivation and individualised consideration, as grade heads inspire teachers through meaningful encouragement while attending to their need for appreciation and affirmation. This suggests that motivation in this context is not merely about external rewards but about fostering intrinsic commitment and a shared sense of achievement.

These findings are consistent with existing literature that stated the importance of recognition and supportive leadership in enhancing teacher motivation and job satisfaction. For instance, Dreer-Göthe (2025) found that teachers who perceive high levels of support and appreciation from leadership report greater job satisfaction and lower emotional exhaustion. Sariakin et al. (2025) highlight that leadership practices centred on encouragement and recognition contribute significantly to teacher engagement and well-being. The findings also resonate with Yulianti et al. (2026), who argue that motivating teachers through positive reinforcement and shared vision is a key pathway to improving organisational outcomes. The present study extends these insights by demonstrating that, in special school contexts, recognising small achievements and reinforcing purpose are particularly critical due to the complex and often slow nature of learner development. Thus, the data not only confirm existing research but also emphasise the contextual importance of sustained motivational practices in enhancing teachers' job satisfaction in specialised educational settings.

The findings identify resource coordination as a crucial leadership function through which grade heads enhance teachers' job satisfaction in special schools. By ensuring access to appropriate teaching materials, assistive technologies, and support personnel, as well as advocating for these resources at the management level, grade heads create enabling working conditions that reduce frustration and improve instructional effectiveness. This suggests that teachers' job satisfaction is not only influenced by relational and motivational factors but also by the extent to which they are adequately resourced to meet learners' diverse needs. Interpreted through transformational leadership theory, these practices reflect individualised consideration and aspects of idealised influence, as grade heads act in the best interests of teachers by addressing their contextual challenges and modelling commitment to supportive working environments. This form of leadership reinforces trust and demonstrates responsiveness to teachers' professional realities, thereby contributing to a more positive and satisfying work experience.

These findings are supported by existing literature which emphasises the importance of adequate resources and supportive leadership in shaping teacher job satisfaction. Nwoko et al. (2023) found that insufficient resources and lack of support are significant predictors of teacher stress and dissatisfaction, whereas access to necessary materials enhances both performance and well-being. Fan and Fang (2025) highlights that organisational support, including resource provision, is critical in fostering teacher engagement and reducing burnout. The findings also align with Yulianti et al. (2026), who argue that leadership practices that improve working conditions have a direct impact on teacher motivation and effectiveness. The present study extends this body of knowledge by foregrounding the intermediary and advocacy role of grade heads in resource allocation within special schools, where the demand for specialised materials and personnel is particularly high. This highlighted that effective resource coordination is not merely administrative but a strategic leadership practice that significantly enhances teachers' job satisfaction in complex educational settings.

Contribution of the Study

This study makes a significant contribution to the understanding of leadership practices in special school contexts by offering a holistic and integrated perspective on how grade heads influence teachers' job satisfaction through multiple, interconnected roles. Drawing on the themes of instructional leadership, emotional and professional support, collaboration and team cohesion, motivation, and resource coordination, the findings collectively demonstrate that teachers' job satisfaction is not shaped by isolated leadership practices but rather by a synergistic interplay of relational, instructional, and organisational dynamics. The synthesis across these themes reveals that grade heads simultaneously operate as instructional guides, emotional anchors, team builders, motivators, and resource advocates. This multi-dimensional leadership approach creates an enabling environment where teachers feel competent, supported, valued, and adequately resourced conditions that are particularly critical in the demanding context of special schools.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study extends the application of transformational leadership theory by demonstrating that its core dimensions, individualised consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealised influence, are deeply interwoven and contextually intensified in special education settings. The findings suggest that, while transformational leadership theory adequately explains many leadership behaviours observed in the study, it requires contextual refinement to fully capture the unique emotional labour, resource constraints, and pedagogical complexities inherent in special schools. Specifically, the study highlights that emotional support and resource coordination are not peripheral leadership functions but are central and indispensable components of effective transformational leadership in this context. Thus, the study contributes to theory by proposing a context-responsive interpretation of transformational leadership that foregrounds emotional sustainability and material support as critical to teacher well-being and satisfaction.

Furthermore, the findings reveal important intersections and overlaps among themes, illustrating that leadership practices are mutually reinforcing rather than discrete. For instance, instructional leadership is strengthened by collaboration, as shared pedagogical practices enhance competence and confidence; emotional support underpins motivation, as teachers who feel valued are more resilient and committed; and resource coordination enables effective instruction and reduces stress, thereby enhancing both emotional well-being and professional efficacy. However, the study also surfaces potential tensions for example, the expectation for grade heads to simultaneously fulfil instructional, emotional, and administrative roles may lead to role strain, suggesting the need for clearer structural support. These insights refine existing conceptualisations of leadership by demonstrating that effective leadership in special schools is inherently integrative, relational, and context-dependent.

In terms of practical and policy contributions, the study provides evidence-based insights for strengthening leadership practices in special schools. For practice, it highlighted the need for professional development programmes that equip grade heads with skills in instructional coaching, emotional intelligence, collaborative leadership, and resource

management. For policy, the findings highlight the necessity of institutional support structures, including the provision of adequate teaching resources, access to multidisciplinary teams, and formal recognition of the expanded leadership roles played by grade heads in special education contexts. Additionally, the study contributes methodologically by foregrounding the voices and lived experiences of teachers and grade heads, thereby offering contextually grounded insights that enrich the broader discourse on teacher job satisfaction and leadership in education. This study advances knowledge by demonstrating that enhancing teachers' job satisfaction in special schools requires a comprehensive, context-sensitive leadership approach that integrates instructional, emotional, collaborative, motivational, and resource-based dimensions. It not only confirms existing theoretical assumptions but also extends and refines them to better account for the complexities of special education, thereby offering valuable implications for future research, theory development, policy formulation, and leadership practice.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the roles of grade heads in enhancing teachers' job satisfaction in special schools, and the findings reveal that their leadership practices are both multifaceted and indispensable. Grade heads function not only as instructional leaders but also as emotional anchors, motivators, collaborators, and resource coordinators within complex educational environments. Their ability to provide curriculum guidance, foster supportive relationships, promote teamwork, recognise teachers' efforts, and ensure access to resources significantly shapes teachers' professional experiences and overall job satisfaction. Interpreted through the lens of transformational leadership theory, these roles reflect key dimensions such as individualised consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation, all of which contribute to creating enabling and empowering work environments. Importantly, the study highlights that teacher job satisfaction in special schools is deeply contextual, influenced by the unique challenges associated with teaching learners with diverse and complex needs. In such settings, leadership cannot be limited to administrative functions; it must be responsive, empathetic, and transformative. Grade heads emerge as critical agents who bridge the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that teachers are not only supported professionally but also sustained emotionally. Their leadership directly impacts teachers' resilience, sense of purpose, and commitment, which are essential for maintaining high-quality teaching and learning in special education contexts.

However, while the contributions of grade heads are evident, the findings also suggest that their effectiveness is contingent upon broader systemic support. Without adequate training, resources, and institutional backing, the potential of grade heads to enhance teacher job satisfaction may be constrained. This presents the need for a more integrated approach where school leadership, education departments, and policymakers work collaboratively to strengthen leadership structures within special schools. There is a need for policymakers, school leaders, and education stakeholders to recognise and invest in the strategic role of grade heads in special schools. This includes prioritising leadership development programmes, ensuring equitable resource distribution, and embedding teacher well-being at the core of school improvement agendas. Institutions of higher

learning and professional bodies should also contribute by designing context-responsive training that equips grade heads with both instructional and socio-emotional leadership skills. Improving teachers' job satisfaction is not a peripheral concern but a central determinant of educational quality and learner outcomes. By empowering grade heads and strengthening the systems within which they operate, stakeholders can create sustainable, supportive, and effective learning environments that benefit both teachers and learners in special schools.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations for practice are proposed to enhance teachers' job satisfaction in special schools through the leadership practices of grade heads:

1. Strengthen Instructional Leadership Capacity of Grade Heads

It is recommended that provincial Departments of Education, in collaboration with school management teams (SMTs) and teacher development units, implement structured and continuous professional development programmes aimed at strengthening the instructional leadership capacity of grade heads. These programmes should include workshops, mentoring schemes, and coaching sessions focused on curriculum differentiation, inclusive pedagogical strategies, classroom observation techniques, and constructive feedback practices tailored to special education contexts. Implementation can be achieved through a combination of in-service training, partnerships with higher education institutions, and professional learning communities within schools. By equipping grade heads with advanced instructional leadership skills, they will be better positioned to support teachers effectively, thereby enhancing teachers' competence, confidence, and overall job satisfaction. This recommendation is significant as it directly contributes to improving teaching quality and learner outcomes while fostering a culture of continuous professional growth.

2. Institutionalise Structured Emotional and Professional Support Systems

School governing bodies, SMTs, and district-level support services should collaboratively institutionalise structured emotional and professional support systems within special schools. This can be operationalised by establishing regular well-being check-ins, peer support groups, and access to professional counselling services, either through in-house personnel or external partnerships with mental health professionals. Grade heads should be formally supported and trained to provide basic emotional support while also being guided on appropriate referral pathways for more complex cases. Additionally, policies should be developed to ensure that teacher well-being is integrated into school improvement plans. The significance of this recommendation lies in its potential to reduce teacher burnout, enhance emotional resilience, and promote a supportive school climate, all of which are critical for sustaining teachers' job satisfaction in high-demand special education environments.

3. Promote Collaborative and Multidisciplinary Practices

It is recommended that school leadership, in partnership with district officials and relevant support professionals (such as therapists and psychologists), actively promote structured collaboration and multidisciplinary engagement within special schools. This can be achieved by establishing professional learning communities, scheduling regular

collaborative planning sessions, and facilitating team teaching initiatives. Furthermore, formal mechanisms should be created to encourage collaboration between teachers and support staff, ensuring that diverse expertise is integrated into teaching and learning processes. Grade heads should play a coordinating role in organising and sustaining these collaborative platforms. The implementation of this recommendation is significant as it fosters a sense of collective efficacy, reduces professional isolation, and enhances teachers' ability to address diverse learner needs effectively, thereby improving both professional fulfilment and job satisfaction.

4. Develop Sustainable Teacher Motivation and Recognition Systems

School management teams, in consultation with grade heads and teachers, should design and implement sustainable motivation and recognition systems that acknowledge teachers' efforts and achievements in meaningful ways. This can include formal recognition programmes, such as awards, appreciation events, and performance acknowledgements during staff meetings, as well as informal practices like personalised feedback and public commendation. Importantly, recognition systems should be context-sensitive, valuing incremental learner progress and the unique challenges of special education. Grade heads should be empowered to lead these initiatives by consistently providing positive reinforcement and fostering a culture of appreciation within their teams. The significance of this recommendation lies in its ability to sustain teacher morale, reinforce a sense of purpose, and enhance intrinsic motivation, which are essential for maintaining high levels of job satisfaction and commitment.

5. Improve Resource Allocation and Advocacy Mechanisms

It is recommended that education authorities, including district offices and provincial departments of education, prioritise equitable and adequate resource allocation to special schools, while formally recognising grade heads as key advocates in this process. Implementation should involve conducting regular needs assessments, streamlining procurement processes for specialised teaching materials and assistive technologies, and ensuring the availability of adequately trained support personnel. Grade heads should be actively involved in identifying resource gaps, communicating these needs to SMTs and district officials, and monitoring the effective utilisation of resources within their grades. Additionally, transparent systems for resource distribution should be established to ensure fairness and accountability. The significance of this recommendation lies in its capacity to reduce teacher frustration, enhance instructional effectiveness, and create enabling working conditions that support both teacher well-being and learner success.

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