Principals' Leadership Competencies: Implications for Educational Excellence

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ABSTRACT

The study utilized a qualitative case study research design entailing an in-depth exploratory examination of principals' leadership competencies and their impact on educational excellence within the O R Tambo Inland education district. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five principals selected from secondary schools in the district. A convenient sampling technique was used to select the participants from whom empirical data were gathered. A narrative analysis was employed to analyze the collected data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the principals' experiences, perspectives, and practices regarding leadership competencies and their implications for educational excellence. The findings revealed that principals play a pivotal role in shaping the school's image and reputation, attracting learners, families, and talented educators through positive attributes and effective leadership practices. Clear and measurable academic objectives aligned with the school's mission and vision are emphasized as essential for guiding educational endeavors and promoting continuous improvement. Thus, the study recommended that a collaborative approach to decision-making, professional development, and community engagement is essential for creating supportive and inclusive learning environments that empower students to thrive academically and personally.

KEYWORDS
Leadership Competencies, Principals, Educational excellence.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the acknowledged importance of effective leadership in educational institutions, there is a gap in understanding the specific leadership competencies that school principals must possess to significantly impact educational excellence. In contemporary educational settings, effective school leadership is universally acknowledged as a pivotal factor in determining the quality of education. Principals play crucial roles in shaping the learning environment and student outcomes. However, the existing literature lacks a comprehensive analysis of the leadership competencies possessed by principals, and how these competencies contribute to educational excellence. This gap in knowledge inhibits the development of targeted leadership training programs and hampers the optimal utilization of leadership resources within schools. By identifying the overlaps and distinctions in their skill sets, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into how these competencies can be leveraged to promote educational excellence. Throughout the twenty-first century, studies of educational leadership and its impact on student learning have concentrated on the leadership provided by certified school principals. More recently, scholars have turned their attention to the leadership provided by principals and other professional staff members (Spillane & Shirrell, 2018). Successful schools, according to this line of thought, depend upon a collection of individuals collaborating and using their leadership skills to influence others, rather than upon a single, sometimes charismatic leader (Grissom et al, 2021; Pretorius & Plaatjies, 2023). The shift towards recognizing and studying distributed leadership in education reflects a deeper appreciation for the multifaceted nature of leadership within schools and its critical role in shaping educational outcomes. It underscores the importance of fostering collaborative environments where diverse stakeholders can effectively contribute to the success of the educational institution and the students it serves. Using this background, the study seeks to evaluate principals' leadership competencies and their implication for academic excellence in a selected secondary school of the O R Tambo Inland Edistrict.

Research question

The study was guided by the following research question:

- What are the leadership competencies that principals should possess for educational excellence?

Empirical literature review

Over the past 20 years, principal leadership has had a significant role in raising student academic achievement and boosting school effectiveness (Hallinger et al, 2015). This leadership has raised both the standard of instruction for students and the institution as a whole. According to Hallinger (2011), the actions of school leaders have helped to improve student results. The desire for high-quality education is one of the issues schools are confronting as education transforms dramatically around the world. Schools are under pressure to adopt instructional strategies that benefit both students and teachers. Hallinger further avers that these demands for high-quality education delivery are putting education in the public eye, and as the need for

excellence intensifies, attention is also being paid to the relationship between school leadership and the focus of schools is high-quality teaching and learning. According to the National Education Policy document "Educating our Future" (1996), school principals should be essential players in the quest for excellence and quality in education. Marasan (2021) reported that all the school leaders (principals, headmasters, headmistresses, vice principals, department heads, and subject teachers) are expected to carry out their leadership responsibilities effectively, according to the constitution. This includes organizational leadership topics pertaining to raising institutional performance through initiatives including strategic planning, curriculum enhancement, and co-curricular activity plans. The primary noteworthy and significant aspect of this situation is that the leadership is guided by the National Education Policy on "Educating our Future" from 1996. It extends beyond the principals' explicitly-stated responsibilities and covers all levels of administration in the school, including those who share formal leadership priorities. Urick (2016) asserts that in the context of Zambia's education system, there are several important aspects of becoming a head teacher or principal that should be taken into consideration, which include principals' leadership styles. Leaders need to be knowledgeable about various leadership approaches and be able to adapt their style based on the specific needs and challenges faced by their schools. Principal leadership styles affect school climate, teachers' attitudes towards leadership and their turnover ratio, and students' academic achievements. However, studies have also emphasized that the leadership style maximizes the effect of principal leadership styles on student achievement, with certain roles under certain circumstances (Aldhaheri, 2017). Principals' duties should include creating the framework for efficient teaching and learning, coming up with solutions to problems encountered, and monitoring the effective implementation of the curriculum. Bush and Doyon (2019) aver that one of the roles of principals is to take a school-wide perspective. Principals are directly accountable for the effectiveness of instruction and learning as well as for the academic success of their students. This entails having high standards, keeping track of learning outcomes, and assessing their efficacy. According to Stein (2018), the principal must recognize effective instruction when they see it, support it when they do not, and provide it.

Another study conducted by Norhannan Ramli et al. (2017) explored the leadership qualities of school principals, emphasizing attributes such as character, behavior, and personal qualities demonstrated by leaders. The study highlighted that leadership devoid of coercion tends to promote positive relationships between leaders and their followers. Additionally, Wanda (2017) delved into how a leader's character contributes to student achievement, emphasizing the principal's responsibility in meeting the school's needs, as indicated by Man et al. (2016). Principals are often regarded as educators of humanity, as stated by Eckman (2018). While these studies primarily employed quantitative methodologies, the extent to which these attributes correlate with successful leadership in schools remains a topic for further investigation. Dolph (2017) conducted a study on the challenges and opportunities for school improvement, and the findings revealed that prioritizing professional development for

principals will assist to enhance academic excellence within their schools. Effective leadership and competent administration contribute to creating an environment where students can thrive academically, achieve their potential, and succeed both inside and outside the classroom. Cappeli and Neumark (2001) discovered a strong association between organizational performance and the managerial capabilities of leaders, as well as the organizational cultures they cultivate. Conversely, it is highlighted deficiencies in school principals' leadership abilities, particularly in decision-making and professionalism, suggesting the need for remedial action. Martinez and Tadeu (2018) emphasizes that a principal's leadership impacts the development of a professional identity among management and teaching staff, underscoring the importance of collaborative efforts between principals and teachers to enhance professionalism and ultimately improve school performance. However, some studies, such as Mastrangelo et al. (2014), argue that school leadership does not significantly influence school performance or organizational culture. This viewpoint is supported by Jafari and Bidarian's (2012) study, which found that competent leadership does not directly shape a school's culture or organizational performance. The study by Tschannen (2015) found that in Malaysia, principals' leadership has a strong influence on the quality of a school's success, its students' achievements, and the commitment of its teachers. One channel for principals to influence students' excellence is through interaction with teachers, considering that teachers are the pulse of the school's management. Principals, therefore, need to play their role as education managers in school. This is in line with the sentiments by Marasan (2021), who indicates that in the South African context, it is necessary for a principal to have positive natural attributes to portray a positive image of personal excellence. A positive personality enables a principal to manage his/her behaviour and thoughts as a leader. Attributes are an important element in a principal's leadership in school. Marasan (2021) claims that shared ideas, distinct academic and teaching objectives, as well as a culture that is committed, are all characteristics of effective schools. This cultural convenience benefits pupils' learning as well as their development of high standards of behavior. The success of a school is dependent on the principal's wisdom in organising competent management strategies besides minimising work-related stress. Although this can be seen as a general strategy for managing prosperous schools, positive attributes reflect one's disposition and manifest through a systematic style of action to achieve organisational goals. There is a growing recognition of the importance of ethical leadership and social justice in education. Research exploring how principals' competencies in these areas contribute to creating equitable learning environments and promoting social justice within schools is limited. Understanding the intersection of leadership competencies, ethics, and social justice is crucial for fostering inclusive educational excellence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts the Great Man theory as its theoretical framework, which predates the 19th century. This theory, rooted in a trait-based approach, focuses on examining the physical and

personality traits of leaders (Moorhead & Griffin, 1998). Great leaders are often associated with innate characteristics such as height, character, and intelligence, as captured by phrases like "he is born to be a leader". The Great Man Theory posits that leadership success is determined by these inherent qualities, and it serves to identify individuals deemed as great leaders. In essence, the Great Man Theory underscores the significance of specific attributes that distinguish leaders from their followers. This theoretical framework guides the exploration of various factors relevant to the research questions. Literature reveals natural attributes can significantly influence a principal's leadership identity, shaping their interactions within the school community. The theory suggests that these attributes play a crucial role in a leader's self-development and effectiveness. Considering these elements, the researcher identifies the potential of exploring the leadership attributes of principals within the case study school. By examining the attributes possessed by the leader, the study aims to uncover opportunities for enhancing organizational leadership through the disposition and personality of the principal. This approach highlights the interconnectedness between inherent attributes and effective leadership practices, emphasizing the importance of understanding and leveraging these qualities in promoting effective school leadership.

METHODOLOGY AND MATERIAL

This segment is dedicated to detailing the methods and materials utilized in exploring principals' leadership competencies for educational excellence. These methodologies and protocols are determined based on whether the study is quantitative, qualitative, or a blend of both, following the guidelines outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2015).

Research approach

This paper aligns with the qualitative research methodology, which encompasses various techniques and approaches to data gathering and analysis, as outlined by Creswell et al. (2014). Qualitative research aims to delve into the lived experiences of individuals within specific real-life contexts, as highlighted in the Government Design Manual (2016). This method is particularly prevalent in investigations where there is no specific focus on large sample sizes.

Research design

This paper adopted a qualitative case study design, defined as an empirical inquiry into a current event within its authentic context, according to Maree (2007). We deemed it crucial to incorporate this design due to its capacity to offer profound insights into the complex real-world experiences of principals' leadership competencies for educational excellence in selected secondary schools of the O R Tambo Inland education district.

Population and sampling procedures

This study focused on all the school principals providing services within the O R Tambo Inland Education district in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa as its target population. Five principals were purposively selected to participate in the investigation. In adherence to ethical standards, participants voluntarily provided consent to participate in the study, following the

guidelines outlined by Dawson (2019). Prior to their involvement, it was made clear that their identities, as well as their responses, would remain confidential, ensuring anonymity. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to anonymize their contributions, from Principal 1-5, represented by P1, P2, P3 to P5. Upon understanding and agreeing to the terms and conditions of the research, all participants willingly agreed to take part in the investigation. To formalize their consent, they each signed a consent form after receiving reassurance regarding confidentiality and anonymity. The table below represents the biographical information of participants.

Table 1.

Biographical information of participants

Participants name	Age	Gender	Qualifications	Years of Experience
P1	42	Female	Bachelor of Arts	22
P2	51	Male	Bachelor of Education Honours	26
P3	57	Male	Bachelor of Education	28
P4	61	Female	Master of Education	44
P5	48	Female	National Diploma: ABET, Post Graduate Certificate in Education	20

Research instruments

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method for data collection for this paper, following the approach suggested by Evans and Lewis (2018). This instrument facilitates open-ended responses, fostering dynamic interactions between the interviewer and interviewee. The interview guide comprised predominantly open-ended questions, necessitating the exploration of additional follow-up inquiries beyond the initial set. All questions posed during the interviews pertained to the principals leadership competencies for educational excellence.

Data collection procedures

All the five principals approached to participate in the study agreed to do so. Emails containing letters requesting a one-hour interview were sent to these principals, clearly outlining the study's objectives and methodology, and ensuring confidentiality. The researchers utilized open-ended questions during the interviews with participants, following the approach advocated by Hammer and Wildavsky (2018). Through these interviews, the researchers gained comprehensive insights into the principals' leadership competencies for educational excellence as highlighted by Almaiah et al. (2020).

Data analysis

A narrative analysis was used to analyse the data. According to Baker (2019), a study technique called narrative analysis is utilized to analyse and comprehend the stories that individuals tell. It is a method of learning about people, civilizations, and society by examining the structures

and patterns found in these tales. Baker goes on to claim that a narrative analysis can be used with a wide range of materials, including social media posts, interviews, movies, and written or spoken tales. For this study, the use of a narrative analysis provided a deep understanding of the principals' leadership competencies for educational excellence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings in relation to existing literature:
The following insights illuminate the fundamental leadership competencies that principals deem essential for attaining educational excellence when probed about their competencies.

P1: '*As a principal, fostering excellence involves a combination of competencies and leadership styles that are tailored to the unique needs of the educational environment. These includes strategic planning, and emotional intelligence to foster a positive learning environment. These competencies not only enhance collaboration among staff but also enable us to adapt to changing educational landscapes and address the diverse needs of students.*

The findings above emphasise the need for principals to understand that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to leadership in education. Different situations call for different leadership styles, and effective principals should be able to adapt their approach accordingly. This highlights the importance of being versatile and able to employ various leadership styles such as transformational, instructional, or situational leadership as needed. This is in line with Urick (2016), who reported that in the context of Zambia's education system, there are several important aspects of becoming a head teacher or principal, that should be taken into consideration which include principals' leadership styles. Leaders need to be knowledgeable about various leadership approaches and be able to adapt their style based on the specific needs and challenges faced by their schools. By possessing competencies such as strategic planning and emotional intelligence, principals can create positive learning environments, enhance collaboration among staff, adapt to change, and address the diverse needs of students, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes.

P2: *I firmly believe that principals play a pivotal role in shaping the image of the school and fostering an environment conducive to learning and growth. Principals should embody a myriad of positive attributes that not only enhance the reputation of the school but also contribute to its overall success in achieving educational excellence.*

The above study findings revealed that principals are depicted as instrumental in enhancing the reputation of the school and by demonstrating positive attributes and effective leadership, they can elevate the school's standing within the community. A strong reputation can attract students, families, and talented educators, further contributing to the school's success. These findings are in agreement with Norhannan Ramli et al. (2017), who explored the leadership qualities of school principals, emphasizing attributes such as character, behavior, and personal qualities demonstrated by leaders. The study highlighted that leadership devoid of coercion tends to promote positive relationships between leaders and their followers and a

positive image for the school. The Great Man Theory which underpines this paper, suggests that these attributes play a crucial role in a leader's self-development and effectiveness. Plaatjiesedu (2019) shares a contrary view by highlighting deficiencies in school principals' leadership abilities, particularly in decision-making and professionalism, suggesting the need for remedial action. This is later supported by Martinez and Tadeu (2018), who emphasises that a principal's leadership impacts the development of a professional identity among management and teaching staff, underscoring the importance of collaborative efforts between principals and teachers to enhance professionalism and ultimately improve school performance.

P3: *'As principals we must establish a clear and measurable academic objective that align with the school's mission and vision. These objectives should outline specific goals for student achievement, academic growth, and curriculum development. Principals who possess distinct academic and teaching objectives, combined with a culture of unwavering commitment to educational excellence, are poised to lead their schools towards success'.*

The study findings highlight the necessity for principals to set clear and measurable academic objectives. These objectives serve as a roadmap for guiding the school's educational endeavors and provide a framework for assessing progress and success. Outlining specific goals for student achievement, academic growth, and curriculum development, principals provide direction and focus for the entire school community. This implies that effective leadership, combined with clear academic objectives and a strong commitment to excellence, is essential for achieving positive educational outcomes. Principals who prioritize academic excellence and create a supportive environment for teaching and learning are more likely to inspire success and foster a culture of continuous improvement within their schools. These findings are similar with the study findings by Muyanda (2022) who established that shared ideas, distinct academic and teaching objectives, as well as a culture that is committed, are all characteristics of effective schools. It is evident that effective leadership, combined with a steadfast commitment to academic excellence, is paramount for achieving positive educational outcomes. Principals who prioritize excellence and cultivate a supportive environment for teaching and learning are better positioned to inspire success and foster a culture of continuous improvement within their schools.

P4: *As principals, we play a pivotal role in promoting educational excellence through collaborative efforts with other stakeholders. Also, we should embrace a collaborative approach to decision-making, engaging in professional learning communities, and building strong relationships with the broader community, principals can create a supportive and inclusive learning environment that empowers students to thrive academically and personally.*

The study findings advocate for a collaborative approach to decision-making, wherein principals involve various stakeholders in the process. By seeking input from teachers, students, parents, and community members, principals can make more informed decisions that reflect the diverse needs and perspectives of the school community. This fosters a sense of ownership and investment among stakeholders, leading to greater support for educational initiatives.

Principals should forge partnerships with parents, local businesses, community organizations, and educational policymakers, principals can leverage external resources and support to enrich the educational experience for students. This fosters a sense of belonging and connection within the community, enhancing overall student well-being and academic success. This is in line with the study findings by Martinez and Tadeu (2018), which emphasized that a principal's leadership competencies underscore the importance of collaborative efforts between principals and teachers to enhance professionalism and ultimately improve school performance. This is also supported by Grissom (2021), who stated that successful schools depend upon a collection of individuals collaborating and using their leadership skills to influence others, rather than depending upon a single, sometimes charismatic leader. It is imperative for educational leaders to embrace collaborative approaches to decision-making and foster a culture of inclusivity and shared responsibility within their schools. By leveraging the diverse perspectives and talents of stakeholders, principals can cultivate a supportive learning community that empowers students to thrive academically and personally.

P5: *'Principals should to prioritize continuous professional development to bolster their leadership skills and competencies, thus fostering enhanced academic excellence.*

The above excerpt emphasises the critical role of ongoing professional development for principals in enhancing their leadership abilities and competencies, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes within their schools. The use of the term "continuous professional development" highlights the importance of an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. This suggests that principals should engage in a continual cycle of learning and growth to stay abreast of evolving educational practices and challenges. By prioritizing professional development, principals can refine their leadership skills. This might include areas such as strategic planning, communication, team building, and conflict resolution. Strong leadership is essential for creating a positive school culture and effectively guiding faculty, staff, and students towards academic success. Similarly, Dolph (2017), conducted a study on the challenges and opportunities for school improvement, and the findings revealed that prioritizing professional development for principals will assist to enhance academic excellence within their schools. By embracing professional development as a priority, principals can foster a positive school culture and effectively navigate the challenges of education, ensuring the success and well-being of both the school and the learners alike.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Principals play a critical role in shaping the educational environment and fostering excellence within schools. The leadership competencies exhibited by principals have significant implications for achieving educational excellence. Through effective leadership, principals can create a positive and inclusive school culture, set clear academic objectives, promote collaboration among stakeholders, and adapt to the evolving needs of the educational landscape. These competencies not only enhance the reputation of the school but also

contribute to improved teaching and learning outcomes, ultimately leading to educational excellence. Principals must establish clear and measurable academic objectives that align with the school's mission and vision. These objectives provide direction and focus for the entire school community, guiding educational endeavors and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Principals should actively engage with stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, and community members, to solicit feedback, gather input, and build partnerships. This collaborative approach can lead to greater support for educational initiatives and a sense of ownership among stakeholders. School principals can enhance their leadership competencies and create environments that foster educational excellence. Through strategic planning, emotional intelligence and inclusive leadership, principals can lead their schools towards success and ensure that every student has the opportunity to thrive academically and personally.

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