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Exploring Principal Identity Models for Effective School Management in uMgungundlovu District, South Africa

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Abstract

This study explores effective models of principal identity in relation to school management and leadership within the uMgungundlovu District of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It examines how principals perceive and develop their professional identities, and how these evolving identities impact effective school management and administration. Therefore, the study identifies both the challenges and potential solutions for improving school leadership practices. The central argument is that a principal's influence and effectiveness stem from the continuous evolution of their professional identity from their experiences as teachers to their eventual roles as school leaders. Grounded in the theory of intersectionality, as a lens to uncover the identity of principals for effective management. The study employs an interpretivist qualitative paradigm to explain principals' identities. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was used to interpret emerging themes and provide nuanced insights into the participants' experiences. Findings reveal that understanding a principal's identity is fundamental to enhancing school management and leadership effectiveness. The study concludes that collaboration and open communication among principals are critical to organizational success. Furthermore, sharing professional experiences, resources, and best practices fosters a deeper appreciation of how identity development contributes to effective school leadership.

Keyword: Principal's identity; identity models, effective school management; collaboration; organisational success

1. INTRODUCTION

In a regular school day, leaders must transition from being an authority figure to a teammate, coach, or therapist when the need arises. (Supovitz, 2019). It takes a wide range of skills to lead through change, including non-behavioural, non-practice-related leadership elements that have an influence on leadership behaviour and practices. Principals in South Africa were just collaborators during the Apartheid era, but since the country's schools transitioned to democracy, principals have played a crucial role in students' academic success and the overall success of the school (Mestry, 2017). Also, principals serve as key managers in

school administration by planning, organising, leading, and monitoring school activities to achieve educational goals. The principal's leadership style, which is regarded as identity in the study, plays a significant role in curriculum delivery and has a significant impact on learner outcomes (Lindberg, 2014).

School' heads, according to Lara (2018), lead the schools in fulfilling the school's goal, vision, and strategic plans. Principals continually consider their identity based on demonstrated effectiveness in improving student results (Whiteman et al., 2015). Because of how well they have done in terms of student outcomes, they continue to reflect on their identities. Principal identity is a non-practice-related component. Identity is described as something that stands for and lends significance to fundamentals (Charness & Chen, 2020). Identity is defined as what represents and lends significance to principals (Crow & Møller 2017). The "internalized connotations" associated with a role are influenced by a school leader's identity, such as whether she is a woman, a person of colour, or lives in a specific town and country (Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017).).

In South Africa, the identity of the principal, the infrastructure of the school, the resources accessible to them, and the laws governing basic education all have a significant impact on the school's identity (Van Lankveld, et al 2017). Effective management involves allocating resources and supporting staff development. Ensuring a positive learning environment and overseeing operations to promote academic success. According to Whiteman et al. (2015), identity context can introduce vulnerabilities that complicate the job of the principal in various ways. For example, a South African rural primary school has its own unique challenges, which might lead to different expectations from the principal as opposed to an urban school. There may be discrepancies in the perceptions of the principal and his or her identity model among different stakeholders in this respect. To respond to these circumstances, a principal must engage in direct interaction with others that requires the negotiation of identities. In this study, the researcher argued that identity is more fundamentally an experience that entails involvement and reification than it is merely a category, a personality feature, a role, or a label.

This means that within the context of this study, the central argument is that the principals' source of influence is their identity models. It is sensible to state that an individual's identity is created and developed over time, beginning with their introduction into the teaching profession and continuing through their appointment as managers and leaders of schools. Therefore, the study looks at exploring effective models of principal identity in relation to school management and leadership within the uMgungundlovu District of

KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The main objective of the study is to propose a model that principals can adopt, which aligns with their identities to enhance effective school management and leadership. This is guided by the research question: which model could be adopted by principals in line with their identities to ensure effective school management and leadership?

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Identity Construction

According to Scribner et al. (2011), it is helpful to understand how identity affects leadership styles by determining how school principals create their identities. School principals' identity construction is also influenced by professional expectations (Crow et al., 2016). According to some researchers, a person's professional identity evolves but becomes a permanent characteristic once internalised (DeRue et al., 2009). Additionally, according to Crow et al. (2016), school principals construct their identities through their background, the environments of their institutions, and the relationships they form with stakeholders.

Teachers go through a transformation process in the classroom when they develop a leadership identity. The shift from a focus on teaching and learning to assuming an administrative and leadership role can lead to challenges for some educators as they navigate their evolving identities. This transition from teacher to principal may result in difficulties regarding their self-perception (Browne-Ferrigno, 2013). Some teachers learn their new identities on the job, while others have to undergo formal training. This suggests that identity construction may occur through reflection on the professional development process. Moorosi (2013) reports that participants in a principal development program in South Africa were able to assess how their self-confidence and self-control had improved at the end of the program.

1.1.2. Leadership Attributes

Research has shown that the personal qualities of school principals are linked to effective school leadership. Personal qualities that influence school principals' leadership identities include listening comprehension, empathy, trust, patience, and stress management, among others (Saarukka, 2014). The characteristics of an effective school principal, as outlined by Crow et al. (2016), encompass accountability, emotional intelligence, and dedication. According to the participants in a study by Dös and Savas (2015), good leadership traits include tolerance, hard work, objectivity in decision-making, motivational skills, and a good sense of humour. Moorosi (2013) distinguishes leadership qualities based on gender.

According to the study, among other things, the male principals were more authoritative, had a clear vision, and set an example, whereas the female principals were more approachable, transparent, had good cooperation skills, and were willing to consult.

Even though some traits of both men and women have been linked to effective leadership, Goldring et al. (2007) contend that personal characteristics do not appear to significantly impact principals' work, and they recommend that more research should be conducted to investigate this relationship. According to their research, contextual factors have a greater impact on the school principals' time allocation for the various tasks than their personal characteristics.

1.1.3. Roles and Responsibilities of School Principals

The role of school principals is described as complex, multifaceted, and dynamic in the literature. They are expected to take on various roles when interacting with teachers and students, such as being a teacher, a leader, and a parental figure. School principals play essential roles in establishing a vision, fostering growth, restructuring the organization, and overseeing teaching and learning processes. However, due to time constraints, they often prioritize administrative tasks over instructional leadership. Principals in different countries, such as Turkey and South Africa, have varying priorities and challenges in fulfilling their responsibilities. Research suggests that principals need to balance managerial duties with instructional leadership to be effective leaders. The study aims to explore how principals' perceptions of their leadership identities influence their prioritization and execution of their roles, considering the diverse responsibilities they are expected to manage.

1.1.4 Effective School Management and Leadership

Effective school management involves maintaining optimal practices that produce the most favourable outcomes in the administration of education and the facilitation of teaching and learning (Day, Sammons, & Gorgen, 2020). The management of a school encompasses the regulation of various activities aimed at achieving specific objectives (Westbrook et al., 2013). Effective school management indicates that the administration is capable of attaining the intended results. Furthermore, the caliber of school leadership can significantly impact the quality of educators, teaching methods, and overall outcomes (Mestry, 2017). Leadership and management are linked and are equally necessary if schools are to be effective and efficient, and lead to school improvement (Mestry, 2017). The school principal collaborates with the

school management team (SMT) to guarantee the success of the institution. School leadership has a significant indirect impact on student learning outcomes based on their role in effective school management (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Ramrathan (2017) states that school leadership constitutes a practice that fosters positive influence, growth, and development for both individuals and groups in pursuit of collective objectives. Within the educational sphere, leadership is shaped by global and societal trends and pressures. Researchers have sought to analyze leadership from the perspective of schools (Hallinger & Chen, 2015). School leaders occupy a pivotal role in a complex environment that necessitates their possession of relevant knowledge and skills (Yan & Ehrich, 2009). Pathak et al. (2011) argue that school leaders are expected to guide, inspire, and direct members of the school community, ensuring that they understand educational goals and the means available to achieve them.

Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) assert that effective school leadership highlights the significance of a unified vision within the school community, as well as the importance of collaborative efforts and professional feedback in fostering changes in attitudes, motivation, and behaviour. The foundation of school leadership is rooted in a shared vision, which depends on the dedication and reciprocal support of the school community, ultimately leading to enhanced educational results. Consequently, the role of school leadership is vital in advancing school performance (Brescoll, 2016).

The school principal plays a variety of roles essential for the effective operation of the institution, as noted by Meador (2019). These responsibilities encompass maintaining student discipline, evaluating teachers, developing new policies, revising existing ones, securing funding, and managing the school budget, among other tasks. Nevertheless, the principal's primary responsibility is to provide leadership. Contemporary school leaders are required to possess a comprehensive understanding of finance, curriculum development, child psychology, human resource management, time management, community engagement, public relations, and exceptional communication abilities (Alkaabi, et al. 2022).

Leadership effectiveness is typically understood as the ability of leaders to inspire and mobilize their followers in a manner that promotes the objectives of both the group and the organization. A fundamental aspect of this understanding is that leadership focuses on achieving collective goals rather than individual aspirations (Steffens, et al. 2021). Furthermore, leadership occurs within the framework of shared group membership, between

leaders and their followers, which influences how followers react to their leader; thus, the effectiveness of leadership is shaped by this narrative (Epitropaki et al. 2017). Effective school principals provide clear direction, encourage personnel, and foster a climate favourable to effective teaching and learning. They recognise outstanding achievements in order to push employees to strive in all aspects of their jobs (Peterson, 2013). Therefore, principals understand their identities in relation to effective school management and leadership impacts on teachers, learners, and the broader school community.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s and later expanded by Patricia Hill Collins, was initially used to explain the experiences of Black women who faced overlapping forms of discrimination based on race and gender. Over time, the theory has evolved to encompass the complex and interconnected nature of multiple identity categories, such as race, gender, class, and professional role, that shape individuals' experiences across social and institutional contexts. The central premise of intersectionality is that identity is multifaceted and that individuals occupy multiple social positions that intersect to influence their perceptions, opportunities, and actions.

In the context of educational leadership, intersectionality provides a valuable framework for understanding how principals' various identities, such as professional, personal, cultural, and social, interact to shape their leadership styles, decision-making, and management practices. It illuminates how institutional structures and power relations influence principals' experiences and how they negotiate their roles within schools. By acknowledging the intersection of these identities, the theory helps to uncover the nuanced challenges and privileges that principals encounter in their pursuit of effective school management and leadership.

Intersectionality also deepens our understanding of the relationships between identity and power within school settings. It reveals how societal hierarchies and organizational norms affect leadership development and the enactment of authority. While the theory's early focus on Black women has drawn criticism for limiting its scope, contemporary scholars have refined it to address broader and more diverse professional contexts, including educational leadership. Researchers have thus employed intersectionality to examine how multiple identity dimensions, such as gender, ethnicity, and professional role, converge to influence leadership behaviour and institutional outcomes.

Within this study, intersectionality serves as a theoretical lens for exploring how principals construct and perform their professional identities in relation to effective school management. It offers insight into how principals' overlapping identities are shaped by their personal histories, social positions, and institutional roles that affect their leadership practices and responses to challenges. By applying this theory, the study situates principal identity not as a fixed attribute but as a dynamic and evolving construct that emerges through continuous interaction between the individual and the institutional environment. In this way, intersectionality provides a robust framework for analysing the complexities of principal identity models and their implications for effective school management and leadership.

2. METHOD

A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore effective models of principal identity in relation to school management and leadership within the uMgungundlovu District of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This approach was chosen for its ability to generate rich, in-depth descriptions and nuanced insights into the lived experiences of participants. By focusing on meaning rather than measurement, qualitative inquiry enabled the researcher to capture the complexity of principals' leadership identities as they evolved within their professional and institutional contexts. This approach was particularly suitable for examining how principals interpret their roles, navigate challenges, and enact leadership practices that shape effective school management.

The study was guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding the subjective meanings individuals construct through their experiences. From this perspective, reality is viewed as socially constructed and best understood through the voices of those directly involved. In alignment with Creswell's (2009) qualitative data analysis framework, data collection involved semi-structured interviews and document analysis to explore principals' perspectives and professional narratives. The analysis process entailed organizing, coding, and interpreting the data to uncover recurring themes and patterns related to identity construction and leadership practice. Through this interpretive lens, the study sought to illuminate how principals' evolving identities influence their management decisions and contribute to the overall effectiveness of their schools.

Sampling is the process of choosing a group of participants for research in a way that ensures they are representative of the wider group from which they were chosen (Smith, 2012). The researchers employed the purposive sampling technique to choose a group of

participants for this study (Smith, 2012). Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select participants most likely to provide rich information relevant to the research objectives (Etikan et al., 2016). Additionally, purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select participants with the knowledge and experience most relevant to the research questions (Hussain et al., 2018). Given the in-depth nature of this study, which aimed to explore school principals' identity model construction through interviews and observations, a sample of six primary schools from Umgungundlovu District was chosen.

This approach facilitated focused data collection within each school context. One principal was selected per school, resulting in a total of six principals participating in individual interviews. Also, focus groups were formulated by three teachers, namely T1, T2, and T3. While the sample size (six schools) represented a small percentage of the total population (335 schools), purposive sampling prioritised information-rich data over statistical generalisability. The focus of this research was to gain deep insights into principals' identity construction through in-depth interviews and document analysis. Limiting the number of schools allows more intensive exploration within each selected context.

This study employed a combination of three data collection methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research question, which includes one-on-one interviews, document analysis, and focus group interviews. While each method offered unique strengths, a triangulation approach (Flick, 2018) was used to corroborate and enrich the data, leading to a more robust understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a thorough analysis and interpretation of the data collected in order to investigate principals' understanding of their identities in relation to effective school management and leadership. A detailed analysis and interpretation of the data collected from the six principals in Umgungundlovu District (through interviews) was anonymised as P1-P6. Additionally, insights into three focus groups, referred to as FG1-FG3 (T1, T2, T3), were equally incorporated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. One focus group discussion was conducted at each of the six research sites (schools). The section was, therefore, structured to address the primary research objective and question. From the research objective and question, themes were established to help the research group's findings. Data analysis and findings of this study are presented based on the qualitative approach for the research objectives:

1. Propose a model that principals can adopt, which aligns with their identities to enhance effective school management and leadership.

Below reflects the themes that were generated from the research question.

Themes aligned to the research question

Research Question	Identified Themes
Which model could be adopted by principals in line with their identities to ensure effective school management and leadership?	□ Consultation with other stakeholders. □ Professional development activities. □ Staff meetings and communication

3.1. Theme 1: Consultation with other Stakeholders

The significance of the principal's consultation and involvement with stakeholders and the community at large is explored in this theme. A school's stakeholders are the learners themselves, families and guardians, teachers, administrators, custodians, secretaries, and other school staff. It is evident from the responses of the research participants that engaging in the community is essential for school success. Building partnerships with parents and other stakeholders can enhance school support and progress. It is of utmost importance that principals should foster a collaborative leadership style that involves staff members and stakeholders in the decision-making processes of school administration. Participant (P4) made a simple summary of this when she noted that:

"All stakeholders need to work together to prepare learners for their future. The task is immense, but learning outcomes can be surpassed while fostering essential skills if we work in unison. Given strong sources of support, learners will achieve at higher levels, develop crucial social-emotional skills, build leadership capacity, and become more autonomous in their future learning" (P4).

This approach encourages a sense of ownership and responsibility among stakeholders, leading to a more engaged and motivated workforce. When staff members are involved in the decision-making process, they feel a sense of ownership over the school's direction, leading to increased commitment and improved school performance (Bryman et al., 2018). Shared leadership and collaboration are essential components of effective school management. By empowering staff, fostering a collaborative culture, and valuing diverse perspectives, principals can create a positive and productive school environment. Research participant (P3) elaborated on the need for a collaborative effort from the principals and stakeholders for school success. He noted that:

"School employees are invested stakeholders. Teachers are on the front lines, working diligently to prepare students for their future. Teachers need support and guidance that comes from a close working relationship with school leaders. It takes many employee groups working together to build a quality school environment. It is then the responsibility of the school principals to make sure that all these stakeholders speak and understand one language, which is school success" (P3).

This quote emphasises the importance of not only the principal consulting with other stakeholders but also working collaboratively with them. By reaching out and providing opportunities for input, principals demonstrate respect for their staff's expertise and create a sense of ownership of the school. A collaborative culture is characterised by open communication, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. Principals who foster such a culture create a supportive environment where staff members and other stakeholders feel valued and empowered. On this, participant (P4) stressed that:

"The school should not be a one-man show. Teachers and other stakeholders have brilliant ideas that can take a school from point A to point B. All you need to do as a manager is to give them a chance to express their opinions" (P4).

This quote highlights the belief that collective wisdom can lead to improved outcomes. By creating opportunities for collaboration, principals can tap into the creativity and innovation of their stakeholders. Shared leadership and collaboration are essential for creating a thriving school community. By empowering staff, fostering a collaborative culture, and addressing potential challenges, principals can create a positive and productive learning environment for all stakeholders. In addition to this, participant (P1) remarked:

"When all voices are heard, and all viewpoints are considered, learners are more likely to receive a well-rounded education that prepares them for future endeavours. Stakeholders' engagement needs to be purposeful, relevant, and organised. As needs arise and new initiatives are considered, school leaders should think about what skills and insights are needed" (P1).

According to Bryman et al. (2018), when staff members are actively involved in decision-making processes, they develop a sense of ownership of the school's direction. This ownership translates into an increased commitment to shared goals, fostering a positive and supportive school climate. Collaborative culture also encourages open communication, respect for diverse perspectives, and a willingness to compromise, which are essential for effective problem-solving and conflict resolution. Participant (P1) supports this assertion by

providing insight into a valuable step that needs to be taken by school principals to effect the much-needed positive changes in schools. According to him:

“There is no doubt that stakeholders bring insight and skills that help to create the learning community. Stakeholders are people, and education is a people business. As school principals develop productive relationships with all stakeholders, they gain feedback and can reflect. Effective communication is essential for quality school operation” (P1).

The understanding shared by Participant (P1) equally highlighted the need for effective communication as a hallmark for success, not just in academic establishments but in all life endeavours. Effective communication in school leadership helps to build and maintain cordial relationships with stakeholders in the school. Furthermore, shared leadership can lead to increased job satisfaction and teacher retention. When teachers feel valued and empowered, they are more likely to be engaged in their work and committed to the school community. This, in turn, can positively impact learner outcomes, as research has shown that teachers' job satisfaction is correlated with learner achievement (Hoy & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006). Participant (P5) had this to add:

“From my experience so far as a principal, I have learnt that as stakeholders feel valued and heard, trust will be earned. As we listen and gather feedback from various stakeholders, communication then becomes a two-way conversation that is free of educational jargon” (P5).

The stakeholders' role in education ranges from receiving instruction, providing instruction, monitoring school improvement, contributing to initiatives, providing funding for scholarships, establishing endowments for causes, and celebrating achievements, among other tasks (Stronge, 2018). The understanding that relationships are everything in education is essential, as noted by participant (P1). She further made clarity between engagement and compliance in dealing with stakeholders:

“Stakeholders' engagement is ongoing and continuous as the engagement is closely linked to school improvement, which is also cyclical. As I work with stakeholders, I do not confuse engagement with compliance. Engagement can quickly turn to compliance, especially with guardians and learners. While most schools would say they want parental engagement, they actually want parental compliance” (P1).

Stakeholder engagement is the loom that weaves together the school's mission, vision, and objectives to create a cohesive and enriching environment, and there is a need for the school principals to continuously engage stakeholders to bring about this positive change.

Research emphasises the importance of leadership approaches that value democratic leadership, effective communication, and cultural responsiveness (Jones & Brown, 2023). By creating an inclusive school environment where everyone is consulted and taken into confidence before executing any action, principals can promote equity and ensure that all learners have equal opportunities to succeed.

Every stakeholder or role player, including educators, students, parents, administrators, and the local community, contributes a distinct element of support and expertise to the educational framework. Establishing open lines of communication and promoting inclusivity are essential for cultivating a vibrant and supportive school environment. When school leaders create spaces where all individuals feel appreciated, respected, and listened to, the advantages extend widely. In summary, the involvement of stakeholders in education is crucial, not only for its administrative aspects but also for the comprehensive growth it fosters within the educational journey. Implementing effective engagement strategies aligns the goals and contributions of all stakeholders, resulting in significantly improved learning outcomes.

3.2. Theme 2: Professional Development Activities

Professional development activities set out individual learning goals for educators on a short-term or long-term basis and give clear steps for achieving them. It is about acquiring new skills and knowledge through continuing education and career training after entering the workforce, which is the education system in this case. This theme investigates the ongoing professional development activities in schools engineered by the school principals to ensure continuous positive output at the schools they are leading and managing. It is important to note that school principals exercise significant influence on teacher professional development.

Based on this, four areas were identified where principals could have a substantial impact on the teacher's continuous learning process. These include the principal as an instructional leader and learner, the creation of a learning environment, direct involvement in the design, delivery, and content of professional development, and finally, the assessment of professional development outcomes.

From the participants' responses, formal professional development activities include workshops, conferences, seminars, and certification programs offered by government agencies, educational institutions, and non-profit organisations. Participant (P2)

acknowledges the inevitability of these professional development activities and stipulates that the positive outcome of engaging in them benefits not just the individual teachers involved, but the entire school. Participant 2 noted that:

“By incorporating ongoing training and development opportunities into initial teacher education, teachers can continue to upgrade their skills and knowledge throughout their careers. This will ensure that teachers keep abreast with best practices and educational trends, ultimately benefiting their learners” (P2).

Professional development activities play a key role in advancing the career progression of teachers and ensuring recognition for their expertise. Consequently, a teacher is a perpetual and lifelong learner. There are numerous advantages for teachers who always engage in professional development activities, especially in matching the demanding nature of modern-day teaching and learning modes and pedagogies. On this, participant (P5) further acknowledges the importance of continuous professional activities by making some recommendations for teachers:

“By actively participating in workshops, seminars, and training programs, educators can expand their knowledge base, acquire new skills, and demonstrate their commitment to continuous learning. Also, informal opportunities, such as online courses, peer learning networks, and mentoring programs, play a significant role in enabling teachers to pursue professional development at their own pace. All these programs are designed to enhance teachers’ subject knowledge, teaching skills, and pedagogical practices” (P5).

Participant (P6) highlighted that:

“I create space for teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning in job-embedded contexts. By working collaboratively, teachers can create communities that positively change the school culture” (P6).

Evidently, these continuous professional development activities can open new career opportunities, such as leadership roles, specialized teaching positions, and mentorship roles. Additionally, they can lead to increased recognition within the education community as teachers become known for their dedication to improving their craft and learner outcomes.

A response from a focus group participant (T1) highlighted the importance of online learning as one of the major professional development activities. He suggested ways of

improving professional development, which is to integrate online learning into teacher training programs. This is what participant T1 from the focus group had to say:

“Online learning empowers teachers to build skills without putting their job or other commitments on hold. Online educational programs are very flexible, as they are often self-paced, cheaper than university courses, and allow teachers to select their own modules” (T1).

Learning can occur in both formal and informal environments. Formal environments encompass conferences, courses, seminars, retreats, and workshops. In contrast, informal avenues for teacher professional development may involve independent research, collaborative learning initiatives among peers, or simply engaging in discussions with a colleague in the staff room. In support of this, focus group participant (T3) added that:

“There is no doubt that teachers share a common concern, especially in science education; we are ever willing to share best practices with others, and we communicate through face-to-face and virtual means on an ongoing basis” (T3).

Professional development fosters an environment where educators actively engage in their own learning, promoting a mutual enthusiasm for knowledge among both teachers and students. By offering educational opportunities and support to teachers, you convey that the school community appreciates their contributions and is committed to their professional growth.

It is another way in which teachers can improve their skills and, in turn, boost learner outcomes. Teacher professional development activities are any type of continuing education effort for educators. Professional development for teachers takes place on several different levels among teachers in each school or even on a classroom or individual basis. Focus group participant (T1) stipulated that:

“The most effective professional development activity directs teachers to focus on the needs of their learners. They learn problem-solving skills together to ensure that their learners achieve success” (T1).

On the other hand, a lack of professional development resources for teachers can be discouraging. It conveys the idea that principals are not interested in making investments in the caliber of instruction or in helping teachers advance their own careers. On this, participant (T2) from the focus group stressed that:

“Change in education is driven by teachers, but teachers have been left out of the conversation. They know what their classrooms need, yet they don’t feel empowered or emboldened by their school systems and their states, and they lack the tools and funding they need to help their learners succeed” (T2).

Teachers need to be interested and engaged. Just like their learners, teachers learn in different ways and respond differently to auditory, kinesthetic, written, or visual learning methods. The success of a professional development activity relies not only on its immediate impact but also on its longevity in the classroom.

A systematic review published in 2021 indicates a strong correlation between the quality of teaching and student outcomes, as well as educational equity. Notably, the review highlights that specific types of professional development are linked to substantial and lasting improvements in both teaching practices and student performance. In the absence of ongoing learning and support, educators may be reluctant to adopt new strategies and concepts in their classrooms, potentially resulting in inefficient utilization of time and resources. Consequently, it is essential to ensure that teachers are provided with adequate support for their professional development as they work to improve their instructional methods.

Thus, for new teachers, having a mentor in the school could help them through common teaching challenges like preparing lesson plans and mastering classroom management. For in-service teachers, mentoring and participation in capacity-building activities offer them valuable learning opportunities to lead and drive change in their school and career. Teachers can also connect with other educators in their district or even participate in an exchange program during the school year, so mentoring doesn't have to take place at the same school. In short, professional development activities could take the form of classes, activities, and training that focus on improving teacher instruction, achieving mastery in instructional planning, and bringing about a positive academic performance in the school. Therefore, it is critical for the school principal to have well-rounded and developed staff that can assist the principal to work with a strong team in trying to achieve a common goal, which is aligned with the vision and mission of the school.

3.3. Theme 3: Staff meetings and communication

Staff meetings can be a vital avenue for effective communication. Effective communication and collaboration are essential for school success, and staff meetings have been a major source of fostering this necessity. The findings of this study highlight the critical role of staff meetings and open communication channels in fostering a positive and

productive school environment. Staff meetings can help keep employees informed, promote communication, and encourage feedback.

Principals emphasised the importance of regular staff meetings as a platform for information sharing, decision-making, and building a shared sense of purpose. Participant (P3) noted the importance of staff meetings by stating that:

"Meetings, if done properly, are the most effective way of making decisions and motivating staff. In effective meetings, participants can contribute and share their thoughts and, as a result, feel more engaged in the school. If the discussion is properly documented in the minutes of the meeting and a comprehensive tasks list, the meetings always lead to tangible results. Teachers are free to raise their voices in our meetings. I believe that everyone has a right to express a view, and my leadership does not revolve around the principal, as the last speaker was saying." (P3).

Participant (P1) places much emphasis on the need to have a stipulated agenda before the meeting, and according to her, this is the only way to get the staff properly engaged during the meeting.

"A meeting without an agenda is like going to an exam without studying, a waste of time. I make sure that all participants receive the agenda, including any supporting material, at least 48 hours before the meeting, so they can prepare and add any topics they believe need to be discussed. When everyone is properly prepared, the actual meeting will be much easier, but you, as a leader, must manage the discussion and make sure it stays on track. Start on time, end on time. Summarize at the end of each topic and document all decisions and action items" (P1).

Open communication channels are vital for fostering a collaborative school culture. Regular staff meetings, as well as informal opportunities for interaction, contribute to a sense of belonging and shared purpose for the staff and the bigger academic community. One of the research participants (P2) noted:

"We hold staff meetings, and we have general staff meetings as well; we also hold urgent staff meetings, if need be. Also, we do hold extraordinary meetings with both SMT and staff. There is room for all participants to raise their concerns and make input during the meetings. As I have said, I lead with people. I do not regard staff members as objects because they have their own minds, and we all share the same objective. I keep all the records of such meetings in the form of minutes" (P2).

The need for active involvement of staff during the meetings was also observed by another participant (P5), who noted that:

"I do allow teachers to have their input during the meetings because if that does not happen, that is not a meeting. A meeting is a discussion where everybody participates, leading to the development of the institution. As I mentioned earlier, being a principal is just a promotional status. Therefore, a staff meeting is an opportunity to allow other staff members to make their contributions towards the development of the school as an objective of quality teaching and learning" (P5).

Effective communication facilitates alignment with school goals and priorities. By keeping staff informed and engaged, principals can foster a shared vision and promote a cohesive approach to school improvement. To support this, one focus group participant (T1) highlighted,

"Our principal is a good listener; she respects other people's opinions and considers them during and after the meetings. We have seen the suggestions for post-level one educators being implemented, courtesy of our deliberations during the staff meetings" (T1).

From the above response, it is evident that the tone and body language used during communication can significantly impact how messages are received. A friendly and open demeanour can encourage participation and create a welcoming atmosphere, whereas a harsh or dismissive attitude may hinder effective communication and collaboration. Participant (P4) provided further clarity on some of the benefits of staff meetings, thus:

"During staff meetings, you are allowed to communicate your ideas and messages in a clear and concise manner. The meeting is meant to foster a deeper and better understanding of the staff in handling their activities. Consequently, when we sit together for the discussion, we are able to all build the school in one way or the other" (P4).

By understanding the importance of these points, preparing thoroughly, fostering active participation, and promoting effective communication, one can transform the staff meetings into engaging and productive sessions. Also, by fostering collaboration, information sharing, and a sense of shared purpose, principals can equally enhance school effectiveness through staff meetings. Addressing the challenges related to communication is crucial for maximising the benefits of the meetings.

Proposed Principal Leadership Identity Model

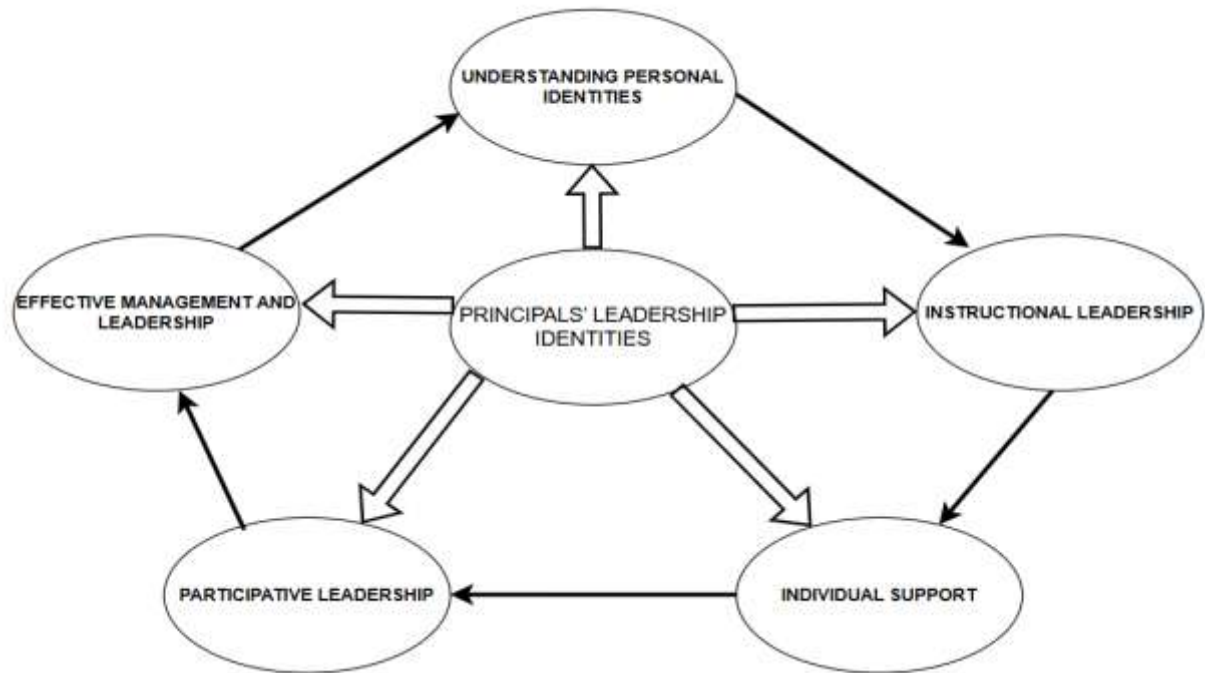


Figure 1. A proposed model: principals' leadership identities

The figure above presents the proposed model, which comprises five components: understanding personal identities, instructional leadership, individual support, participative leadership, and effective management and leadership.

1. Understanding Personal Identities

According to Aguilar (2012), personal identity is the concept of who a person is, which includes their beliefs, personalities, experiences, and name; it is a consistent aspect of a person's life that develops over time. Personal identity helps people to understand themselves and how they differ from others. Consequently, from the findings, personal identity helps determine effective school management and leadership. The principal's leadership style plays a significant role in curriculum delivery and has a significant impact on learner outcomes (Lindberg, 2014). Schools' heads, according to Lara (2018), lead the schools in fulfilling the schools' goals, vision, and strategic plans. Their identities have a big influence on this: they determine the schools' identities. They keep thinking about this identity because of how well it has performed in terms of learner results. They continually consider this identity, considering its demonstrated effectiveness in improving learner results (Whiteman, Scribner, & Crow, 2015).

Personal identity is helpful in comprehending how principals make meaning of their duties and situate themselves according to the requirements of the school environment (Burke & Stets, 2009). According to Whiteman, Scribner and Crow (2015), identity context can introduce vulnerabilities that complicate the job of the principal in various ways. The findings of this study indicate that the principals' source of influence is their identities. According to Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010), identity is built and reshaped as people change their personal narratives about themselves, as well as the narrative types they discuss and draw upon when creating descriptions or identity narratives. Smulyan (2000) stipulated that there are four types of contexts where identities fall. In the first context, the principals operate in a personal context. This context consists of their family and educational background. The second context is community, which comprises the school environment. The third context is positions of power and structural regularities that influence the principals' actions. The last context is the historical and social context, which consists of hierarchies' norms and patterns (Smulyan, 2000).

The findings of the study focused on the second and third contexts, and they examined how principals create, maintain, and constantly deconstruct their identities, as well as how identity affects their leadership. It was found that school principals have different perspectives on how they perform their duties and how they see their roles in schools and society. Thus, principals must understand their personal identities so that their leadership and management are not influenced by their personalities. Understanding personal identities is crucial for this study as it helps to unpack the research questions and to determine the principals' identities in terms of effective school management and leadership. Understanding personal identities will also help to ascertain if principals understand their identities as a component of effective school management and leadership, as stipulated in the research objective.

2. Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is concerned with leadership for learning as much as it is with supporting learning and learning outcomes, guaranteeing quality in teaching, and improving school and learner results (Zheng, Yin & Li 2019). This is leadership that pays peculiar attention to teaching and learning. From the research findings, principals as instructional leaders pay attention to classroom learning activities. Instructional leadership is generally perceived to be focused on achievement standards, accountability, and school reform. The primary responsibility of instructional leadership is to build and influence the school culture

to improve teaching and learning (Ohlson, 2009). The research findings indicated that instructional leadership is first associated with improving learning and learner performance. The research has equally established how instructional leadership impacts learners' overall achievement and school management.

Instructional leaders are tasked with a range of critical responsibilities, which encompass advocating, planning, implementation, supporting, communicating, evaluating, and monitoring, in addition to interpreting the curriculum and planning for school improvement (Wang, 2016). Consequently, instructional leadership is characterized by a focus on motivating followers to enhance teaching and learning, rather than merely overseeing the daily operations of the school (Bush, 2008). In essence, principals acting as instructional leaders take a comprehensive approach to all school activities, actively engaging with both staff and students in their pursuit of success. They champion more effective teaching and learning practices and prioritize instructional needs, rather than function solely as school managers. From the perspective of instructional leadership, the research objective concerning the impact of principals' identities on their management and leadership roles has been successfully addressed. This has facilitated the exploration of pertinent research questions, particularly regarding the proposed model that principals could adopt for aligning their identities for the sake of promoting effective school management and leadership.

3. Individual Support

Leadership, according to Pekkoley (2021), is the ability to urge and inspire others to undertake things they would not typically consider. Therefore, for effective school leadership and management, there is a need for continuous support for school leaders and teachers. The individual support for school principals can include professional development opportunities, which are interventions for principals to improve themselves through learning and training. Principals require ongoing support to balance the dictates of their identity and leadership demands, especially when it comes to implementing difficult school policies. By providing principals with resources, strategies, and guidance, these forms of support would help them to effectively plan and prioritise their approach, activities, and engagements. Providing access to counseling services, stress management programs, and strategies for work-life balance can help principals manage leadership pressures and stress.

4. Participative Leadership

Participative leadership, equally known as democratic leadership and shared leadership, entails leadership and management styles that involve the employees in the decision-making process of the institution or organisation. In participative leadership, the leader delegates the responsibility, collects opinions, reviews feedback, and guides the team to a final decision. Participative leadership has goals of improving decision-making, enhancing employees' sense of ownership of their work and integrating employees' personal goals with the organisation's goals (Yan & Ehrich, 2009). Ramrathan (2017) defines school leadership as a practice that leads to positive influence, growth, and development of both the individuals and groups for a collective purpose and common goal.

From the perspective of this leadership style, the principal and the School Management Team (SMT) should work together to ensure the school's success. To achieve this purpose, the school principal must master democratic leadership skills and principles to carry everyone along. This style of leadership makes room for more people to participate in the decision-making process. Besides, participative leadership helps to build trust by demonstrating the importance and value of group members' opinions on important matters, and it significantly benefits organisations by fostering a collaborative and innovative environment. A participative leader considers the perspective of everyone in the team and encourages employees to be heavily involved in joint decision-making (Brescoll, 2016). Participative leadership could motivate all staff members, as they feel important through their involvement in decision-making for the common goal of the school, which includes the mission and vision of the school.

5. Effective Management and Leadership

Leadership and management are linked and equally necessary if schools are to be effective, efficient, and geared towards school improvement (Mestry, 2017). According to Day, Sammons and Gorgen (2020), effective school management relates to sustaining the best practices that yield the best results in school management and administration of teaching and learning. When school management is effective, it implies that the school administration can achieve the desired results. The principal and the SMT work together to ensure the school's success. School leadership has a significant indirect impact on learners' learning outcomes based on their role in effective school management (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) defined leadership effectiveness as the ability of leaders to inspire and mobilize their followers in ways that promote the objectives of both the

group and the organization. Effective school principals are characterized by their ability to provide clear guidance, motivate their staff, and create an environment conducive to successful teaching and learning. Furthermore, school leadership highlights the importance of a shared vision within the school community, as well as the significance of collaborative efforts and professional feedback in fostering changes in attitudes, motivation, and behaviour. This form of leadership is fundamentally anchored in a collective vision and depends on the dedication and mutual support of the school community, which can lead to enhanced educational outcomes. A crucial aspect of this perspective is that leadership focuses on achieving collective goals rather than individual ambitions (Steffens, Munt, & van Knippenberg, 2021). In summary, effective leadership by principals is characterized by the encouragement of collaborative initiatives and the maintenance of a positive working environment within the school. Through this approach, the principal collaborates with the staff to establish a shared vision, enhance academic performance, and cultivate a leadership culture that engages all members of the staff.

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study proposes a conceptual model designed to understand how principals' identities influence effective school management and leadership. The model consists of five interrelated components: understanding personal identity, instructional leadership, individual support, participative leadership, and effective management and leadership. These components collectively highlight the dynamic relationship between a principal's self-concept and their professional actions, demonstrating how identity shapes leadership behaviour, decision-making, and school culture.

The study concludes that effective school management within the uMgungundlovu District is closely linked to the adoption and integration of principals' identity models. It recommends that collaboration and communication among principals within the same district or geographical area should be actively encouraged to foster the sharing of resources, best practices, and professional experiences. Such collaboration can enhance both novice and experienced principals' understanding of how identity influences leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, future research should focus on applying and refining this identity-based model in diverse educational contexts to advance the continuous improvement of school management and leadership practices.

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