



# The Leadership Role of the School Principal in Developing and Improving Learner Performance in Eswatini Schools

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a study on the leadership role of school principals in developing and improving learner performance in schools. In this study, principals are the most influential educational leaders whose leadership role is inseparably linked to student performance. This study examines the basics of good leadership in line with student performance and offers practical suggestions that school leaders can employ. A qualitative case study embedded within the interpretative paradigm was conducted with five purposively sampled high schools and conveniently sampled principals in the Manzini region of Eswatini. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that the principal is key to ensuring learner performance; thus, he is referred to as an instructional leader. The strategies principals employ to develop and improve learner performance are establishing a clear context relevant to school goals and focusing on those goals. Additionally, setting high expectations for student achievement and providing adequate resources and appropriate staff development programmes for teachers positively contribute to improving learner performance. Based on these findings, the study recommends that school principals have a knowledge-sharing platform on leadership practices and strategies for developing and improving learner performance.

**Keywords:** Instructional leaders, leadership practices, learners performance, resources.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The leadership role of school principals is critical for developing and improving learners' performance in schools. In Eswatini, school principals are responsible for setting the overall vision and direction for the schools they lead, creating and maintaining a school culture conducive to learning, developing teachers, evaluating teacher performance, managing the school's resources, and building relationships with parents and the community. Kellerman (2015) acknowledges that in the ever-evolving landscape of education, the role of school principals is a cornerstone in shaping the quality of learning experiences and student outcomes. Williams (2017) highlights that the crucial leadership role of school principals extends far beyond administrative duties; it encompasses the responsibility of cultivating an environment conducive to developing and improving learner performance. Kellerman (2015) observed that the pursuit of excellence in education is characterised by the continuous enhancement

of learner performance, which is greatly influenced by school leadership. Reich (2016) emphasises that schools are fundamental platforms where students embark on their educational journeys, and within these walls are the seeds of knowledge, skills, and personal growth. The seeds are shown by teachers under the guidance of the school principal. Shaked (2022) notes that schools are complex organisations in which numerous internal and external factors influence students' performance. Among these factors, leadership provided by school principals is considered a critical determinant of success.

Beyond doubt, educational leadership is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various dimensions, roles, and responsibilities. In particular, school principals are the cornerstone of educational policies, teacher practices, and student outcomes (Elliott & Clifford, 2014). This is also true in the Eswatini context, where school principals execute multiple roles to ensure effective school operations



and achieve positive learner outcomes. Importantly, principals' leadership styles, strategies, and decisions directly influence students' performance and achievement (Ramrathan, 2017). As an instructional leader, the school principal is tasked with managing the school and shaping the teaching and learning experiences of learners.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

School principal leadership is widely acknowledged as a critical factor in shaping the quality of education and student outcomes. As educational systems worldwide grapple with improving learner performance, extensive research has been conducted to understand the multifaceted role principals play in fostering positive educational environments. In his quantitative study, Pardosi and Utari (2021) found that the relationships between leaders and followers, task structure, and leader position significantly affected learner performance. Ramrathan (2017) identified that setting high expectations and achievable goals contributes to learner performance. Other scholars (Katterfeld, 2013; Kellerman, 2015) have identified visible principals, resource allocation, and staff development programs initiated and implemented by school principals as crucial for students' learning outcomes. These key aspects are discussed in the following subsections.

### 2.1. Instructional Leadership and the School Principal

Instructional leadership is the cornerstone of effective school leadership. It moves principals beyond their traditional role as administrators and transforms them into active agents, shaping the core of a school's educational experience: teaching and learning. Research by Hallinger and Lee (2014) demonstrates a clear connection between strong instructional leadership and improved student achievement.

Effective instructional leadership improves learning in several ways. Firstly, an instructional leader sets the vision and goals. They establish a clear vision for the school, outlining desired learning outcomes for students. This creates a shared sense of purpose that drives teachers and students toward a common goal. Secondly, they build a culture of learning. This means fostering collaboration among teachers, encouraging professional development, and celebrating student success—creating a school environment where everyone values learning. Resource allocation is another principal's key responsibility. Instructional leaders ensure that teachers have the resources they need to be successful, including instructional materials, technology, and professional development opportunities to improve teaching practices. Finally, they play a crucial role in curriculum development and alignment. Principals who value instructional leadership work with teachers to create a strong, aligned curriculum that meets the diverse needs of their students (Francera & Bliss, 2011; Katterfeld, 2013).

The responsibilities of an instructional leader go beyond setting the stage. McBryer *et al.* (2022) and Shaked (2022) highlight several key areas where instructional leaders make a difference. According to these scholars, first and foremost, principals focus on learning, fostering a love of learning, and ensuring all students have access to

high-quality education. Effective instructional leaders also create a culture of high expectations for both students and teachers, fostering a belief that all students can achieve academic success. They go beyond setting goals and actively support student ownership of learning, helping them set and achieve individual learning goals.

Monitoring student progress is another crucial responsibility. Instructional leaders put systems in place to track how students progress toward learning objectives and adjust instruction as needed. They understand the importance of protecting instructional time, minimising disruptions, and maximising the time available for effective teaching and learning. Curriculum coordination ensures coherence across grade levels and subject areas, fostering a smooth learning progression for students. Finally, providing ongoing support for teachers is essential. This can include observations, coaching, and professional development opportunities geared towards empowering educators to be their best.

While the principal plays a pivotal role, instructional leadership is not a one-person show. Many schools adopt a distributed leadership model, sharing instructional leadership responsibilities with assistant principals, department heads, and lead teachers. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of student needs and facilitates targeted instructional support across grade levels and subject areas.

Importantly, Gedifew (2014) acknowledges that effective instructional leadership, spearheaded by the principal and shared across the school community, is essential for driving improvement in student achievement and fostering a vibrant learning environment. When school leaders prioritise instruction and create a culture of collaboration, teaching and learning flourish, empowering students to reach their full potential.

### 2.2. Resource Allocation and Staff Development

Effective principals act as stewards of school resources, strategically allocating them to meet the diverse needs of teachers and students (Louis & Marks, 1998). This includes ensuring access to adequate instructional materials, professional development opportunities, and classroom supplies. Collaboration of the principal with teachers is a crucial aspect of the resource allocation process, ensuring a smooth flow of the instructional process. Effective principals champion staff development through needs-based programs, differentiated learning opportunities, and a culture of continuous improvement (Shaked, 2022). By identifying individual staff needs and designing targeted professional development initiatives, principals empower teachers to hone their skills and embrace new strategies. This ongoing commitment to staff development fosters a learning environment that ultimately benefits educators and students.

### 2.3. Setting High Expectations and Clear Achievable Goals

Principals play a crucial role in setting high expectations and clear, achievable goals for schools. Msila (2013) asserts that school leadership and management create a positive culture in schools, which results in improved learner performance. Sharing the same sentiments, Kellerman

(2015) agreed that principals who set clear, context-relevant school goals and objectives significantly impact learner performance. Reich (2016) and Ramrathan (2017), in their studies, revealed that principals who consistently communicate and uphold high expectations for student achievement tend to have schools with better learner outcomes. Principles convey these expectations to both teachers and students. One consistent finding in the literature (Hallinger, 2010; Reich, 2016) is that successful school principals set clear goals and expectations for their schools. Printy *et al.* (2022) argue that goal clarity and alignment with student needs are essential for improved learner outcomes. Setting goals should be context-relevant, and existing resources and what the school can afford to provide should be considered. Principals who engage their school communities in goal-setting processes and monitor progress tend to foster a shared sense of purpose that drives students' success. Hallinger *et al.* (2010) highlighted the significance of principals setting high expectations for student achievement. These scholars acknowledge that when principals convey a belief in students' abilities and create a culture of high expectations, students tend to rise to these expectations. This approach positively influences learners' motivation and effort, improving academic performance.

#### 2.4. Available Principals

The principals go beyond obligatory classroom observations and provide valuable feedback to teachers, aiming to improve teaching quality (Hallinger, 2010). Their active presence around the school and in classrooms, whenever possible, fosters collegiality, empowering and motivating educators. This visibility should extend to all school stakeholders, including non-academic staff, parents, and wider school communities. Memela and Ramrathan (2022) observe that being visible as a principal among students entails personal interaction, such as greeting students by name during school entry, exit, between classes, and during recess. Principals who maintain a consistent and approachable presence throughout the school day cultivate trust and motivation among students (Douglas, 2000). Importantly, principals' visibility allows for proactive measures to prevent potential disciplinary issues before they arise. Principals visit classrooms for more than just the required teacher observations and provide feedback to teachers to increase their quality of teaching (Hallinger, 2010). Principal's visibility enhances collegiality, which in turn empowers and motivates teachers. Douglas (2000) emphasises that good principals should be visible during school to maintain trust and motivation.

#### 2.5. Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative leadership fosters a sense of shared responsibility for student success. Teachers, parents, and community members feel invested in learning (Farah, 2013). This collective ownership allows everyone to contribute their unique perspectives and expertise. Teachers can share best practices, parents can provide valuable insights into their children's learning styles, and community members can offer real-world connections to enhance curriculum. This collective brainpower leads

to a richer learning environment and improved student outcomes. Research by Fullan (2009) highlights a growing trend of collaborative leadership in education. This approach moves away from traditional top-down leadership models and emphasises shared decision-making between school principals, teachers, and other stakeholders. This collaborative approach can lead to a more effective implementation of positive educational practices, ultimately benefiting students. Collaborative leadership allows principals to tap into the collective knowledge and experience of the school community to develop relevant and impactful solutions within their schools.

#### 2.6. Parent Involvement

Research by Epstein (2007) shows a clear link between principals who actively engage parents and encourage teachers to do the same and improved student performance. In other words, schools with strong leadership that prioritise parental involvement see better results from their students. Importantly, when parents are actively involved in their child's education, students tend to be more motivated and have higher self-esteem. This translates to better grades and a more positive overall school experience (Epstein *et al.*, 2011). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) further emphasise that parental involvement is essential for academic success. It creates a supportive environment where students feel encouraged to learn and grow academically and personally (Averill *et al.*, 2016). The impact of parental involvement goes beyond grades and test scores. It fosters a love of learning that can last a lifetime. When parents show genuine interest in their child's education, it sends a powerful message: learning is important. This sets the stage for students to become curious, engaged learners prepared for future success in all aspects of life. By working together, parents, teachers, and the school community can create a powerful support system that empowers students to achieve their academic goals and reach their full potential. Parents are key partners in a child's education, working alongside teachers and the school community to help students reach their full potential.

### 3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Learner performance in schools is at the centre of the existence of the education system. However, learner performance in Eswatini schools is a major concern for all stakeholders, including parents and the Ministry of Education and Training. The government is exerting considerable effort through the ministry to improve learner performance through teacher-in-service workshops and providing qualified teachers in schools. Despite various efforts to improve learner outcomes, there is still significant variation in learner performance across countrywide schools (Dlamini, 2017). This raises questions regarding the role of school leadership, particularly that of the principal, in shaping student achievement. This seeks a thorough exploration of leadership practices that foster the development and enhancement of learners' performance. In the context of educational leadership, it is unclear how school principals, as instructional leaders, can effectively develop and improve learners' performance. Thus,



there is a need to investigate specific leadership practices and strategies employed by principals to enhance student achievement.

### 3.1. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to better understand the specific leadership practices and strategies employed by school principals that are associated with improved learner performance.

### 3.2. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to (1) examine the leadership practices employed by the principals in enhancing learners' performance in schools and (2) determine the strategies principals employed to enhance learner performance in schools.

### 3.3. Research Question

To address the problem statement and gain a deeper insight into the leadership role of school principals in developing and improving learner performance, the following research questions were formulated:

1. *What leadership practices are employed by the principals to enhance learners' performance in schools?*
2. *What strategies have principals employed to enhance learner performance in schools?*

### 3.4. Significance of the Study

The rationale for this study is grounded in understanding effective school principal leadership practices for improving learners' performance. While the importance of school principals in the educational system is widely acknowledged (Mestry, 2017; Msila, 2022), there is a need to explore specific leadership practices and strategies that contribute to developing and enhancing learner performance. Understanding the complex interplay between leadership and student outcomes is paramount in the quest for educational excellence. The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide valuable insights into the leadership practices of school principals regarding learner performance. These insights can guide current and upcoming school principals on their leadership practices and benefit students by creating more conducive learning environments and improving educational outcomes. Moreover, school principals are often tasked with complex responsibilities, and their leadership can vary widely. This study offers practical guidance to principals by identifying effective leadership strategies that positively impact student performance. Principals can use this information to refine their leadership styles and decision-making processes. This study adds to the body of research on educational leadership. It is a foundation for further research, potentially leading to more comprehensive theories and models of effective school leadership and its relationship with learner performance.

## 4. METHOD

Using a case study design, this qualitative study was embedded in an interpretative paradigm. The study was

conducted in five schools in the Hhohho region of Eswatini and involved five school principals. The research sites were conveniently sampled based on the Eswatini Examinations Council Annual Reports dating five years back, where the selected schools had consistently outstanding performance, and the participants were purposively sampled.

All principals in these schools had been principals for five years or more. Data for the study were generated through semi-structured interviews conducted individually at their schools. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate as they enabled extensive interactions with the participants (Creswell, 2018). Each principal was visited twice, with each interview session lasting between 45 and 60 min. Data were analysed using a thematic method and presented using themes emerging from the participants' responses. The researchers used pseudonyms of Principal A and Principal B for other principals to refer to them as participants and to protect their identities.

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings were presented based on the themes emanating from the interviews conducted to discover the practices and strategies used by the principals to enhance learners' performance.

### 5.1. Leadership Practices Employed by the Principals in Enhancing Learners' Performance in Schools

The findings indicate that principals employ various practices to enhance learner performance. These strategies include communicating expectations, being visible, involving parents and teachers, and providing teaching and learning resources.

#### 5.1.1. Visibility

Some of the participants indicated that they were available in their schools most of the time. Even when they had commitments outside the school, they would make sure they made time to start or come back to the school after meetings.

#### 5.1.2. Parental Involvement

What was prominently employed by the principals of successful schools as a strategy for developing and improving learner performance was the involvement of parents. The participants had the following to say in this regard, as presented below:

*"We believe that parent involvement is essential to student success. We make it a priority to communicate regularly with parents and provide them with opportunities to get involved in their children's education."* (Principal A)

*"We have a strong PTA that supports a variety of programs and events at our school."* And Principal E said, *"I encourage teachers to reach out to parents regularly and invite them to participate in their child's education. I believe that when parents and teachers work together, students are more likely to succeed."* (Principal D)

### 5.1.3. Learner Discipline

The participants indicated that discipline is a complex phenomenon, yet it underpins every aspect of school life. It is recognised as a key indicator of a successful school and determines the quality of education that the learners experience in a school. For positive learning outcomes, this is one area that calls for vigilance on the part of the school. The participants had the following to say;

*"We believe in maintaining a balanced approach to discipline. While we understand the importance of flexibility, our policies are designed to create a safe and respectful learning environment for all students."* (Principal C)

*"Consistency in discipline is crucial to ensure that consequences are fair and predictable. It helps students understand the expectations and promotes responsible behaviour. However, we encounter a lot of challenges in line with learner discipline, and we try to remain vigilant. As a principal, I provide support by all means to teachers."* (Principal D)

*"We value open dialogue with students, parents, and staff. If anyone feels our discipline policies are too strict, we encourage them to share their concerns with us. We are committed to working together. Students are encouraged to ensure discipline amongst them and frown upon disruptive individuals. This is so helpful. We have discipline challenges, but we dedicate our efforts as a school towards discipline, and this greatly enhances learner performance. As a principal, I take the lead and ensure that any referred cases are addressed accordingly."* (Principal B)

### 5.1.4. Involvement of Teachers

Participants indicated that teacher involvement inspires teachers to work extra hard and take ownership of agreed decisions and, in return, contribute to students' learning outcomes. It was also revealed that through shared leadership, teachers are motivated to go the extra mile. In this regard, the participants had the following to say:

*"Involving teachers is at the core of our school's success. We have regular meetings where teachers collaborate on decision-making. Each department is encouraged to take ownership of specific areas, such as monitoring and improving learner performance. This shared approach encourages everyone to contribute their expertise."* (Principal E)

*"We believe in distributed leadership, where responsibilities are shared amongst all staff members. Our Parent-Teacher Association plays an active role in decision-making, and teachers are encouraged to lead professional development sessions. I recognise that leadership can come from any corner of the school community."* (Principal B)

*"I foster open communication. We have suggestion boxes, regular forums for teachers to voice their ideas and anonymous feedback channels. It is important that*

*all voices are heard, and decisions are made collectively with input from teachers, parents, and students."* (Principal C)

*"I share information and exchange ideas with teachers. We work as a team. Our leadership team consists of representatives from different departments, and they have autonomy within their departments. For instance, our Math Department Head leads initiatives related to math curriculum and professional development."* (Principal A)

*"I use a collaborative decision-making process. Committees are in place to tackle specific issues, such as learner discipline and educational tours. This way, we ensure diverse perspectives in our decision-making."* (Principal D)

These responses reflect that leadership is not confined to the principal's office but can emerge from all members of the school community. The findings suggest that shared leadership is an effective strategy for improving learner performance. When teachers are involved in decision-making and share responsibility for leading the school, they are more motivated and engaged in their work. This leads to better teaching and learning outcomes for students. Importantly, shared leadership motivates teachers and encourages them. When teachers have a voice in decision-making and feel ownership of the schools' goals, they are more likely to be actively engaged in their work.

## 5.2. Strategies Principals Employed to Enhance Learner Performance in Schools

### 5.2.1. Resource Provision

The findings also revealed that successful principals allocate resources, ensuring that teachers have access to the necessary materials and tools to support them in excelling in their roles. The excerpts below are the responses of the participants in this regard:

*"One of my top priorities is to ensure that all of our teachers have the resources they need to be successful. This means allocating our budget strategically and providing teachers with access to professional development opportunities."* (Principal A)

*"I believe that resource allocation is crucial to teacher motivation and performance. When teachers have the tools and support they need, they are more likely to be engaged in their work and produce positive results for students."* (Principal C)

*"I am always looking for ways to provide our school with resources. I have recently submitted a grant application to purchase new technology for our classrooms."* (Principal E)

It was interesting to note that these principals were effective at resource allocation and were able to create a school environment where teachers have the resources they need to support students' learning.

### 5.2.2. Communicating Expectations to Teachers

The findings revealed that principals need confidence and skills to engage in productive and respectful conversations about the quality of teaching and learning expected

of teachers. Participants indicated that they spent time communicating with teachers, and the excerpts below are what they had to say:

*“We spend time with teachers and discuss our primary goal, ensuring that every student in our school experiences growth and progress. I encourage teachers to dedicate themselves to the school’s goals.”* (Principal B)

*“We believe in continuous improvement. We work together to identify areas where we can enhance our teaching methods, curriculum, and classroom strategies to benefit our students.”* (Principal A)

*“We are a team, and each member’s contribution matters. Working together, sharing best practices, and supporting one another is key to our school’s success.”* (Principal D)

*“From a leadership point of view, I try to create a positive and inclusive learning environment. I encourage every teacher to foster a classroom atmosphere where students feel safe, valued, and motivated to learn.”* (Principal E)

These excerpts convey the principal’s commitment to student success and a collaborative school culture. They also emphasise the importance of continuous improvement and maintaining a positive learning environment. Effective communication of these messages can inspire and motivate teachers to produce good school results.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that school principals recognise that parental involvement is essential to student success. When parents are involved in their children’s education, students are more likely to succeed academically and socially. The principals of successful schools emphasise the importance of communication and collaboration with parents. They also provide parents with opportunities to get involved in their child’s education and to learn more about how to support their children’s learning at home (Epstein, 2007). The principals’ responses reflect a principled commitment to maintaining a safe and respectful learning environment, which aligns with Schlebusch *et al.* (2022), who indicated that for effective learning to take place, there must be a respectful learning environment. It was encouraging to discover that principals take a leading role in ensuring discipline in the schools.

It was discovered that principals play a leading role in ensuring discipline in schools. These findings resonate with Louis and Marks (1998) assertion that effective principals ensure that teachers have access to adequate resources, including instructional materials and professional development opportunities. Such support enhances teacher effectiveness and directly impacts learner performance. It was interesting to note that the principals prioritise resource allocation in their schools against all odds. These findings align with Hallinger and Lee (2014), who indicated that resource allocation is crucial to teacher motivation and performance. This may include details on

budget allocation, access to teaching materials, and professional development opportunities.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In concluding the study, we go back to our research purpose: to gain a deeper understanding of the specific leadership practices and strategies employed by school principals that are associated with improved learner performance and conclude that:

- Principals are critical in the development and improvement of learner outcomes.
- Principals who prioritise their visibility and engagement within the school community contribute significantly to an enriched educational environment and improved student outcomes.
- Learner discipline contributes to positive performance and is not an event but a developmental process that enables learners to become responsible individuals.
- Principals who engage in collaborative leadership practices by involving teachers and other stakeholders in decision-making contribute positively to learner performance.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusion, the study recommends that:

- School principals should have a knowledge-sharing platform on leadership to share practices and strategies for developing and improving learner performance.
- While certain leadership practices are associated with improved learner performance, more research is needed to understand the variations across different educational contexts in Eswatini schools.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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