



Enabling Leadership Behaviours of Principals Leading Rural Primary Schools in the Ilembe District, South Africa

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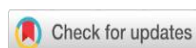
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ABSTRACT

This paper flows from a research project that examined the Principals' lived experiences of leading rural primary schools. It focuses specifically on leadership behaviours enabling the principals in leading rural primary schools against challenging contextual realities. The servant leadership concept was adopted to frame our understanding of and engagement with participants' experiences. Regarding the research method, we employed the narrative inquiry design to inquire into principals' experiences. In keeping with this design, we generated field texts using a narrative interview, an unstructured type of interview. The generated field texts were subsequently analyzed through narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. The findings revealed important leadership behaviours that appeared to enable the participating principals in leading rural primary schools; these include embracing all stakeholders as a family, leading a rural school as a servant, and leveraging stakeholder support to benefit learners. In conclusion, we deduce that the participating rural primary school principals keep their schools afloat by setting themselves as servants who show support to all stakeholders and who are willing to go out of their way to solicit charity to expand the support.



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INTRODUCTION

In 2024, South Africa marked 30 years into democracy; however, the demographics and location of communities still reflect the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. According to Gachassin (2010) and Sarkar with Mashiri (2001), about 70% of Sub-Saharan African communities live in rural areas. South Africa is not an exception, as the majority of black South Africans still reside in the countryside (Sewell et al., 2019). Though there have been some developments post-apartheid, rural communities remain underdeveloped and have to contend with complexities that uniquely characterize their environment (Myende & Hlalele, 2018). These complexities include poor infrastructure (or a lack of infrastructural capacity), geographical isolation, unemployment, poverty, inequality, and lack of access to social services, clean water, and sanitation (Myende & Hlalele, 2018; Sewell et al., 2019). Given that schools are microcosms of communities, the above challenges faced by rural communities also affect the schools (Duma et al., 2021).

In South Africa, the quintile system is used to rank schools and facilitate equitable distribution of resources to all schools (Republic of South Africa, 1998). Schools ranked in Quintile 1 are the poorest schools, while those ranked in Quintile 5 are the least poor (Blose & Naicker 2018; Naicker & Ncokwana, 2016; Republic of South Africa, 1998). The quintiling system shows the state's acknowledgement of the disparities among South African schools. Most schools in rural communities are ranked from quintiles 1 to 3; these schools are the poorest (Naicker & Ncokwana, 2016). Among many challenges, such schools contend with a lack of infrastructure, a



lack of access to information and communication technology, a shortage of teachers, inadequate access to teacher professional development, financial constraints, a poor culture of teaching and learning, multi-grade teaching, underqualified teachers, a lack of parental involvement, and poverty (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Matshe, 2014; Myende & Maifala, 2020; Myende & Hlalele, 2018; Miller, 2015; Arnold et al., 2005). Despite these challenges, rural schools are required to perform at the same level as their counterparts in urban and semi-urban communities.

In our study, we paid attention to principals who are accounting officers and whose leadership is crucial for the success of schools (Blose et al., 2022). In rural contexts, these leaders lead schools faced with a myriad of challenges that constrain their endeavors; yet, like all other principals, they are expected to ensure quality teaching and learning (Department of Basic Education, 2016). For these leaders, it is not an option to lapse into a state of hopelessness and paralysis; instead, they need to find ways to keep their schools afloat amid numerous contextual adversities. Heystek (2015) suggests that they need to find ways of mitigating their complexities instead of defaulting to excuses. Considering this scenario, many questions arise as to how rural school principals keep their schools afloat.

In this paper, we focused on the behaviours that enable these leaders in their leadership. The challenges of rural contexts affect both primary and secondary schools; however, scholars have focused more on secondary schools, perhaps because the performance of schools is gauged through matric results. While we do not dispute this view, we argue that primary schools also contribute to matric results; therefore, the voices of primary school principals are well worth listening to. Through engaging with selected primary school principals narratively, we sought to understand leadership behaviours that enable them to survive and keep their schools functional. The research puzzle revolves around identifying the key leadership behaviours that facilitate successful principalship in rural primary schools

School principals in the 21st century, are generally challenged by numerous complexities, including the multifaceted roles that they need to balance, excessive workloads, resource constraints, increased accountability mandates, changing learner demographics, bigger job responsibilities, and the expectation to do more with less (Du Plessis, 2017; Wiczorek & Manard, 2018; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Peck & Reitzug, 2014; Klar et al., 2020; Stewart & Mathews, 2016). The complexities of this position are even worse in rural schools, where contextual challenges are rife. Miller (2015) agrees and asserts that contextual challenges that rural school principals contend with could either create additional leadership complexities or aggravate existing ones. This suggests that school principals must be specifically prepared to lead in rural contexts, otherwise the execution of their leadership mandates could take a “sink or swim” trajectory (Ncokwana, 2020).

Although principals in rural schools contend with a myriad of challenges, they are held to the same accountability standards as their counterparts in urban and semi-urban schools (Myende & Maifala, 2020; Preston et al., 2013). Hence, leadership becomes a key contributor to the survival of these schools, a view supported by scholars such as Wiley (2018) and Bush and Glover (2014), who recognize leadership as second only to classroom teaching in its impact on student learning. As the most senior leaders in schools, principals play a vital role in shaping both school leadership and school performance. To lead effectively, it is important that they possess a clear understanding of the context in which they lead. In the context of a rural setting, Chalker (1999) and Preston (2013) argue that unique contextual realities of rural schools require a unique brand of leadership, which, according to Preston (2013), should be multidimensional, context-sensitive, and relationship-dependent. Accordingly, the interests and priorities of learners, their parents, and the school community at large require a school principal who is well-conversant with the prevailing educational policies but, most importantly, responsive to the unique local-context needs and cultural disposition of stakeholders in the rural school community (Preston et al., 2013). This means that rural principal leadership shares a “yin-yang” relationship with the



context within which it is operationalized as leadership shapes the context, the context, in turn, shapes leadership (Naicker & Ncokwana, 2021).

In a comprehensive conceptual study on successful rural schools, successful principals show people-centered leadership and are change agents in their schools (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Hayes et al., 2021). On the one hand, people-centered leadership embraces the nurturing of interpersonal relationships with the teachers, learners, parents, and school community, which promote a shared vision in the quest to galvanize school effectiveness. This resonates with the findings of Wieczorek and Manard's (2018) study that rural novice principals have to focus on learning how to be a rural school principal, which includes being a visible and active community member, grasping the multiplicity of roles, and building sound relationships. As a change agent, a principal has to support and facilitate educational, social, cultural, and behavioural change in a school to ensure its improvement (Hayes et al., 2021). Successful rural principals are change agents who are able to balance local needs and educational vision at the macro level (Preston & Barnes, 2017). These authors also argue that successful school leaders understand how policy contexts at the micro and macro levels affect schools, and they respond in a fashion that is both context-sensitive and mandate-responsive (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Regardless of the core leadership practices that a principal executes, a lack of balance between policy implementation and local community needs could render such practices futile and could derail the school's effectiveness trajectory.

The study by Klar (2020) found that successful school principals in deprived rural contexts make it their mission to ensure that the social, emotional, and physical needs of learners are catered for, as they acknowledge that those basic needs are a prerequisite for effective student learning. This suggests that satisfying the basic needs of learners should be a point of departure in the quest to promote learner academic achievement. While taking care of learners' basic needs, successful schools in deprived rural contexts regularly collect and analyze assessment data from the classroom, observations, and weekly cluster meetings to shape and re-shape teaching and learning processes (Klar et al., 2020; O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). Such data collection enables those schools to make data-informed decisions regarding their core business. This aligns with the quest to understand context vis-à-vis leadership practices. In executing the aforesaid decisions, effective school leaders defy the pre-existing deficit thinking about rurality, namely that learners from low-income households are not able to excel academically. Instead, these principals set high expectations for their teachers and learners (Klar et al., 2020) and hold them accountable for achieving those expectations (Klar & Brewer, 2014). In other words, the principals confront the rural schools' inferiority complex, something that is not uncommon in rural communities (Theobald & Wood, 2010). This approach drives the rural schools' academic improvement agenda. Furthermore, understanding that turning the schools around cannot be a solo project, the rural principals mobilize parental and community involvement inter alia through scheduling school meetings and events well in advance and during times that are convenient for parents. This mobilization involves soliciting support from local businesses for the benefit of teaching and learning programmes (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Since leading a school cannot be a "one-man show", principals (across settings) embrace distributed leadership behaviours that mobilizes stakeholder agency towards the school vision (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022). This distributed leadership approach is crucial as it becomes an antidote for principals who have to "wear many hats" – something that can derail the instructional leadership agenda (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022), particularly in rural contexts.

Leadership is one of the most critical ingredients for organizational success (Nandasinghe, 2020). The school principals as leaders have to embrace the reality that the success of different facets of school life – for which they are accountable – is largely shaped and re-shaped by their leadership behaviours (Pardosi & Utari, 2021). There are specific behaviours, skills, traits, and responsibilities that successful school principals need to adopt (Rammer, 2007) in order to lead effectively, particularly in rural contexts. However, this paper does not suggest that school leadership is the prerogative of a principal alone (Khanal, 2018). Leadership behaviours are a

powerful conduit of practice that communicates organizational (school) values and expectations, and that underpins the tone of the organizational climate (Grojean et al., 2004). Successful principals operationalize behaviours and programmes that share compatibility and are inclined to synergies the efforts of all the school stakeholders (Yukl, 2008). The synergized behaviours, operationalized repeatedly, are able to enhance leadership effectiveness. However, according to Rajbhandari (2016), there is no single leadership behaviour that breeds successful leadership, and there are dimensions of individual principal personalities and school context that influence the choice of leadership behaviours. For instance, personality dimensions include extroversion, emotional stability, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Goldberg, 1992), while school context includes the location of the school (whether rural or urban), size of the district or the school, socio-economic status of school community (Hallinger, 2018), learner demographics, fee-paying or no-fee-paying school. A critical prerequisite to adopting leadership behaviours is the understanding of the context (Rajbhandari, 2013). Therefore, the unavoidable impact of each school's unique contextual variations (internal or external) has an influence on the change of leadership behaviours (Rajbhandari et al., 2016). This suggests that the forces that influence leadership behaviours emanate from within and beyond the bounds of the school. It is these forces that shape and reshape the leadership behaviours of principals. Consequently, we submit that the principal leadership behaviours do not exist in a vacuum; they are uniquely context-laden. In determining the leadership behaviours that are context responsive, contextual intelligence of the principals plays a critical role (Rajbhandari, 2013).

Langford (2017) presents leadership behaviours in two categories (relations-oriented and task-oriented) that are considered to impact the effectiveness of leadership. Firstly, relation-oriented leadership behaviours are primarily concerned with developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Holloway, 2012). It includes supporting, developing, recognizing, rewarding, and empowering (Yukl et al., 2019), as well as allowing for individual autonomy (Yukl, 2006). It is argued that the dimensions of the relations-oriented leadership behaviour share a close resemblance with servant leadership, which puts the interests of the people that are led before those of leaders (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Furthermore, leaders make it their mission to fulfil the needs of the people they lead (Greenleaf, 2002). Secondly, task-oriented leadership behaviour is focused on the accomplishment of organizational goals by assisting employees to achieve their goals by defining roles and methods of evaluation, giving directions, setting timelines, and showing the organizational strategy for achieving the goals (Holloway, 2012). These behaviours are not mutually exclusive; they complement one another. For these leadership behaviours to yield intended outcomes, they must be appropriately aligned to a context or situation (Yukl et al., 2019), as the misalignment may yield unintended outcomes that do not advance leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, though these leadership behaviours have the potential to galvanize effective leadership, it is a rebuttable presumption that both are equally responsive in all school contexts or that every behaviour is responsive in every context (Yukl, Gordon & Taber, 2002).

Depending on the contextual variations (internal or external), school principal leadership is inclined to be characterized by one type of leadership behaviours, either task-oriented or relations-oriented (Wirawan et al., 2018). However, enacting a single leadership behaviour may not be adequate in the quest for effective principal leadership (Day et al., 2016; Marks & Printy, 2003). The emergent dominance of a leadership behaviour is contingent upon the impact of the school's contextual realities (Rajbhandari et al., 2016). However, such dominance does not seek to exclude the other behaviours. The complementary relationship between these behaviours breeds leadership flexibility characterized by the interplay of the components of both task- and relations-oriented behaviours, which leads to effective school leadership flexibility (Yukl, 2008). It is this flexible leadership that mirrors context responsiveness. To this end, maximizing leadership behaviours for a particular school at a particular time should consider the multi-layered nature of context and the personal characteristics of a principal (Hallinger, 2018). Hence, in practice, individual and organizational contexts are not mutually exclusive; instead, they

intersect with each other to shape and reshape leadership behaviours (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

We adopted the concept of servant leadership to understand the leadership experiences of principals who are leading rural primary schools. In the 1970s, Robert Greenleaf contributed a seminal work on the servant leadership concept. His idea was that the role of a servant and that of a leader may be fused in one person, a servant leader. Greenleaf (1977) made a clear distinction between a servant leader and a non-servant leader. He viewed a servant leader as a servant first, rather than a leader first, and further added that to be a servant leader starts with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, followed by a conscious choice and aspiration to lead. In contrast, the non-servant leader may be a person who is a leader first because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions, and they only later make a choice to serve (Greenleaf, 1977).

The servant leadership concept attracted many scholars (Crippen, 2005; Graham, 1991; Russell & Stone, 2002; Van Dierendonck, 2011) over the years, but there is still no agreed-upon definition. In our study, we adopted Van Dierendonck's (2011) notion of servant leadership. In his definition, he paid attention to the role and use of power in the context of servant leadership, and claimed that power is a possibility to serve and a prerequisite for servant leaders. Van Dierendonck (2011) further looked at serving and leading as interchangeable, because being a servant allows a person to lead, and being a leader implies a person serves. There is a wide range of characteristics to describe behaviours of servant leaders, and Van Dierendonck's (2011) work involved an assessment of multiple sets of characteristics of servant leaders mentioned in the available literature. Since this assessment revealed that there are commonalities among these sets, he compressed them and formulated six key characteristics: servant leaders empower and develop people; they show humility; they are authentic; they accept people for who they are; they provide direction; and they are stewards who work for the good of the whole (Van Dierendonck, 2011). These characteristics reflect the commitment to serve others (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021).

The study we report on here sought to understand leadership behaviours that enable principals in leading rural schools. As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, rural schools experience multiple challenges, and we believe that these challenges call on leaders to serve before they lead. For this reason, we deemed the servant leadership concept relevant to frame the study, and we utilized Van Dierendonck's (2011) characteristics of servant leadership to understand the behaviours of rural school principals.

RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, we located ourselves within the interpretivism paradigm to engage with the lived experiences of rural primary school principals. One of the assumptions of this paradigm is that there exist multiple truths; thus, people's experiences are perceived as subjective (Willis, 2007; Creswell, 2009). In keeping with this paradigmatic positioning, we adopted a qualitative research approach. Creswell (2009) defines qualitative research as a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. This research approach aims to understand, describe, and sometimes explain social phenomena from the inside, using various ways (Flick, 2007). Hence, we perceived participants as individuals with unique experiences, and we engaged deeply with their experiences to understand their enabling leadership behaviours in rural primary schools.

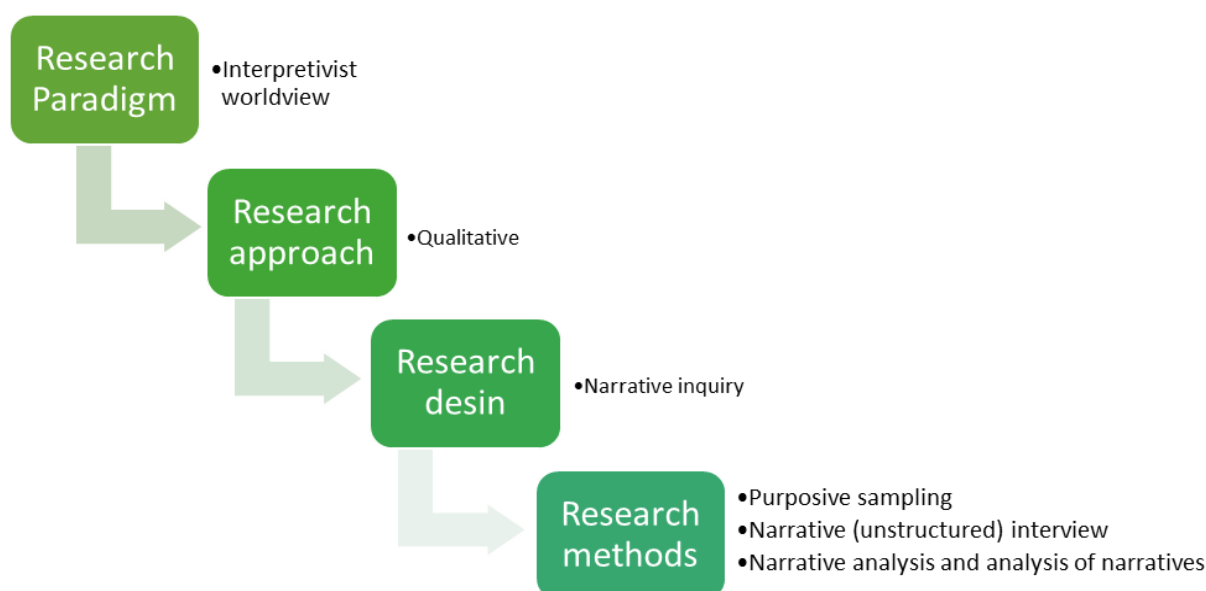


Figure 1. Flow chart

Within the qualitative research framework, we utilized the narrative inquiry design. The latter is defined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) as a way of understanding experience through collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with different milieus. In this narrative inquiry, we purposely selected and engaged with three primary school principals in a rural district of KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. For anonymity purposes, we use three pseudonyms (Mr. Mthethwa, Ms. Simelane, and Ms. Mbewu) to refer to these participants (see profile below).

Table 2. Participants' profiles

Name of participant	Age	Gender	Position	Name of school
Mr. Mthethwa	54	Male	Principal	Komanisi Primary
Ms. Mbewu	48	Female	Principal	Nono Primary
Ms. Simelane	56	Female	Principal	Nakanjani Primary

We used a narrative method of generating field texts, i.e., a narrative interview, to generate participants' accounts of their lived experiences in rural primary schools. To operationalize this method, we used broad questions to allow participants to relate their stories of lived experiences freely. The broad question we posed was: tell us about your leadership behaviours enabling you to lead a rural primary school, and why you adopt such behaviours? The generated field texts were subsequently analyzed using two analysis methods: narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. The narrative analysis involved organizing each participant's field text into a coherent and chronological account by using plots that captured different episodes of participants' experiences (Polkinghorne, 2002). While these narratives are not included in this paper in full due to word constraints, considerable extractions are presented as part of the findings. Following the narrative analysis, the re-storied narratives of Mr. Mthethwa, Ms. Simelane, and Ms. Mbewu were further analyzed using the analysis of narratives method. This involved a close examination of the re-storied narratives to identify particular instances or themes that provide answers to the research question (Polkinghorne, 2002). In the next section, we discuss the themes that resulted from this process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents the findings of the study. Three themes reflecting behaviours that enable rural school principals emerged from the narratives of the principals. These themes were embracing stakeholders as a family, leading the rural school as a servant, and leveraging stakeholder support to benefit learners.

Embracing Stakeholders as a Family

The principals who participated in this study seemed to embrace stakeholders within their schools and treated them as a family. These leaders created a positive spirit in the workplace by attending to the needs of and showing support to stakeholders in their schools. Mr. Mthethwa narrates how he prioritized an existing stakeholder when a better job position became available at his school:

At some point we had a cleaner post at school. The SGB wanted to deploy a comrade into this post and that was going to be unfair because we had a lady that had been cooking in the school. She was earning one hundred and fifty rand a month and the cleaning post was going to pay far better. Her husband was working in Johannesburg and was not sending her money every month. She was already part of the family and had been loyal to the school for quite some time, so I influenced the SGB members to consider her. Eventually, she was appointed. [Mr. Mthethwa]

It seems that Ms. Simelane also created a family at her workplace, as is clear from her explanation of how she supported teachers offering extra classes at her school:

There are teachers who stay behind after school to do their schoolwork, I remain behind with them. Perhaps around 16h00 I would realize that teachers are still at school. I interrupt them and invite them for drinks to de-stress them. It is important that we get together from time to time and enjoy drinks. [Ms. Simelane]

Ms. Mbewu embraced her learners to the extent that she allowed needy learners to take food from the nutrition program home.

When I started at this school, the nutrition program was no longer in place. I had to enquire with the Department and ask them to reinstate it, which they did. We allow some learners to dish extra food from our nutrition program so that they can take it home. I took it upon my shoulders to persuade our supplier for the nutrition program to provide us with more food so that needy learners can take some home. The previous supplier even organized food parcels that we also distributed to these learners. [Ms. Mbewu]

Family leaders are often the primary source of support (Manolova et al., 2019), and they make a difference in the lives of their family members through facilitating a spirit of working as a supportive, cohesive, and caring unit or group (Eckrich & McClure, 2012). The above extracts show the participating principals behaving as family leaders since they held their followers closely and showed concern for them. The participating principals not only cared for stakeholders while in the school space, but they were also concerned about their well-being even outside the school. Such care is important in rural contexts where challenges such as unemployment and poverty are rife (Mbonambi et al., 2023; Nkosi & Moyo, 2024). By embracing stakeholders, the participating principals not only showed understanding of the people with whom they worked, but also thoughtfulness of their situations. A study by Klar (2020) found that successful school principals in deprived rural contexts made it their responsibility to address the social, emotional, and physical needs of learners, as they acknowledged that those basic needs were a prerequisite to effective student learning. Our own study confirms this finding but also extends it, as the participating principals embraced not only learners but teachers and non-teaching staff as well. According to Van Dierendonck (2011), servant leaders show humility, are authentic, and accept people for who they are. These characteristics match the behaviour of the participating rural school principals.

Leading a Rural School as a Servant

The principals who participated in this study appeared to be servants in their rural communities. These communities are usually stricken by numerous socio-economic issues, including poverty, high unemployment rates, and/or poor infrastructure (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Leaders understand the realities of their context and its impact on the communities. Thus, they serve their communities by assisting where they can. Ms. Simelane was concerned about the illiteracy rate and the level of learner school readiness in her community and therefore she decided to build early childhood development centers to mitigate this challenge:

I looked at my community, it was illiterate. There were no crèches or Early Childhood Development institutions. I would hear our teachers who are coming from Umlazi and KwaMashu complaining about kids that cry and “release” themselves anywhere at our school. It would hurt me as a resident in the area. I decided to try something. So, I built two crèches near my home. I applied for sponsors. The first crèche was built by Tongaat Hulets, and the other one was built by my brother together with my brother-in-law. [Ms. Simelane]

Also responding to a contextual reality in a rural context is Ms. Simelane, who strove to improve learners’ language proficiency levels:

I introduced some co-curricular activities at my school to improve the language efficiency level of our learners. These include speech contest, presentations. The speech contest started at our school, but has been adopted by the entire cluster comprising 7 schools. I still lead the program at the cluster level; we hold competitions twice or thrice a year. Our learners are still leading the pack. Apart from the speech contest, we encourage learners to practice English speaking as we believe that if they can speak, it may be easy to write. Working with my colleagues, we organize English related activities for our assembly with different grades taking turns to participate on different days. Learners may present poems, dialogue, storytelling, news bulletins and debates. We also have curriculum days where the entire school gathers at the hall for our contest activities. [Ms. Simelane]

Mr. Mthethwa narrated a touching story about protecting a child with albinism in a rural area:

A grade three learner at my school lives with albinism. At some point there was a threat that people with albinism are taken by so-called izinyanga [traditional doctors] to be killed and their body parts are used for umuthi purposes. So, there was that attempt of kidnapping one of our learners in the area. As a school we feared for that learner. We arranged with one educator to fetch this learner from home in the morning and I took her home in the afternoon. I did that for some time until the threat diminished. [Mr. Mthethwa]

Mr. Mthethwa also showed concern and sympathy for children in the rural area. He did not see them as homogeneous learners, but tried to understand their backgrounds.

Some learners do not have parents at all. Other learners stay with their grannies and have to take care of ogogo (grannies). Others have their siblings, who are doing grade eight, as heads of households. So, I have to understand those situations, so it helps me to be compassionate; not to be harsh when some learners cannot produce work. I have to go deep to find learners like that so that I create space for them to do homework while I am still at school after school hours. [Mr. Mthethwa]

Ms. Mbewu understood that SGB members would not be able play their role effectively due to inadequate training. Thus, she took it upon herself to continuously train them to avoid role confusion:

Many SGB members in our community are less literate and illiterate. The workshop rendered by the Department of Education does not help them; as a result, I also workshop them continuously so they are able to fulfil their mandates. Apart from this, I clarify circulars to them and also translate them into IsiZulu so they understand the contents of the circulars. [Ms. Mbewu]

From the narratives of the participating principals, it is clear that they were concerned about the people they were leading to an extent that they went the extra mile in trying to provide support. They seemed to exercise leadership that puts people’s needs first (Greenleaf, 1997). While this leadership approach was probably taxing on the side of principals, it was helpful in

creating a healthy institutional culture wherein all followers could feel valued and cared for. The practices mentioned (e.g., daily transporting a learner with albinism and establishing creches in the area) portrayed the participating principals as servant leaders who seemed committed to empowering and developing people; also, they provided direction (Van Dierendock, 2011).

Leveraging Stakeholder Support to Benefit Learners

Considering that socio-economic issues such as poverty and unemployment are rife in rural areas, schools as microcosms of communities may not be insulated from these issues (Duma et al., 2021). For this reason, all the participating principals grappled with poverty in their school, but they seemed to be committed to assisting learners by seeking charity. Mr. Mthethwa explained how he took the bull by its horns in trying to assist learners in his rural school:

I also grew up in a very poor family, and I'm teaching poor children who come from poor families. When other learners go out on an excursion, they do pay, but this is not the case at our school because of our children's background; so, the school must subsidize. When they go to play soccer, athletics and everything on behalf of the school, we don't collect money from them. Apart from this, I have organized uniforms from the municipality, and companies that do services in the area. We try by all means to make sure that every learner has shoes especially during winter without paying even a cent; the school pays for everything. We have pairs of shoes that are waiting for any learner who will not have shoes and uniform, then we take those shoes and give it to the learner. My poor background socialized me to be conscious of whoever is poor and to try to find means to assist. [Mr. Mthethwa]

Likewise, Ms. Simelane solicited assistance from local businesses to provide learners with school uniforms and meals:

We are in a deep, deep, poor rural area. We have learners from child-headed households. They have to look after their siblings and find food for them. Some are orphans and they live with their grandparents. We've identified these learners. We have forged a partnership with a local taxi association. They sponsor us with school uniforms for those who do not have it. There is no learner who does not have a uniform since I started that program. I organize sponsored food parcels that these needy children take home. From the school nutrition program, we also dish up extra so that these children can have their afternoon meals at home. We negotiated with our school nutrition supplier to buy a bit more than the prescribed food rations in order to provide for these poor children. [Ms. Simelane]

It appears that principals in rural school contexts lead with limited resources, which pushes them to reach out for assistance from different sponsors. Ms. Mbewu invited teachers to join her in soliciting sponsors:

I always encourage teachers that we go all out to find sponsors who can provide for indigent learners. Consequently, we have asked for uniform donations from Inkosi (chief) of this area, the municipality and Aqua Amanzi Company, amongst others. The latter granted us R10 000. We bought shoes for learners who did not have shoes. To this date we still have pairs of shoes left that are waiting for any learner who needs shoes. We also use donations to buy school jerseys to give to needy learners. Furthermore, we subsidize transport costs for learners' educational excursions. When learners go out to play sports on behalf of the school, we pay for everything. We have set aside a budget for such activities.

While other participants solicited sponsorship support, Ms. Sinothile solicited community support in fighting the theft of school equipment:

The school is not properly fenced and the security guards have not been effective; with some quitting from time to time citing low salary. Hence the challenge of vandalism and burglary. However, after roping in the community and leaders of different sectors within the community, break-ins at the school have since stopped as this is the fifth year since our last break-in. Just last December 2017 there was no security but the school was neither vandalized nor broken into. In some cases, we invite these leaders to the school to address learners on matters affecting the children and the school in particular as well as the community in general. Each year we organize a function where we invite community leaders and we give them slots to address various issues

ranging from educational to cultural issues. By so doing the community takes ownership of the school. Bringing the entire community on board is really working for the school.

While schools in other contexts engage in multiple fundraising activities to generate funds that subsequently supplement teaching and learning resources and sometimes human resources, schools in rural areas have limited fundraising opportunities owing to the context in which they operate (Blose, 2024). The narratives of the participating principals show that they seek charity to provide the basic needs of learners, such as school uniforms. We learn that principals in rural schools are not concerned with learners' academic development only, but also their well-being and dignity. Hence, they take it upon themselves to obtain uniforms for learners whose parents cannot afford them. Our finding shows the significance of care that principals display in leading their rural schools, which Blose and Naicker (2018) perceive as a crucial ingredient in turning around the attitudes of learners who hail from traumatizing, unhappy, and vulnerable environments. Also, we learn that the work of principals in rural schools is stretched by the contextual realities they grapple with as they respond to different demands of rural school contexts. From the perspective of servant leadership, the participating principals show humility, they are authentic, they accept people for who they are, they provide direction, and they are stewards who work for the good of the whole (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

Discussion

In the study reported on here, we engaged with the lived experiences of principals who lead primary schools in a rural setting in order to understand the leadership behaviours that make their work possible. Rural schools in South Africa must cope with a myriad of challenges, including a lack of infrastructure, lack of access to information and communication technology, shortage of teachers, inadequate access to teacher professional development, financial constraints, poor culture of teaching and learning, multi-grade teaching, underqualified teachers, lack of parental involvement, and poverty (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Matshe, 2014; Myende & Maifala, 2020; Myende & Hlalele, 2018; Miller, 2015; Arnold et al., 2005). Such challenges make the work of principals and other stakeholders in these schools difficult. While we acknowledge that principals are not super leaders, their role remains key in influencing success in schools (Blose et al., 2022); hence, we examined their leadership behaviours. We composed our inquiry around the question: what leadership behaviours enable principals to lead their rural primary schools?

From our engagement with the lived experiences of rural primary school principals, three themes that reflect enabling leadership behaviours emerged. First, principals embraced stakeholders as a family. This behaviour is significant in a rural school context where many dispiriting adversities affect performance. The participating principals maintained a close proximity to stakeholders to ensure that they feel cared for and their role acknowledged. While this behaviour may not be necessary for principals in affluent schools, it is vital in rural school contexts owing to its potential to instigate full cooperation and productive collaboration among teachers. Second, the participating principals lead rural schools as servants; they appear to be invested in the needs of their learners and teachers, and they go out of their way to respond to these needs. The academic performance of learners in rural schools does not compare to that of their counterparts in affluent schools. This reality concerned our participating principals. Instead of complaining about this, they served their schools and communities by coming up with different initiatives to address the problem. Establishing creches, organizing speech contests, and creating space for learners to do homework at school are some of the initiatives that the participating principals came up with. Finally, the principals leveraged stakeholder support to benefit learners. Considering the adversities associated with rural schools, it goes without saying that every support is needed to keep these schools afloat. The participating principals reported soliciting support from external stakeholders. While affluent schools raise funds to optimize teaching and learning resources, rural schools were found to solicit charity to meet learners' basic needs, such as clothing and food.

The principals' lived experiences in this study showed their awareness of the contextual realities within which they operate. Over and above this awareness, their behaviours suggested that they aim to serve their learners, teachers, non-teaching staff, and the communities surrounding their schools. We therefore deduced that the behaviours of the participating principals constituted a fusion between servant and leader in exercising their role as principals (Greenleaf, 1977). They appeared to be servants first, rather than leaders first (Greenleaf, 1997). They embraced humility and showed an understanding of other people for who they are; in this way, they were able to keep their schools afloat. The behaviours of these principals show what Van Dierendonck (2011) calls leading as exchangeable, suggesting that being a servant allows a person to lead, and being a leader implies a person serves.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to examine the principals' leadership behaviours that enable them to lead in rural primary schools. The study was driven by the question "What leadership behaviours enable principals to lead their rural primary schools?" While all school principals must lead and manage their schools professionally, their leadership behaviours that give expression to this mandate could vary, depending on the specific school and the context. We deduce that school principals' leadership behaviours cannot be defined and understood beyond the bounds of the contexts within which their schools function. The findings of our study revealed the enabling leadership behaviours that the participating principals enacted to respond to the contextual realities of their rural schools. This suggests that the leadership behaviours of principals are shaped and re-shaped by the school context in which they operate. In this paper, we reported on a small-scale qualitative research study that involved only four participants. Our findings are therefore not representative of the experiences of all rural school principals in South Africa, but they make a significant contribution to the knowledge about leadership of rural schools. Considering the myriad of challenges associated with the rural school context, more research is needed – not only to understand current practices, but also to explore ways through which such leadership may be enhanced.

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