



THE INFLUENCE OF STRESS AND BURNOUT ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PRINCIPALS IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This study explored the nature and level of professional support and induction that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) provided to primary school principals in the iLembe District, KwaZulu-Natal Province to manage and lead schools successfully. Framed within the interpretivist paradigm, the study followed a qualitative approach using purposive sampling to select 10 principals from KwaDukuza Circuit and semi-structured interviews to generate data. It used Maslach's multidimensional theory of burnout as a theoretical framework to guide the discussion. The findings reveal that the principals felt overwhelmed and unsupported in their work and experienced high stress and burnout that impeded their ability to perform their duties effectively. They further show that the DBE and circuit managers did not provide meaningful induction programmes to assist novice and experienced principals in their professional development and work. To address these challenges and mitigate stress and burnout, the DBE should strengthen professional support and introduce wellness programmes for principals. The DBE should also intensify its school improvement efforts and foster a healthy school environment to enhance principals' effectiveness, as their stress is often linked to learner outcomes.

Keywords: School principal, novice principal, effectiveness, stress, burnout, self-care, support, induction

Introduction

KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) schools welcome roughly 2,883,354 learners annually (DBE, 2023a), hoping to receive quality education to improve their lives and their families' socioeconomic conditions. However, just like the rest of South Africa, KZN schools are still characterized by high educational inequalities. Specifically, the elite schools, locally called former model-C schools, which previously served Whites only during the apartheid era, remain effective, whereas schools serving Blacks remain dysfunctional, with most learners having poor numerical and literacy skills (Ngema & Lekhetho, 2019; Spaul, 2015). Regardless of the socioeconomic context, a firm principal is the most vital element in a school and a cornerstone of sustained academic success, as effective leadership directly impacts learner performance (Daniel, 2025; Sahlin, 2025; Tekir, 2021). Highly effective principals raise the achievement levels of typical learners (Branch et al., 2013; Tekir, 2021) given their attributes at intake. The principalship responsibilities are particularly daunting in South Africa, as high economic inequalities and deprivation affect schools and education quality.

The principalship role is increasingly becoming more complex with new duties that include addressing learners' diverse needs, dealing with bureaucratic processes and improving academic standards, leading to mental and physical fatigue (Sibisanu et al., 2024; Tamadoni et al., 2024). To exacerbate the situation, the employer (DBE, district and circuit offices) does not provide sufficient support as expected, forcing principals to navigate complex school leadership responsibilities independently. The South African education system faces numerous systemic challenges that undercut its growth and effectiveness (de Bruyn & Mestry, 2020). This situation is worrying because principalship is a complex and stressful job that requires purposeful, results-driven and committed principals to achieve the schools' educational goals (Kaufman, 2019), particularly raising learners' achievement levels.

Constant pressure on principals and exacting job demands can trigger significant stress and burnout (Doyle Fosco et al., 2025). Fink (2009) defines *stress* as a non-specific response or reaction to actions that affect a person's physical and psychological wellbeing or integrity. He avers that "the effect of stress on our emotional and physical health can be devastating" (Fink, 2009, p. 4). Stress can debilitate the principals' ability to function optimally when they receive limited or no support from the DBE and local education authorities (LEAs), like the circuit office. Leiter and Maslach (2004) define *burnout* as the fundamental disconnect between the worker and workplace caused by a loss of positive expectations and enthusiasm because of overwhelming exhaustion, cynicism and a sense of ineffectiveness. A lack of sufficient preparation and training and limited system support from the DBE and LEAs can escalate a sense of helplessness and ineptitude in principals.

Although principals are expected to institute and oversee school improvement initiatives, they hardly accomplish these, causing many to question their abilities and competencies (Silbaugh et al., 2023). When principals feel that their job is purposeful and supported, they generally attain higher job satisfaction, which attenuates stress, burnout and emotional exhaustion common in this position (Mahfouz, 2023; Skaalvik, 2023). Burnout rates are particularly high in the education profession, especially amongst principals, due to their work's demanding and stressful nature, and intense pressure to improve education quality and students' achievement levels (Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021; Skaalvik, 2023).

To lead schools effectively, principals should fulfill multiple roles that are often unclear, challenging and competing (Naidoo, 2019; Skaalvik, 2023). They make decisions on numerous aspects during the school day, often triggering stress that impedes sound discretion and clear judgement (Kaufman, 2019; Skaalvik, 2023). Principals also experience elevated stress because of rising educational expectations, increased workloads, long school days, and varied challenges that surface throughout the day (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Scott et. al., 2024).

Research Problem

The success of a school largely rests on the principal's effective leadership and management (Pillay, 2024). The DBE must train principals adequately and support them in acquiring the necessary skills and competencies to be effective. Although principals play a key role in promoting education quality, the prevalence and effects of stress and burnout they experience have not been adequately investigated. Some anecdotal research indicates that principals' burnout increases their turnover rate, which disrupts the smooth running of a school, stability and effectiveness (Pillay, 2024; Sibisanu et al., 2024). A high principals' turnover rate can hinder the implementation of sustainable education initiatives, as new principals may not have the necessary experience or acumen to manage schools competently. Additionally, stress and burnout can reduce the principals' ability to support teachers and learners, ultimately eroding the overall educational environment and outcomes (DeMatthews et al., 2021a; Pillay, 2024).

Stress and burnout have deleterious effects on principals, their productivity and efficiency (Marinac et. al., 2025). Hence, it is crucial to formulate strategies that can address them. For instance, enhancing support systems for principals by offering professional development, support, mentoring, professional counselling and mental health resources can mitigate the stressors linked to their roles (Pillay, 2024; Sibisanu et al., 2024). However, this support system is lacking for principals in South African primary schools. Generally, principals do not feel valued and supported by their circuit managers, which elevates feelings of isolation, stress and burnout. Hence, this study probed whether primary school principals in the iLembe District, KwaZulu-Natal, have participated in any induction programme run by the DBE and have been supported in their work.

Theoretical Framework

This article uses Maslach's multidimensional theory of burnout as a theoretical lens to guide the discussion and analysis. According to Maslach (1998), multidimensional theory consists of three fundamental aspects: *emotional exhaustion*, *depersonalization* and *reduced personal accomplishment*. Emotional exhaustion describes feeling overwhelmed and drained of emotional energy with fatigue primarily stemming from excessive workload or high work pressure (Maslach, 1998; Skaalvik, 2023). It states that individuals feel too drained to tackle another day or to support anyone else and that this aspect of emotional exhaustion reflects the personal stress element of burnout (Skaalvik, 2023). As this study's findings show, principals in South African schools and the iLembe District face overwhelming demands, including managing staff, addressing diverse and evolving learners' needs, and navigating administrative responsibilities without clear guidance from their circuit managers. Constant pressure triggers feelings of emotional depletion, making it difficult for principals to sustain the energy and enthusiasm needed to manage schools effectively.

The second aspect, *depersonalization*, involves a sense of detachment and cynicism towards one's job and the people involved, resulting in a negative attitude and a lack of empathy (Maslach, 1998; Skaalvik, 2023). This aspect

reflects the social dimension of burnout. In South Africa, many principals have developed a sense of detachment from their work and the individuals they serve, namely teachers, learners and parents. They often feel overwhelmed and consider leaving the profession (Msila, 2017; Wiehahn & du Plessis, 2018). When the DBE does not address the principals' challenges, and they should rely on their colleagues for survival, this dependence can create cynicism toward their responsibilities and the education system.

Finally, the *reduced personal accomplishment* aspect refers to reduced feelings of competence and effectiveness in the workplace (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). This diminished sense of self-efficacy is associated with difficulties in managing job demands and can be worsened by insufficient social support and limited opportunities for professional growth (Maslach, 1998; Skaalvik, 2023). The personal accomplishment aspect reflects the self-assessment dimension of burnout. When principals fail to meet their schools' diverse needs, they naturally feel ineffective. This feeling diminishes their sense of achievement and self-worth because of the perceived lack of support from the circuit manager and professional development opportunities. Principals often struggle to feel effective without proper induction and ongoing professional development. A lack of recognition for the principals' efforts and achievements diminishes their sense of competence as they consider their contributions inadequate. A feeling of isolation compounds their sense of inadequacy, as they may not receive the feedback and encouragement needed to cultivate a sense of accomplishment.

Literature Review

The worrisome state of South African schools, characterised by a stressful work environment, is reflected in the poor quality of matric (Grade 12) results in the national school-leaving examinations and the high learner dropout rates (Lekhetho, 2021; Mestry & Govindasamy, 2021). South Africa struggles with low literacy and achievement levels, and teachers face numerous challenges in improving them (Carter et al., 2024; Spaul, 2015). However, some scholars observe that South Africa's matric results have improved significantly since 1994 (Wills et al., 2024). While the percentage of learners passing matric has been progressively increasing in South Africa, the proportion of those choosing challenging subjects like mathematics and physical science has declined (Selkirk & Wills, 2024). The progressive improvement of South Africa's matric results has occurred alongside slow economic growth and rising unemployment, which raises a question about the quality and utility of South Africa's education (Wills et al., 2024).

Principals are the linchpin of education quality and student success because effective principalship positively influences teaching and learning (Branch et al., 2013; DeMatthews et al., 2021a). Hence, it is crucial to improve their skills, as this addresses the gaps in their leadership competencies and teaching and learning (Mestry, 2017; Tekir, 2021). When principals are skilled and effective in their leadership and management, they can equip teachers with instructional skills and support them in implementing strategies that directly impact learner achievement. They can improve teacher performance and educational outcomes through goal-oriented and purposeful leadership, ultimately reducing educational disparities.

The growing demands on principals' professional and administrative responsibilities are overwhelming, increasing stress levels (Pollock et al., 2025; Richard, 2024). With the decentralisation of power and authority in many countries and education systems, the scope of the principals' leadership and management responsibilities has expanded considerably (Naidoo, 2019; Watts, 2023). As control and decision-making have shifted closer to the local level, principals' responsibilities for more complex issues demanding their attention have increased, as they take greater accountability for the success of their schools (Kameshwara et al., 2023).

When principals are emotionally drained, overwhelmed by work, and neglect their wellbeing, they often become frustrated, and their performance and effectiveness drop (Mahfouz, 2018; Skaalvik, 2023). Unfortunately, people who attempt to assist them also get affected somehow, leading to second-hand stress. Vukčević et al. (2022) describe secondary traumatic stress (STS) as a condition that arises from assisting or wanting to assist individuals who have experienced trauma. Principals often prioritise the teachers' wellbeing at the expense of their health (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2021). This phenomenon constitutes second-hand stress and will likely affect principals committed to their staff and learners. Individuals working with trauma survivors may experience intrusive thoughts or disturbing dreams about the trauma they have seen, negative changes in mood and cognition and heightened arousal (Vukčević et al., 2022), exposing principals to stressful situations and eroding their wellbeing.

Principals experience higher burnout rates due to intense pressure to progressively improve schools and raise learners' achievement levels (Hancock et al., 2019; Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021; Skaalvik, 2023). Therefore, the responsible authorities, such as the Department of Education or district education office, should design appropriate preparation programmes to equip principals with the necessary socio-emotional skills and support

them to be effective from the first day on the job. This intervention can promote job satisfaction and foster a lasting commitment to the teaching profession and principalship (Mahfouz & Richardsdon, 2021).

Moreover, mentoring and induction programmes can enhance novice principals' skills and enable them to receive guidance from experienced administrators, engage in reflective practices with qualified mentors and empower them to manage the stress associated with their roles appropriately (Caminiti, 2022; DeMatthews et al., 2021b). Unfortunately, most novice principals in South African primary schools do not receive proper mentoring and induction and are forced to cope with unfamiliar, complex roles without support.

Leaving the Profession

Immense pressure, everyday stress and other debilitating factors exacerbate a growing shortage of principals and poor academic performance in schools (Mahfouz, 2018). In this way, unfavourable working conditions, burdensome workload and a lack of support force many principals to quit teaching (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018; Skaalvik, 2023). Consequently, a hostile work environment, high job demands, and scarce resources often lead to stress and burnout for most principals because they are isolated and distracted (Caminiti, 2022; DeMatthews et al., 2021a). Despite working in a high-pressure environment, the principal must coordinate all activities at school and organise teachers to function as a working unit to teach efficiently (Caminiti, 2022).

Principals are usually under constant pressure to continuously improve learners' achievement, school management, staff welfare and meet parents' high expectations, leading to work-related stress (Arnold et al., 2023; Caminiti, 2022; Karanikola, et. al., 2025). Increasing job demands, stakeholders' high educational expectations, and public pressure to raise learners' achievement levels are potential stressors for principals (Mahfouz, 2018). When principals experience high stress levels, their sense of self-efficacy is undermined, forcing them to harbour negative thoughts and doubt their ability to complete tasks successfully (Caminiti, 2022; Mahfouz, 2018).

Around 4000 principals and teachers exit the teaching profession earlier than expected each year in South Africa (Msila, 2017). Their early exit has a far-reaching impact on the education system and increases pressure and workload on the remaining teachers. Principals experiencing burnout will likely leave the profession (Levin et al., 2020; Msila, 2017), destabilizing school stability and functionality. In contrast, principals seen as effective by teachers and supervisors are less inclined to abandon their principalship positions unless promoted (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020). Principals who are well-prepared for their roles, particularly those who have secured mentors or internship experience, are less likely to experience stress and are more likely to remain in their posts for a longer time, even in schools with greater needs (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2020; Watts, 2023).

When principals overcommit their time and resources to work and maintain a poor work-life balance, they risk becoming emotionally drained (Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021; Watts, 2023). This state can lead to depersonalization, where leaders stop viewing people as individuals, but as problems to solve, resulting in cynicism and negativity that can take effect. This situation leads to impulsive actions, a lack of empathy, and the inability to form and sustain healthy relationships. Depersonalization often manifests in reduced patience, tolerance, engagement, and care. Emotionally exhausted school principals may develop a sense of helplessness, believing that their efforts will never make a difference, and eventually, many of them will leave their jobs.

The Role of the Department of Basic Education

The Department of Basic Education manages primary and secondary schools in South Africa. Principals are regarded as "key delivery agents in our education system" (DBE, 2023b, n.p.), yet the DBE does not prescribe any formal training for them in South African schools (Naidoo, 2019). Consequently, many lack basic skills and competencies before their appointment and during their tenures (Alladatin et al., 2024; Naidoo, 2019). Many novice principals are less informed about their responsibilities and duties (Sepuru & Mohlakwana, 2020), which are increasingly overwhelming, complex and ambiguous (Naidoo, 2019). Therefore, education authorities must provide initial training and guidance to principals through effective principal preparation programmes (Mestry, 2020) and ongoing professional support.

The DBE (2016) describes a new principal as a teacher recently promoted to principal or deputy principal rank and is on the verge of assuming the post. In South Africa, the school management committee can appoint a post-level 1 teacher to the position of school principal based on the minimum qualification (matriculation plus three years of formal study) and seven years of teaching experience (Pillay, 2024). This situation is worrisome as a post-level 1 teacher may not have served as a departmental head or a deputy principal before being appointed as a school principal, setting them up for failure and frustration. The South African government acknowledges that most SGBs lack the expertise and experience to carry out their school governance responsibilities effectively and

SASA mandates provincial structures to train them (Joubert, 2014). However, the DBE does not offer or prescribe formal training for principals despite their job's complex and demanding nature.

The DBE (2016) further maintains that the principal's primary role is to assist in the development and execution of the curriculum and guarantee delivery of high-quality teaching and learning. However, the DBE (2015) acknowledges that no clear consensus or guidelines exist for supporting aspiring principals, and no unified system is in place to address their unique needs. Accordingly, the DBE (2011) developed the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa (ISPFTED, SA, 2011-2025) to strengthen teachers' competencies and teaching. This document outlines the need to establish compulsory induction processes within the first two weeks of hiring principals and to explore and sustain ongoing learning and growth. However, the DBE and schools usually do not achieve these policy goals.

Research Methodology

The interpretivist paradigm, a worldview that assumes reality is subjective and socially constructed by individuals involved in a situation based on their social interactions, experiences, and interpretations of a phenomenon of interest, guided this study (Turin et al., 2024). The main goal of interpretivism is to understand the subjective world of human experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), get into participants' heads to see their subjective thinking and meaning (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017), to understand their perspectives. Accordingly, the study adopted a qualitative research methodology as it aligns with the interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative research focuses on participants' feelings, experiences, views and perceptions and is used to collect non-numerical data to generate insights (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). To gain an unbiased perspective of participants' lived experiences, this study collected data from principals in their natural settings, namely schools. The researcher allowed participants to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences during face-to-face interviews to understand how stress and burnout affected them.

The study used the phenomenology design to look for detailed descriptions of how primary school principals in the iLembe District, KwaZulu-Natal, personally experienced work-related stress and burnout. Phenomenology focuses on the individuals' lived experiences and seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon from those who have experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019). Hence, the lead researcher immersed herself in the participants' world to perceive their experiences from their perspective (Johnson & Christensen, 2019; Qutoshi, 2018). The study used semi-structured interviews to collect data, focusing on participants' meanings.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Before collecting data, researchers must adhere to established procedures to ensure that the research is conducted ethically (Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). In this sense, the researchers obtained ethical clearance from the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee, Ref.: 2022/10/12/31893473/27/AM, after reviewing the application and satisfying themselves that all the ethical issues were adhered to, and the researcher would protect participants' rights. Based on this, the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education granted permission to conduct the study in selected schools in the iLembe District. Finally, 10 selected school principals granted permission and signed the written consent as research participants. The researcher carefully explained the research process to each primary school principal and informed them that they could withdraw from the study without any repercussions.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis requires transcription, which involves converting raw data, such as recorded interviews or field notes, into written text (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). Raw data entailed the lead researcher's field notes, transcribed interviews, and voice recordings. Afterwards, the researchers organized data into similar categories and established patterns to identify possible conclusions and recommendations. The interviews took place in calm, natural environments where participants felt comfortable. In reporting the findings, the codes are used to protect participants' identities and maintain the confidentiality of information reflected in Table 1.

Research site and participants' demographic data

KwaZulu-Natal is divided into 12 education districts, which are further organized into 39 circuits. The iLembe District is one of the districts and consists of three circuits. The lead researcher chose 10 schools from the iLembe District on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal out of 432 schools and interviewed principals from urban and rural schools in KwaDukuza Circuit. Table 1 displays the schools' code numbers, principals' ages, and gender.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Details

School	Principal's Age	Gender	Code
1	50	M	Principal 1
2	56	F	Principal 2
3	50	F	Principal 3
4	58	M	Principal 4
5	61	M	Principal 5
6	61	M	Principal 6
7	62	M	Principal 7
8	37	M	Principal 8
9	56	F	Principal 9
10	58	M	Principal 10

Table 1 reflects that most principals in the KwaDukuza Circuit are rapidly approaching retirement. Of the 10 principals interviewed, only three were women, despite the researcher's efforts to achieve gender balance during the selection process, meaning that there are relatively few women principals in the circuit and the whole country, by extrapolation.

Table 2: Principals' Years of Experience in the Post Level

School	Total Years of Service	Years of Service as Level 1 Teacher	Years of Service as DH	Years of Service as Deputy Principal	Years of Service as Principal
1	28	12	4	5	7
2	10	3	nil	nil	7
3	28	20	nil	5	3
4	30	15	11	1	3
5	28	15	11	1	1
6	40	20	10	5	5
7	40	21	8	9	2
8	16	12	nil	4	2 months
9	29	10	12	nil	7
10	36	30	5	nil	1

Key

DH – departmental head

Table 2 indicates the years each principal spent at each management level, including the total number of years in the teaching profession, while the last column shows the number of years they had served as principals. Out of 10 principals, nine had extensive experience accumulated in the teaching profession. They had spent most of their careers as post-level 1 teachers, with many having served in this category for at least 30 years before being promoted, meaning they were highly experienced. The principals with the longest tenures, specifically Principals 1, 2 and 9, had served for seven years in the position. The researcher also considered the participants' qualifications, as tabulated in Table 3, to determine the influence of stress and burnout. As Table 3 displays, three of the ten sampled principals possessed honours degrees, while two possessed doctoral degrees completed before promotion.

Table 3: Principals' Qualifications

School	Teaching Qualification	Postgraduate Qualifications/Other
1	Bachelor of Science Degree; HDE	Hons. Degree
2	Bachelor of Education Degree	-
3	Diploma (SNR Primary)	ABET, Hons degree
4	Diploma; HDE	-
5	Bachelor of Arts Degree; HDE	HONS, MEd; PhD
6	Diploma; HDE	-
7	Bachelor of Education Degree	HONS; MEd; PhD

8	Bachelor of Education Degree	-
9	Bachelor of Education Degree	Hons degree
10	Bachelor of Arts Degree	SPED diploma; Further diploma in education

Qualifications demonstrate a person's competence and capability in performing their job. They represent the skills and abilities that an individual requires to successfully fulfill their responsibilities (Kristiawan & Lian, 2019). The quality of schools largely depends on the principal's qualifications, skills and competence (Sideridis & Alghamdi, 2024). Similarly, the principals in this study affirmed that upgrading their qualifications was vital for effective school leadership. Other studies have established a correlation between the principal's qualifications and specific areas of their performance and learner achievement (Gümüő et al., 2024). As Kristiawan and Lian (2019) note, the higher the principal's level of education, the more advanced and effective the learners' learning experience becomes.

The principals in this study believed that induction programmes would help them to apply the theoretical knowledge acquired to manage schools better. However, they were frustrated by stress and burnout and considered leaving the profession or relinquishing their positions. Therefore, principals must upgrade their qualifications to manage schools effectively and improve their academic performance to decrease stress, as it seems to be linked to learner achievement.

All the principals said they had acquired leadership and management experience from serving as departmental heads, deputy principals, or both, before being promoted to the principalship position. They stressed the importance of first serving as a departmental head and deputy principal as this experience incubated and prepared them for the principalship role.

Themes and Sub-themes

Table 4 displays the themes and subthemes that emerged on how the DBE's lack of support and development for principals impacted their effectiveness and triggered their stress and burnout.

Table 4: Emergent Themes and Sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Purpose of induction programmes	Sub-theme 1.1 Principals' loneliness, despair and frustration.
	Sub-theme 1.2 Principals contemplating leaving their posts or exiting the system
2. How were principals in the iLembe District supported?	Sub-theme 2.1 The DBE's contribution to principal development
	Sub-theme 2.2 The role of the circuit manager and senior DBE officials in supporting principals
3. The impact of induction programmes and the DBE's support on the principals' roles	Sub-theme 3.1 The DBE's contribution to principals' induction and professional support
4. What do primary school principals expect of the programmes provided by the DBE?	Sub-theme 4.1 Incorporating principals' needs in the provision of support

Sub-theme 1.1: Principals' Loneliness, Despair and Frustration

All the principals shared the frustrations and despair they frequently experienced throughout the interviews, as indicated below.

"...At times, I even contemplate reverting to my old post at my previous school for a lower salary to run away from the work pressure and stress I am experiencing" (Principal 5).

Principal 5's statement indicates a level of frustration so intense that he was willing to forgo his leadership position and return to his older teaching position for a lower position and salary, implying that he was unsatisfied with his current job. During the interviews, the principals displayed high frustration, irritation, and anger in their

body language and gestures. They clicked their tongues vigorously, shook their heads, and used exclamatory sounds to express their frustrations and agitation.

An interview with Principal 3 revealed that principals frequently encounter considerable difficulties. While her efforts to lead and manage effectively were apparent, she exhibited a palpable sense of isolation and frustration throughout the interview. She was overwhelmed by the expectations placed upon her, which included accomplishing her work, meeting the educational standards and managing staff, students and parents. Sepuru and Mohlakwana (2020) confirm that while principals are eager to fulfil their responsibilities, they are unaware of the challenges inherent in the position.

Sub-theme 1.2: Principals' Contemplation to Leave their Posts or Exit the System

South Africa lacks a specific certification or training programme for school principals. All the sampled principals indicated that they had neither participated in induction programmes nor professional development training throughout their time in office. However, Naidoo (2019) asserts that initiating interventions to support and develop principals meaningfully to ensure school functionality is essential.

In many African countries, teachers are appointed to principalship solely based on their teaching experience, as principals lack formal training (Naidoo, 2019; Sepuru & Mohlakwana, 2020). However, teaching experience alone does not sufficiently equip principals with the necessary skills and competencies for effective school leadership and management (Mathibe, 2007; Sepuru & Mohlakwana, 2020). The principals in this study explained that they tried to survive and secure their positions through their self-development initiatives. To avoid stress and burnout, one principal disclosed that several principals were planning to leave the profession, as follows:

"We attended the principals' meeting last week and one principal who has just been appointed stated that he has seen enough and is ready to leave the profession – he can't take it anymore. He had just been appointed for seven days but was fed up. Every principal in that room with experience ranging from three to five years said the work is daunting and they were ready to leave the job" (Principal 7).

Sub-theme 2.1: The DBE's Contribution to Principal Development

The question related to this theme invited principals to share any development the DBE had afforded them during their teaching careers, including induction-related, professional development programmes, or other training opportunities. None of the principals reported participating in any of these. To ensure principals acquire the latest knowledge and skills to lead and manage schools competently, the DBE should regularly inform them about policy changes and emerging leadership strategies. The DBE's support and development programmes should include training in decision-making processes and strategies to enable principals and school committees to make impactful decisions that foster school growth. As Naidoo (2019) observes, effective principals engage teachers using relevant and current teaching strategies that can enhance learner performance.

Sub-theme 2.2: The Circuit Manager and Senior DBE Officials' Role in Supporting Principals

The circuit manager heads a circuit office and performs the functions assigned by the District Director of the Provincial Education Department (PED) (DBE, 2013). Some of their responsibilities include interactions with school principals, school governing bodies (SGBs), and the public, as authorized by the district director or Provincial Head of Department (DBE, 2013). Circuit managers are expected to provide support and administrative assistance to schools, including training and development of principals to enhance educational quality and promote their professional growth (DBE, 2013). They must promote the effectiveness of schools and safeguard every learner's right to quality education. However, Msila (2017) notes that although principals frequently seek assistance and school visits from the circuit managers, they do not receive timely responses or any response. This lack of support causes some principals to disengage from their schools, as circuit managers distance themselves and fail to offer the necessary guidance when requested (Msila, 2017).

Furthermore, the principals stressed that the DBE's senior officials and circuit managers lacked the necessary skills and resources to provide timely guidance and support when needed, as indicated below.

"If you have a problem now and ask the seniors for help, they will respond so late that you do not know what to do. The circuit managers also leave their posts because they cannot cope. Sometimes a senior official is not as clued up as some colleagues" (Principal 2).

Emphasising the principals' frustrations with a lack of support from the DBE, another participant explained:

"Nobody listens to you about the problems you are facing in your school and is keen to assist you. The circuit manager is always busy and is never available to help us. The DBE must adequately equip senior officials to help principals run schools properly" (Principal 6).

Another principal expressed similar sentiments, thus:

"There is no support from the Superintendent of Education Management (SEM) and other senior officials in the Department. The circuit managers sign the documents for five minutes and send you away. There is no one-on-one session or proper guidance" (Principal 9).

Stressing the principals' challenges with the circuit office, Principal 10 shared:

"Many circuit managers are acting, which is a problem. Another challenge is that they take so long to answer you; I don't know if they know what to do themselves."

Insufficient support from the circuit managers and DBE's senior officials exacerbates the principals' challenges in managing schools. Since these DBE officials play a key role in leadership development, they must guide, mentor and support principals on practical and policy matters and give them prompt and effective feedback to improve their competencies in managing schools.

Sub-theme 3.1: The DBE's Contribution to Principals' Induction and Professional Support

Scholars and policymakers agree that it is crucial to design preparation programmes for principals to address the complexity of their job and improve their schools' effectiveness and learner achievement (Jerdborg, 2022). Just as teachers are required to become lifelong learners, principals should also engage in ongoing learning and adaptation to fulfill their multifaceted roles. All the principals agreed that the DBE should introduce and sustain induction programmes to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to enhance their operational effectiveness.

To fill the gap created by the DBE and circuit office's lack of strong professional support, some principals within the same circuit created communities of practice to exchange ideas and share valuable information, as stated below.

"I have created a WhatsApp group of principals in the circuit, and we use this platform to share our frustrations in our personal and professional capacities and some best practices to support each other" (Principal 2).

The principals characterised their responsibilities as complex and onerous. They expressed some frustration and a sense of despondency due to a lack of support or guidance, and a desire for meaningful assistance from the DBE.

Principal 9, who had many years in the profession, disclosed:

"The Superintendent of Education Management has not been empowering us for years through principals' workshops to share policy issues and best practices. We are left alone to figure out how to manage and improve schools".

All the principals acknowledged that their roles were multifaceted and involved numerous tasks. These challenges undermine the principals' effectiveness, resulting in burnout, stress and diminished confidence, driving them to exit the teaching profession prematurely (Tekir, 2021). They concurred that they could lead and manage their schools more successfully with proper support and development of essential skills and knowledge.

Sub-theme 4.1: Incorporating Principals' Needs in the Provision of Support

To be effective, the induction programmes must integrate principals' needs. However, during the interviews, some principals were dismayed that the DBE did not incorporate their specific needs into the induction programmes. The DBE's support was general and did not address their schools' specific challenges. Murphy (2023) agrees that incorporating feedback from principals enhances the quality of induction programmes.

When asked whether the DBE offered any assistance tailored to individual principals' specific needs, Principal 7 responded negatively:

"No. We do not get any meaningful guidance from the Department. They just organise a short general meeting without our input. Nobody listens to you and addresses the specific problems of your school. Everything is generalized and rushed. I am an old principal with many years in the field. I have never been offered assistance that speaks to the specific needs of my school" (Principal 7).

Corroborating these sentiments, Principal 8 echoed,

"No. I do not think the Department has specific programmes that target the individual needs of new principals. I have never heard of such" (Principal 8).

In agreement, Principal 10 substantiated:

"No. There are no programmes designed to suit the specific needs of a school. The circuit office usually calls principals to a meeting. If you need help with something, you must raise it. If the facilitator assists you, everyone in the room will raise their hand to express similar concerns" (Principal 10).

Data from Primary School Principals on the Induction Programme

While several principals castigated the DBE for organizing short meetings passed off as training workshops, some conceded that it ran induction programmes for new principals. During the fieldwork, one female principal reported attending a weekend programme for female principals, which she regarded as an induction programme. Another principal explained that the DBE organised an induction programme, thus:

"When I was appointed as a principal in 2016, I was requested to attend a two-day training programme facilitated by the iLembe District. The programme was intended to equip principals on managing schools, but focused mainly on the DBE protocols, policies and personnel administrative measures. The circuit further allowed us to attend developmental programmes on new policies. Unfortunately, these programmes were not necessarily run by individuals who thoroughly understood their purpose" (Principal 1).

Principal 1's response shows that he was not fully satisfied with the conduct of the induction programme because it failed to equip him with the skills for leading the school competently. He was also unhappy about the scant workshop content and the ineffectual facilitators' presentation skills. Nine novice and experienced principals reported that the DBE or SGB did not organise induction programmes for them. Some who had been with the DBE for decades confirmed that they did not know any principal who participated in induction programmes. This denial signals that the DBE did not execute its mandate of developing and supporting principals properly as expected. The interviews revealed that the DBE did not have any structured induction programmes for new primary school principals or a development programme for all principals to address leadership and management skills gaps.

Commenting on the lack of support from the circuit managers, Principal 3 reported:

"There is no support or assistance from the Department. I was appointed when many circuit managers were acting, and I did not receive any support. Another challenge is that the circuit managers leave their posts because they are frustrated and cannot cope with the pressure."

Principal 3's comment linked the DBE's senior officials' ineffectiveness to their high turnover because they could not handle the pressure of their complex responsibilities. By implication, if the DBE's senior officials cannot lead effectively, principals would not receive adequate support in their leadership roles. Principal 3's response suggests that principals do not expect meaningful help from the DBE's officials, as they also work under pressure and struggle to manage. This vicious cycle points to the need for the DBE to improve staff recruitment practices and increase the staff complement in the district and circuit offices to cope with the high volume of work.

Furthermore, many principals cited multitasking and work overload as significant challenges, thus:

"The DBE and circuit office should inform novice principals of how the circuit and district work on issues such as the submission of documents, communication, record keeping, protocols, structures, and the NGOs' work. As a post-level 1 principal, you know little about school administration because you must teach like other teachers. For instance, you may not know how to handle conflict, counselling, administration, and setting stakeholders' goals because of limited knowledge. You need help in all these aspects. The circuit office should provide continuous support to new principals until they are settled" (Principal 5).

Hacking back to the issue of a lack of system support, Principal 9 shared:

"The superintendent of education management has not been empowering us for years. The circuit must induct new principals every year. Sometimes we attend meetings where officials from different teacher development departments present. The HR tells you one thing, but they do something else. Due to ongoing changes, a principal needs constant assistance and support. The presenters get irritated with you when you ask questions because they do not know the answers themselves. As a principal, you lose interest because they just read to you and don't show much confidence."

Explaining the nature of principals' interactions with the DBE officials, Principal 10 revealed:

"Our seniors at the DBE contact us if there is an urgent exercise to do, like submitting information or accomplishing tasks. However, for the most part, you are on your own."

All the principals expressed frustrations about the challenges they experienced in their work.

"You experience loneliness and a sense of despair as there is no one from the DBE to assist you in your time of need" (Principal 1).

Similarly, Principal 3 reported that her job somehow detached her from her social network, thus:

"There is no one to share your excitement or achievements as a principal. Although you have just been promoted to principalship, you are incredibly lonely. I feel helpless and unsupported because of loneliness" (Principal 3).

The above excerpt highlights the critical reality of school leadership that the DBE and local school authorities (LEAs) overlook, namely emotional isolation. Principals experience loneliness because the position brings about immense responsibility and accountability that are daunting without a strong support network. Therefore, the DBE and school districts must prioritize initiatives such as induction programmes, mentorship programmes and peer support groups where principals can connect, share experiences and celebrate their successes together.

Commenting further on the effects of loneliness and lack of support, Principal 10 disclosed:

"There were times when I needed the urgent help of my superior at the circuit office, as I did not know how to handle some sensitive situations. I tried to contact the circuit office and left several messages for the circuit manager to assist. However, it was too late when he got the message, and my head was on the block. In some difficult situations, you are alone and must phone other principals in the area to ask for advice. Sometimes this makes me look like a weak principal to my peers, and I feel embarrassed to seek assistance because some of them seem to run their schools well. However, I won't make it alone if I don't ask for help."

Principal 10's response above indicates low motivation, self-esteem, and confidence created by a lack of district support. Consequently, she had to seek assistance from her counterparts in the circuit as she felt insecure in her role. A lack of communication between circuit managers and principals can trigger tensions among staff, parents, and students. Additional stressors for principals include multitasking, managing competing priorities, long workdays, and increased pressure to improve education quality and learner outcomes.

Discussion

The research findings indicate that there is no formal induction programme for novice principals in the iLembe District and that the support it provides is ad hoc and occasional. When the DBE and circuit office do not properly induct principals into their roles following a well-coordinated induction programme, they are unlikely to manage properly and promote quality teaching and learning needed for learners to perform well academically and become productive citizens (DBE, 2014; Mestry, 2017). A lack of support can trigger anxiety, stress and burnout for new principals, as they try to acclimate to the school conditions and management responsibilities. The primary role of principals is to cultivate a school culture that promotes the quality of teaching and learning and to perform numerous other roles that require them to be well prepared for principalship.

In the U.S., new principals enrol for the national principal induction programme where they complete eight courses and receive job-embedded district-specific support from the LEAs through induction and mentoring (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2024; Tekir, 2021). Induction provides professional learning support and onboarding related to district expectations, policies and culture (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2024; Tekir, 2021). Hence, appointing mentors for new principals can improve their effectiveness and retention (Tekir, 2021). From their study in Tanzania, Michael and Kitula (2022) emphasised that induction seeks to inform new employees and principals about their new responsibilities, help them socialise with other workers, and acclimate them to their work environment.

The research findings revealed limited professional support for principals in the iLembe District and no smooth interaction and communication between principals and the circuit or district office, even on urgent matters that require their intervention. Strong, purposeful support from the Department of Education is the backbone of a well-functioning education system as it promotes high-quality leadership and school functionality (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017; Naidoo, 2019). The DBE must support and collaborate with principals and schools to ensure all learners have access to quality education, create conditions conducive to effective teaching and learning and raise student attainment (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017; DBE, 2013, 2014).

Furthermore, the participants mentioned high turnover of circuit managers as a factor causing instability in the system, as several were acting in their positions. Staff turnover triggers substantial losses and organisational inefficiency because human and social capital attrition weakens performance and productivity (De Winne et al., 2018; Knight et al., 2013). The principals reported that their workload was heavy, and they could barely cope, causing stress and burnout. In Wiehahn and du Plessis's (2018) study on new principals' induction programme in South Africa's Gauteng province, the new principals affirmed that they were overwhelmed and unable to cope with the day-to-day running of schools because of the high-pressure work.

Data analysis revealed that many principals had moved up the ranks of the school hierarchy before appointment to principalship. This career progression is indirect leadership preparation and training, central to building effective and efficient principals (Mestry, 2017; Sepuru & Mohlakwana, 2020). These authors criticize the appointment of inexperienced, post-level one (entry-level) teachers without adequate preparation and experience for principalship, as they have organisational knowledge gaps that can weaken school functionality, staff productivity, and learner outcomes.

Partly because of limited support from the circuit office, some principals reported that they formed a community of practice or a WhatsApp group to support each other, share information and exchange ideas. A community of practice (CoP) can foster the skills and knowledge of individuals and groups in a social learning system like a school (Alvi, 2021; Miller et al., 2023). A CoP consists of three elements: a domain of activity or knowledge that creates a common identity, the community or group members who care about the domain, and the shared practice (Wenger, 1998).

Writing from the World Bank perspective, Alvis (2021) elucidates the elements of a CoP as: purpose, people and practice. She asserts that it is best to start with the purpose or end in mind that the group seeks to achieve. Secondly, it is important to identify and invite people with common interests who care about attaining the goal. Finally, the group should jointly develop the practice that will motivate members to engage or work together (Alvis, 2021; Miller et al., 2023). In this research, principals in the same locality represent a community or group that seeks to enrich their knowledge of managing schools and address the gaps created by the DBE and circuit managers' limited support. They can use technology and communication platforms like WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams and Zoom to facilitate mutual engagement and professional growth that can engender their schools' effectiveness.

Recommendations

The research findings revealed that principals in the iLembe District experience high levels of stress and burnout because of heavy workload, constant pressure from multiple stakeholders, frequent changes in policies governing education, insufficient support from the DBE and a lack of induction for novice principals. To address these challenges, principals must understand the DBE policies guiding education to help other stakeholders, like the school management teams, to implement them properly. The DBE should also introduce well-structured and functional induction programmes and strengthen existing ones to help novice principals understand their leadership and management roles and work processes. The DBE may secure the services of reputable external agencies to strengthen the principals' induction programme. An induction programme can build the principals' resilience to work under pressure and in stressful situations.

Moreover, the DBE, district and circuit offices should forge stronger interactions and cooperation with principals to support them in their work and mitigate situations that can trigger stress and burnout. Maintaining healthy relations and communication with principals can develop their competence and confidence. Mentoring is another important function that can bolster novice principals' development and competence and help them settle into their jobs. Additionally, the DBE can engage experienced principals to serve as mentors for a stipulated period with clear timelines, deliverables and some incentives to ensure the programme succeeds. The findings also indicated that professional development for principals is lacking, yet it is critical for their effectiveness. Therefore, the DBE should design a well-structured PD training programme for principals to cultivate their professional growth, competence, and efficiency. The DBE and circuit must incorporate the principals' training needs into the training programme to ensure that it addresses their leadership development needs.

Communities of practice for teachers and principals are effective in developing their competencies and skills, enabling them to engage in shared learning and exchange ideas. The DBE could create a community of practice for principals in the same area or circuit using video conferencing platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet and WhatsApp to discuss issues of mutual interest and exchange ideas on aspects such as school management, self-care techniques and school improvement strategies. These strategies could mitigate the principals' work-related stress and improve their competencies, education quality, and student outcomes.

Conclusion

This article explored the extent to which the DBE and circuit develop, support and guide novice and experienced primary school principals in the iLembe District in their leadership and management roles. It analysed whether the principals' claims about insufficient support from the DBE and circuit office, and a lack of development opportunities, could be linked to the stress and burnout they experienced and how these affected them. The key finding that emerged is that there are no functional and structured induction programmes for school principals in the iLembe District, and possibly in the rest of South Africa. The interviewed principals reported that they did not receive meaningful support, training, development and guidance from the iLembe District. They expressed frustrations over insufficient support from the DBE officials, including the circuit managers, causing many of them to feel lonely and overwhelmed. Consequently, some principals contemplated quitting their jobs and reverting to their teaching positions for lower salaries to escape frustrations, stress and burnout associated with principalship.

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