Stories of Success: A Phenomenological Study of the Leadership Practices of High-Performing Secondary Schools in Selebi Phikwe, Botswana

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Abstract: *This qualitative research study was intended to find the thoughts, feelings and actions of school principals of secondary schools in the town of Selebi Phikwe about the leadership styles they use in their high-performing schools and how their educational leadership practices align to the 21 leadership responsibilities coined by Marzano et al. (2005). The study used a phenomenological research design. Semi-structured interviews were used for collecting data from six school principals purposefully selected, who maintained high student achievement in the high-performing secondary schools. The evidence presented in this study established that to be successful in high-performing schools, principals must develop a school culture of high expectations with a focus on student achievement. Principals must be good managers who are compassionate. Effective principals build the collective efficacy of their teams by building strong relationships through effective means of communication. The participants of the study highlighted building school culture and having a clear and concise vision as the most prevalent characteristics principals must possess. In high-performing schools, the development of a strong culture is intentional and aligned to strong student achievement. Effective principals develop teacher instructional capacity through mentorship and coaching programs to assuage the challenges of inexperienced teachers and also value relationships with students, parents and the community. Effective principals retain experienced teachers in their schools by building strong relationships. Focus and being data-driven were also identified as leadership responsibilities that an effective principal must practice in an environment of their high-performance. School principals must also master accountability systems.*
Keywords: effective school principals, high-performing school, student achievement, school culture.

INTRODUCTION

This research study was mainly aimed at extensively investigating the thoughts, feelings, and actions of school principals of government secondary schools in the town of Selebi Phikwe, Botswana regarding the running of their schools and leadership styles they use. The primary functions and leadership roles of a secondary school principal are wide ranging and include support for collaboration, alignment of curriculum, assignment of teachers, provision of opportunities for professional growth, engagement of the community, and the general school administration (Casey, Dunlap, Brown & Davison, 2012). Influential school principals need to have skills to adapt and excel as new roles and responsibilities are placed on them through their job descriptions and public accountability expectations. Using the qualitative approach, this research provided and reified structured ideas into how school principals judge their own effectiveness impact on student academic outcomes. Principals as school leaders are responsible for upholding the school culture and to be overseers of all in-and-outside classroom day-to-day activities. Despite emotional burnout presented by the laborious responsibilities and challenges, secondary school principals in Selebi Phikwe had for the past years maintained exceptional performance, especially the junior secondary schools. The town comprises of six (6) junior secondary school and one senior secondary school. The junior secondary schools feed the senior secondary school with students who had excelled in the Junior Certificate Education (JCE). The JCE is the national examination administered by Botswana Examination Council (BEC) and it determines the graduation rate of students who progress from junior secondary schools to senior secondary schools.

The primary job responsibilities and expectations of principals are changing from time to time (Mulford, 2006). Constantly changing requirements from the government through educational reforms have brought about a few of challenges and responsibilities on school principals. Fostering and maintaining successful management throughout these processes of constant change is the key for schools to attain and maintain success for their pupils (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2009; Sanzo, Sherman & Clayton, 2010). The high demanding accountability burnout on school principals to be school managers, disciplinarians, and instructional leaders made the leadership job to be even more stressful (Vidoni, Bezzina, Gatelli, & Grassetti, 2008). These wide range of responsibilities of the school principals brought about more questions on which types of school leaders would be successful in enhancing academic achievement.

The effectiveness of the principal determines a school's success. A principal's creation of an atmosphere and climate of success is essential to having an effective staff and culture of high performance (Choiniere, 2019). Principals build trust, establish transparency, and collaborate with all stakeholders on crucial responsibilities in the school environment. The school principal directly influences the degree of success achieved by students in the school (Terziu et al., 2016). Principals must communicate efficiently to achieve the best of the school he or she oversees. Principals who devote their time and energy around effective instruction and academic excellence are often the

most successful. These two according to Blasé and Blasé (1999) are the most crucial roles of an instructional leader.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership Characteristics of School Principals

Ubben et al. (2017) stated that responsibilities of the school principal had all the years changed significantly and had become more burdening because of the changes brought about by new reforms and innovations in the education systems. School principals are mandated with the accountability of the academic excellence and success of all students. Also, principals are expected to provide a conducive atmosphere for students to develop socially and psychologically. However, as presented by Stringer and Hourani (2015), many principals are left in a sink-or-swim type of environment and are not coping with the high expectations engraved in their main role. Ubben et al. (2017) asserted that when school principals are given their new roles to lead a school, they come up with their own system of beliefs, values, and ideas that they want to infuse in the workplace. The set of values, beliefs and ideas the principal comes with to the school then determines what can be changed or maintained in what was already in place. According to Senge et al. (1990) effective principals should clearly master their values and ideas since leading an organization comes from sacrifice and determination. As explained by George (2003), principals must know their responsibilities, possess high professional integrity, build working relationships, demonstrates good communication skills and are clear about their business goals. Goleman (2000) mentioned that there is strong link between emotional intelligence and successful school principals. Goleman further stated that the emotional intelligence (EI) level influences the style of leadership of the school leader. The style of leadership can vary from transformational to dictatorship and could provoke different reactions from the viewpoints of the people being lead such as compliance, contentment, collaboration, growth, or commitment even retaliation. As argued by Dugan (2017), leadership can be learned and imitated, and it is defined by desirable opportunities of growth and the will to change.

Moswelwa and Kgosidialwa (2019) started that the school principals should catalyze commitment and encourage high performance standards; inspiring followers and be able to turn them into leaders. They held that an effective school leader should emerge as one who is easy to approach, friendly, caring and one who has the welfare of his followers at heart. Although important of a leader, this social part on its own is not good enough to take the school to higher levels. The leader should also have the needed knowledge, be skillful and should be willing to serve as a role model to his/her followers. Important among the characteristics is the recurring or repeated high level of servitude that the leader should understand that good performance is not an individual effort but a group function and hence their advocacy for a leader who respects the individual and group views of the subordinates with respect to decision making. One of participating teachers in (Moswela and Dialwa's 2019, p. 449) study wrote: "His words should be a healing unto the teachers' bones not paraffin which can burn and bring suffrage unto teachers' hearts that can lead to failing the

children". This study identified the relationship between the style of school principal, as perceived by the school principals and the effects on student achievement through success stories through their thoughts, beliefs and actions.

Leadership Standards and Leadership Crisis

There is still a shortage of school principals who have proper qualifications in school management or educational management in Botswana. Although the situation had for the recent years improved, many leaders in schools have been given promotion to their management positions looking at their good classroom performance and not on their leadership acumen per se and, yet success is schools need leaders who are professionally trained in educational leadership and management as well as the related skills in technology. Totolo (2007) observed that these skills are currently lacking in the leadership and attributed students' poor performance to this leadership gap. Totolo further pointed out that nepotism and favoritism are other obstacles to effective leadership in schools.

The literature on school leadership emphasizes its importance and influence on followers and school's performance. Leadership as a notable feature of school success derive support from the teaching staff and students (Marishane & Botha, 2006). Marishane and Botha compared school leadership and school success to the captain of a sailing ship who safely brings his ship to a preferred destination, the principal must drive the school to a given goal to actualize its vision. If the leader is not there, the school can go astray into any direction and mostly not the wanted direction. In a school setup, the leader is the school principal. It is school leadership defines the distinction between mediocrity and academic excellence (Larson & Murtadha, 2002).

Leader collaboration or its absence with followers and other stakeholders is one characteristic of a highly effective or ineffective school principal. Through collaboration, leaders can grow their understanding of leadership as they share knowledge and sharpen their skills and capabilities. In the process the principal is capable of constantly shaping, evaluate and perfect his/her leadership practices. Collaboration through concerted teamwork offers a continuous professional development route to both the principal and the teachers to improve mutual respect among the members of the team. In Botswana teachers are generally unhappy because according to the research findings by Pansiri (2012), they are not sufficiently engaged in the democratic decision-making process of schools. Although, the findings by Pansiri indicate unhealthy fluid working relationship between school principals, teachers and students, it further shows that the school principals generally get little support from the parents. Arguably, this is because of the dangers of not involving everybody on board in the administration of the school by the principals. Abosi and Kandjii (2002) and Pansiri (2008, 2011) cautioned that leaving behind other stakeholders from democratic decision-making retards productivity and success.

Principal Leadership and Student Achievement

School principals who have improved student achievement always support staff's professional development by rejuvenating teachers' attitude towards their work (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009). These school principals also provide continuous professional

development opportunities for one-on-one, group learning sessions and workshops (Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008). School principals who practice transformational leadership find ways of distributing resources to improve staff's professional development. Cotton (2003) explained that principals who are capable of increasing student achievement in their schools are those who maintain high expectations to their students and staff in order to pull them off their comfort zone and embrace new changes. Transformational principals need to forge high expectations that will pull low performing students to improve their grades. Setting the bar too low for students can be discouraging for both teachers and learners and can lead to low student achievements (Butler, 1997). Scheurich (1998) however, cautioned that high expectations do not have to be harsh demands. He further explained that the focus on high expectations should be based on the belief that every family expectation for every child at school is good for academic results.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach
Qualitative approach was adopted for this study. It was used to gather some understanding of thoughts, feelings, and actions of effective and successful school principals of junior secondary schools in Selebi Phikwe. It provided an idea about the problem and helped to craft an inquiry for potential quantitative research.

Research Design
This study used a phenomenological research method. Phenomenological study is a common research method used in educational leadership and management as well as in the field of educational research (Creswell, 2013). In this study the transcendental phenomenological approach was used within the qualitative context because the design and method are aligned to the goal for exploring the thoughts, feelings and actions of effective school principals who increased students' achievements.

Population of the Study
Population in this research was school principals of the six secondary schools in Selebi Phikwe, Botswana. The school principal is the most senior and accounting person in schools. They are the rich sources of first-hand information for this study.

Sample and sampling design
The participants of this study were six school principals purposefully selected, who maintained high student achievement in the high-performing secondary schools in Selebi Phikwe. The participants for this study were selected through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Non-probability sampling was used in this study. The sample participants were purposely selected to permit the researcher to choose participants where the resultant information will clearly illuminate the inquiry question being under investigation (Patton, 2002). Due to the researcher's time,

geographical location, and resources, convenience sampling was also found to be suitable for this study.

Data Collection Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used for collecting data for this study. The interviewer and respondents engaged in a formal interview. The interviewer used an interview guide. This is a list of questions and topics that were covered during the conversation, usually in a particular order. The interviewer followed the guide but was able to follow topical trajectories in the conversation and this was appropriate as questions were prepared well ahead of time.

Data Analysis

After conducting the interviews, followed data analysis which was performed according to techniques developed by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). The field notes were reviewed addition of the researcher comments and coming up with themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Then key descriptive phrases used by the respondents when describing their lived experiences were noted (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Thoughts and feelings of successful secondary school principals who were able to balance their roles as curriculum leaders and school managers.

The participants were quizzed the questions, "*What are your thoughts and feelings about the qualities of a school principal who can lead a high-performing school with high student achievement?", and "How do you balance your roles as a curriculum leader and a school manager?"* Change agent, good manager, clear and concise vision, instructional knowledge, compassionate, ideas and beliefs focused and data-driven were the responses mentioned by the participants.

Principals should be a change agent.

Participant 1 stated that for a school principal to be successful he or she must have the guts to be a change agent.

> *Something that is accepted as a norm may eventually become a barrier to success. Sometimes to challenge the status quo could open doors to success. So, principals must have the leadership guts to be able to work on that change, even though some people may not be comfortable with the change, so you have to be strong enough to do that. The leaders should establish clear goals and communicate them clearly to his or her team.*

Additionally, participant 5 concurred with participant 1 and described that the responsibility of being a change agent is important for the leadership role in schools. As she explained, schools

often find it difficult to meet accountability requirements or suffer because the instant is not where you expect it to be.

> *The principal should come up with a positive change agent mind-set. Principals must evaluate the culture of the school before stepping in and must be able to make the change needed. To lead is to live dangerously because when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people love dearly - their daily ways of doing things, tools, comfort zones and ways of reasoning and thinking with less to offer but just being happy with the environment...*

Participant 5 further explained that;

> *Teachers in many different schools had been there for the longest times and not all the time making positive progress to their work. But you have to come in and be the change agent for that school.*

Principals should be good managers.
Participant 1 felt that school principals should be good managers who support staff by providing mentorship and coaching. He emphasised that these are the essential behaviours in building effective schools that will improve student achievement.

> *Principals should be well-vested on issues of curriculum and instruction to better guide their teachers. Also, the school principal should be a good manager of the available resources to channel the support and create the conditions for success. These resources could be related to professional development, teaching materials, coaching, mentoring and many others…*

Participant 4 stated that in leading a successful school, principals must be good in making priorities. Prioritizing is a vital tool in leadership. A good manager needs to know what to do and what time. As she explained, principals must work around with a variety of variables and have to deal with people of different attributes and backgrounds.

> *But at a school like this, pressure comes from every corner, from the parents, from the students, from the teacher, from the teacher union, from political leaders. You can easily break down. So, you have to prioritize every single little thing and you may not. So, the best way is to prioritize to get towards the most important things done first.*

In the viewpoint of Participant 6, school principals must be knowledgeable about accountability system. A good manager should foster accountability systems.

During my early years as a principal, I did not know what the accountability system was. So, my school would miss the targets just because I wasn't familiar how we were being graded. And so, after knowing the accountability system and knowing how we were measured, the numbers started to work, and we managed to prepare our students to beat those set targets. It was then that we were able to kind of sail through with other high performing schools.

To make sure the instructional leader has the full determination of the school and can lead the school well, Participant 3 believe that he or she must be in good terms with every member in the team.

The reasons why my teachers have adjusted easily into so many things that I bring forward to them, is simply because I am forever there with them. I even teach alongside with them. I will come up with strategies for them myself and explain them.

Participant 5 mentioned that the moment she was appointed as the principal at her school, she met with all members of her team. Good managers should always see around the workplace and should be approachable by all the members of the institution.

I arrange meetings with each teacher on a one-on-one basis, even the non-teaching staff so I could get to know them, and they could get to know me as well.

Principals should be focused, and data driven.
Participant 1 said that principals have a lot of responsibilities but that the most important one should be being able to focus in establishing clear goals, building on the strengths of the team and in providing continuous support for the staff. In addition, he emphasized that the principal has to make sure that all members of the team should have understanding about the goals of the organization and have a clear focus as it relates to student's needs.

You must do needs assessment so that you can see where the needs are and then focus on what it is needed to be done.

Participant 2 also mentioned that the principal must have an analytical mind-set. For participant 2, principals must have an analytical mind-set. They should be able to repeatedly assess and evaluate programmes, initiatives, procedures, data, school culture and the community making sure that there is a correlation with the vision and mission of the school. In the viewpoint of this principal, the principal must have a great deal of professional positive impact over the community making sure that there is buy-in with the ideas to keep up the momentum as challenges arise to ensure the collective success of the school in sustaining the vision and mission.

We do data analysis for the students, and in the meantime assess staff morale and capacity. These cannot be separated in leading a high performing school.

Participant 4 also concurred with participants 1 and 2 as she alluded that data provides functional information that could be used for decision making in the school.

The data analysis communicates a great deal of internal process of the school. The numbers never lie. If you cannot get down to that level, you will not be that effective in raising student achievement.

Participant 3 cautioned that although effective principals must be data driven, it can also be overwhelming.

You need to be very precise and paying attention to small details in what is it that you are particularly interested, and that must be the focus to move students to success.

Participant 5 also stated that focus was an important leadership characteristic of a principal to sustain the vision of the school in optimal shape.

Every member of the school needs to know the school vision so that they own up the vision and shares that vision with you. That vision is kept as your focus. If you go astray or lose direction the vision will guide you back to the track. You need to be focused and know the goal you want to achieve.

Participant 6 also asserted that being data-driven became their strongest point of success.

We have results analysis with all our teachers and then come to a point of coaching and mentoring some other teachers looking at the result analysis.

Principals should have instructional knowledge.
Participant 2 felt that school principals must have a strong stand about the fact that working with requires perseverance and resilience more so that it requires more from the leaders than a school. The principal possess energy and have a good wealth of instructional knowledge.

The principal must always stay ahead of the game in term of curriculum issues. Spend time together with your staff to have professional discussions with them. Because we have lots of meetings, sometimes opportunities to have one-on-one meetings are important.

Participant 4 also added that the principal needs to know curriculum issues and classroom instructional content. She further explained that teachers like to challenge the knowledge of the

principal in this area. However, as she explained, principals cannot be experts in everything, so it is crucial to find people on your team that has that additional expertise to be able to support and coach all other teachers.

> *While you're talking about making the school culture better, and raising students grades you have to be able to provide guidance to the teachers so that they can achieve that. There is a group of some experienced teachers who are top performers and I usually delegate them on coaching and mentoring other teachers.*

Participant 4 further emphasized that to be successful in school, the principal need be master instructional content and be fully engaged in the classroom activities.

> *The reasons why my teachers have adjusted easily into so many things that I bring forward to them, is simply because I am forever there with them. I even teach alongside with them. I will come up with coaching and mentorship programmes for them myself. In the process we create a strong team with a common basis of knowledge.*

School leadership should be set-in the ideals and beliefs of principals.
Participant 2 stated that the basis of school leadership is set in the ideals and beliefs of the school principal.

> *Another element considered essential in leading a successful school is the ability to set, communicate, monitor and adjust your goals for the school community. It stems from your belief as a principal and as a person and as a leader, where do you want the kids in your school and your community to be, and what is the best for them. And then knowing the route that you want to take, you must plan effectively... if you don't have the right ideal or belief, then it's not going to translate to classrooms... realign and be flexible to readjust because nothing will ever go as planned. So, you need to make sure that the right steps are in place.*

Also, participant 5 emphasized that ideals and beliefs play an important role in the art of running an effective school.

> *Making sure that everybody is on the same page and that you all know what your goal is, what the focus of the school should be as it relates to the needs of all the students at your school... so definitely the ideal and beliefs of the principal play a huge role. I think that when you go into a school that has students with socio-economic needs, you must look and see where those needs are and then focus on what it is that we want to accomplish. What is the number one thing that we want to happen for our school and our students and our staff, because not only do you have to worry about those students, but you also must care*

for that staff as well because if their needs aren't being met, they can't meet the needs of their students.

School principals should have a clear and concise vision.

Participant 1 stated that principals need to be able to safeguard the vision and goals of the school by being strategic, well-organized and.

If we have the structures and strategies in place, then we are all moving towards the same direction in unison.

Participant 1 further elaborated that the principal must design his or her vision, mission, and ideals in relation to effective communication.

The ability of the principal to have a vision of what he or she wanted the school to be like, five years into the future is a characteristic of a successful principal.

According to participants 2 and 3 successful school principals need to have a concise vision which can communicate well with his or her teachers. As participant 2 stated the principal must share her vision which must be understandable and straightforward.

You must know exactly what your goals are, what direction you are headed towards because people will start coming to you with all different things that they want to do.

According to participant 3, school principals need to have a clearly defined and straightforward vision. The vision must be grounded on what is suitable for learners despite the challenges that might arise. The principal must be focused in attaining organizational goals despite the multiple pre-existing challenges commonly encountered in schools.

I think it is important for the school management team to know where they are going. It doesn't mean you cannot change it, as a member of staff you want to have the captain of the ship kind of knowing which way you are going, and it is through a concise vision that a direction of travel is well defined to follow towards success of the school in totality.

School principals should be compassionate.

Participant 3 mentioned that the leadership responsibility she values the most is compassion. For her, being a principal in an effective school, empathy is a vital characteristic that a school principal must possess.

We can't address the academic component if we haven't identified their social-emotional needs first. Students come as best as they can and sometimes the situations that they face

at home, it's not fair to them. So, it's almost like you must be that parent for them. So, you ought to have that compassion. It can't just be business as usual when you have a student have needs some help, but you got to focus on academics at the end of the day.

Participant 4 also concurred with participant 3 and asserted that principals ought to have experience with people to be able to handle teachers from socioeconomic backgrounds and various talents to understand the different levels of teacher performance.

If they don't respect you and they don't trust you, then it's hard for them to follow you. You don't really end up attracting and retaining some of the higher quality teachers because they can't breakdown the doors to come to your school to work with you.

Participant 5 thought empathy was an important leadership responsibility that allows her to lead her school to success. She emphasized that successful principals must be able to understand the different situations that other people may be experiencing, especially the learners.

Something like empathy you cannot teach, you must already have this characteristic. The parents get individual attention. If they have an issue, they know it is going to be sorted out. We know all the parents. We know all the kids and I feel they feel they get that individual attention every time and the kids get it as well. I am part of the society where my students are coming from, I know their challenges and the lifestyle they are leading at their families.

Theme 2: Educational leadership practices of successful secondary school principals who were able to improve best practices in the classroom.
The participants were asked the question, "*Of all the educational leadership practices that you have applied in running your school to success, which one do you consider the most important in impacting student achievement?*" Effective management and distribution of school resources, effective communication, building relationships, fostering a positive school culture, collaboration, mentorship and coaching were stated as educational leadership practices that improve best practices in the classroom.

Effective management and distribution of school resources
Participant 1 stated that principals had to be able to maximize the resources that they have in their schools to reach to the school's full potential. Participant 1 also emphasized that principals need be a strategic planner, structured and organized in the way he or she distribute these resources.

You definitively have to be aware of the budget, looking at the budget prior to planning your professional development and prior to purchasing resources. The little that we have

we must share equally amongst our departments. It goes a long way in strengthening our team building efforts.

Participant 5 opined that he rates effective management of resources as one of the essential leadership practices that a leader should have. He felt that being able to have pressing conversations with followers about distribution of school infrastructure is important in upholding impartiality in his leadership. Additionally, this participant believed that school principals should be able to manage available resources in the school and be able to distribute them equally among the departments in the school.

Even though you're an instructional leader, you do have to be an impartial resource manager, make sure that all the departments in the school have a share of the little that you have, because you're supposed to be able to maximize the resources to reach your full potential. It's a skill that a principal has to have in order to move your school to the next level.

Effective Communication

Participant 1 emphasized the importance of effective communication of ideas with her followers before making changes to the school.

I always make sure that I communicate effectively without missing anything. I always expect the devil's advocate. If you want to move a school to high performing, you must be comfortable with different opinions. That doesn't mean that the opinion is what you are going to do, but you must be able to listen and apply yourself to the rationale coming from that end.

To that aspect, participant 1 stated;

We must stop, think and then respond in an effective way that's not going to make them move further away from us. Because if you have a student who is just not emotionally and socially invested in that classroom, they're not going to want to work for you.

Participant 2 also stated, it is crucial for principals to be good professional role models who communicate effectively to ensure the followers understand and stay on board with the school vision.

I take pride in making sure that we're all saying the same thing to our teachers... a consistent message across the leadership...we all need to be having the same vision as it relates to what our accountability is and what we are holding our teachers accountable for.

Participant 6 stressed the benefits of effective communication, especially with the school management team. Also, participant 6 opined that positive feedback is key in the process of building your school to the next level of academic excellence. As he repeatedly emphasized the importance of effective feedback, he stated that providing feedback takes practice.

> *You must design the feedback in a way that the teacher is either going to come up with the realization themselves or accept the feedback. Feedback can move mountains and bring about positive attitude towards work. I feel that I can talk to anyone, and they respond in a positive way and give me all the support I need and encouragement that they need as well. We do it in a manner that it doesn't look like a fault-finding exercise. No witch-hunt but a friendly professional engagement in pertinent issues aimed at improving school performance.*

Participant 6 stated that effective principal through effective communication with teachers can make them to do some work outside their comfort zones.

> *...requires you to relate well the teachers such that they can do things outside of teaching time and people have to want to do that for kids and relationships is what gets them to do it.*

Participant 5 felt that principals should be brave enough to face and talk about all the difficult circumstances in the school.

> *The students need the utmost sincere honesty, as well as their parents. The teachers also need to receive those crucial conversations the first time something bad goes in their classroom, the first time when any ineffectiveness or unacceptability happens in the classroom, it must be addressed the first time. The principal must be proactive in addressing issues without hesitation.*

Building Relationships
According to participant 3 to be effective in their leadership roles, principals need to build strong relationships, they have be flexible, and they must have strong ideals and beliefs. In the process of building relationships, participant 3 allows teachers and students to be a part of the decision-making process.

> *When it comes to academic excellence, students' voices need to be heard if we truly want to gain their respect and their willingness to learn. That has always helped me with making sure that the students understand that we're in this together because it's not easy. We tend to react when students behave differently. And it's like with other adults; we can't take it personal. We must stop, think and then respond in an effective way that's not going to make*

them move further away from us. Because if you have a student who is just not emotionally or socially invested in that classroom, they're not going to want to work for you. So, these are the kinds of things that we're focusing on. And that's huge on my school because if we can't identify that, and work on that, learning is not going to happen.

According to participant 4, school principals must be objective about building relationships with all stakeholders to create mutual respect. Participant 4 also mentioned that principals must have prior experience in the field working with students with different socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, participant 4 mentioned that relationships are foundational to the process of transforming a school. This principal reported that immediately after she selected for her school, she met in person one on one with each and every one in the school. She felt that she needed to know everyone to be able to connect with them.

Building learning focused relationships and establishing the difference between caring and learning is very important. It is about learning; we do this in the same cohesion as well… Problems are being addressed quickly. From what I can see, things are not being rushed so there is time for everyone to get familiar and comfortable. Communication with parents and community is real, which is helpful in building relationships.

Participant 6 elaborated that in order to retain experienced teachers, principals must build strong relationships with their teachers since teachers have freedom to seek transfers and work anywhere, they wish.

As you know, not a lot of people would want to come to a school where teachers are unhappy. It just won't happen. I just know from experience. There were people that teachers from across the country that wanted to transfer to the school because of the relationships that I had built with people. So, I think that's the number one thing. I mean, the work is going to be hard. You're going to ask people to do stuff outside of their comfort zone and relationships are going to be what gets them to do it. If you don't have a great relationship with your staff, you don't have a great relationship with those parents and those students as well; then they won't really feel comfortable working with you.

Participant 6 mentioned that he had to build strong relationships with his followers to attract them to your school.

Teachers could probably work anywhere in the country. I just know from experience. So, the relationships that I have with teachers, it keeps them here, it keeps them wanting to come.

Participant 6 asserted that principals must also build working relationships with all stakeholders. Participant 6 stated that the community is capable of making or destroying a school principal, so it is important to put high premium on having relationships with the community.

> *The community is definitely an area I think a lot of leaders do not tap into. They can support you, and they can break you…*

Building a positive school culture

Participant 4 emphasized the need to build a positive culture in schools. Participant 4 stated that principal must influence the teachers to code switch school culture.

> *Culture is the foundation of all teaching and learning. And if the school culture in their classroom isn't strong and positive, the game is over already, and the school's effectiveness will be compromised.*

Participant 5 stated that school principals need to build a positive culture. Participant 5 also opined that principals must build not just teachers' ability to understand content but also understand culture. Participant 5 stated that building a positive culture is essential in running an effective school.

> *…making sure that everybody is on the same level and that you all know what the intended goal is, what the focus of the school should be. The culture is so important because you can walk in and base everything on the school that you came from and destroy the school that you're going to or that you're a part of. So, culture for me was a big deal because there was so much dissension when I got here amongst teachers and non-teaching staff.*

Participant 6 emphasised the importance of culture in teaching and learning.

> *Culture is the core base on which teaching and learning process takes place. Without a strong positive culture on your school, you will fail dismally. Culture is what make your school different from any other school.*

Coaching and mentorship

Participant 3 mentioned that at her school they have resorted to coaching and mentoring the new and temporary teachers who lack experience so that they easily adapt to the school culture.

> *Beginning teachers found the work of teaching and learning to teach unrelentingly hard and exhausting, despite being cushioned by good induction programmes in the school. There never seemed to be enough time and they had to cope with new experiences. Even though we have high demands on teachers, expecting all teachers to be committed to work hard, we have a role to mentor them and teach them strategies to improve student grades.*

Participant 4 also stated that she delegated other teachers to mentor and coach new or temporary teacher so that they catch up the classroom instruction quite easily.

> *There is a group of teachers who are high achievers in their own and I usually delegate them on coaching and mentoring other teachers.*

Collaboration
Participant 3 mentioned that building relationships with stakeholders and collaboration helped them in dealing with challenges facing their schools. Participant 3 mentioned that building relationships with all stakeholders is in essential gaining mutual respect.

> *If they don't respect you, they don't trust you. Then is hard for them to follow your ideas.*

Collaboration was also emphasised by participant 4 who stated that it is the fundamental aspect of decision-making. Decisions made through collaboration have an element of collective accountability.

> *In a professional learning community, collaboration is embedded into every aspect of the school culture. Every major decision related to the learning mission is made through collaborative processes. It commits all stakeholders in the accountability system.*

Participant 6 explained that principals have a positive mind-set towards community engagement. Principals must be able to identify situational occurrences and design reach out programs to the community for a smooth running of the school.

> *The community is definitely an area I think a lot of leaders do not tap into. They can support you, and they can break you.*

Theme 3: Challenges that successful secondary school principals endure in their workplace as they strive to increasing their schools' student achievement.
The six participants of the study were asked the interview question, "*What are some of the challenges that you face in your workplace as you strive to increase your school's student achievement anyhow do you deal with those challenges?*". Shortage or lack of resources, lack of parental involve mentor support, political influence, and high expectations from community were listed as the most recurring challenges in running schools. Focus, collaboration with the stakeholders, coaching and mentorship programmes were mentioned as the mitigating strategies used in dealing with those challenges.

Limited resources

Participant 1 mentioned shortage of resources as the main challenge that they face in running the school. He further emphasized that that they must share the limited resources among the departments as a way of mitigating for this shortage.

> *Everybody had to give their absolute best with the limited resources we have in school to play their part and do it well. Do their best, for the kids, for the parents, for each other, to bring it alive. It puts lots of pressure on every person. Operating with one photocopying machine, having to run tests, examinations, teaching aids for teachers and all. We have learnt to share every little that we have.*

Participant 4 also mentioned shortage of resources as one of the obstacles that hinders the fluid running of their schools. He cited an example of having to operate with one printing machine, that is shared by all the departments in the school which hinders them producing revision materials for the students.

> *We operate with only one computer at the Deputy School Head's office for running tests and examinations for the whole school. It's not only the computer, but a lot of resources are also just not enough for the size of this school.*

Political influence

Participant 3 mentioned external pressure from political leadership as a challenge in running an effective school as a principal. She mentioned political decisions and other community expectations that compound a lot of pressure on the school, and she will make sure that she encourages her teachers to focus and not to be distracted by the forces from outside.

> *Most of the time it's not even just teachers, it could be from outside, like higher up. At the end of the day, you must decide what's going to work for my students. And I know my students....so a lot of times it can get discouraging...So, we must stay driven by the fact that is not going to be easy work. You must be in the trenches with the teachers in every aspect to get teachers to buy-in to really see that the work moves along and progresses.*

Participant 6 also mentioned external forces such as political decisions as a challenge that they face at his school. He said that sometimes certain directives push their operating capacity to the edges to a point where he will shield resistance from his teachers.

> *Schools need the outside to get the job done. These external forces, however, do not always come in helpful packages; they are often complex and uncoordinated abstracts. The work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship with them a productive one. I*

often get resistance by my staff because the complexity of the processes that the community want us to operate on.

Inexperienced temporary teachers

Participant 2 mentioned that one of the obstacles they face is receiving new teachers who have little classroom experience. He said that they have come up with internal professional development initiatives in their school that helps new teachers to catch up quickly with the pedagogical content.

Beginning teachers found the work of teaching and learning to teach unrelentingly hard and exhausting, despite being cushioned by good induction programmes in the school. There never seemed to be enough time and they had to cope with new experiences. Even though we have high demands on teachers, expecting all teachers to be committed to work hard, we have a role to mentor them and teach them strategies to improve student grades. Long hours are the norms in our school.

Participant 3 lamented of the inexperienced new teachers and temporary teachers who lack good command of the classroom instruction. Her outcry concurred with participant 6 who emphasized that temporary teachers are only hired on short contracts which creates some discontinuity in learning when they leave at the end of their contracts.

We respect that some teachers may go for study leave, maternity leave, sabbatical leave and so on. Sometimes the process of replacing them take the longest time and the teachers are replaced by temporary teachers. Then our best planning, educational knowledge, vision, and interpersonal skills encounter unexpected roadblocks.

Participant 3 mentioned that the school sometimes operate with a lot of temporary teachers with little or no classroom experience, and they normally leave at the end of their 1-year contracts which she says affects the students. Participant 3 further stated that at her school they are usually flexible to help students in the event a temporary teacher leaves at the end of his or her contract and this had helped them to fill the shortage gap and ensured continuity in teaching and learning.

Flexibility has become our key for success here, my teachers are so willing to cover up for any teacher who is not available for whatever reason, without complaining. My teachers are the asset for this school.

High expectations from the community

Participant 4 mentioned high expectations from the community as a challenging issue that they face at her school, and she mentioned collaborations with the community members in running of the school as a way to assuage the unyielding pressure they experience as a team.

There are also community expectations. We are in a bit of a trap. People are looking in. What is going to happen there? So, there are all those expectations as well that added pressure. How long should everything go through me to ensure we maintain our direction? How do I take staff with me, build their skill base and confidence, and give them ownership? How much and when do I let go? Obvious answer was collaboration.

According to participant 5, in order to be successful in schools, principals need to have a work-life balance since the work in schools demands more from the principals. He also mentioned external forces such as high expectations from the community as a challenge that they face at his school. He said that sometimes confusions to the school operations are caused by external forces that are not visible from a distance.

The external forces are not always visible from any angle, you only feel their presence by some confusion in the system. You know, people have quit this job. People get moved from the job. You know, a lot of people get sick and lose weight on the job... We need to figure out how you're taking care of yourself, you're building culture, with your staff, but you need to learn how you build a working relationship with these forces and bring them closer in your decision making.

Lack of parental involvement in education
Participant 2 stated that lack of parental involvement or support is the other problem that leads to declining student performance. She explained that when parents are not fully involved in their children's schoolwork it creates inconsistency in learning.

It can get discouraging when staff members tell you that there is no parental involvement. Like we can't bank on them, they are literally not there.

Participant 2 concur with participant 3 who stated that student indiscipline is mainly blamed on the lack of parental involvement. This is in agreement with what participant 2 asserted in relation to the emotional burnouts that some teachers experience regarding the lack of parental involvement and parental support. She elaborated out that some students are always moving between their parents and grandparents and that results inconsistency in their learning process.

Some students are often bouncing around from grandparents to parents and things of that nature. So, I feel like when they come to school that could be one thing that is constant for them...I feel that consistency is a big key in their success in school.

DISCUSSION

When the participating principals were asked about their thoughts, feelings and actions principals need to be able to succeed in high performing schools; they identified that the school principals should have the following; instructional knowledge, be a change agent, focused and data-driven, be a good manager, base his/her leadership of the school in his ideal and beliefs, be compassionate, and have a clear and concise vision. Interestingly, Clear, and concise vision was the characteristic mostly mentioned by the participants. According to Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), the purpose of vision is implicit or explicit in almost every theory. In his work Marzano et al. found that there are four behaviours associated with vision: (a) promoting cohesion among staff (b) promoting a sense of well-being among staff (c) developing an understanding of purpose among staff (d) developing a shared goal.

The participants identified the following educational leadership roles as the ones that school principals should do to improve best classroom performance: effective communication, building relationships, effective management and distribution of school resources, collaboration, mentorship, and coaching, and building a positive school culture. McClure, Yonezawa and Jones (2010) found that to improve the culture in schools is necessary to improve the relationships between students and their learning environment. Student achievement and building relationships are at main goals of the work of principals in schools. According to Mittal and Sindhu (2012), effective leaders can put themselves in others' shoes and are able to understand how employees react to administrative events, personal crises, and change. In the same way, their empathy does not prevent them from making challenging decisions. Successful leaders appeal to the rationale and recognize others' feelings, and in the process empowering followers to feel that the decisions make sense. This notion aligns consistently with the statement collected from the participants of this study.

The participating principals mentioned the following challenges that they encounter in running their schools, inexperienced new or temporary teachers, lack of resources, lack of parental involvement, political influence, and high expectations from the communities. The participants of this study stated that schools shield multiple challenges and distractions that deter the school leader from focusing on what really matters. This is also consistent with the findings of Marzano et al. (2005). The following educational leadership practices were mentioned as strategies used by the school principals as ways of mitigating the challenges faced by school principals in running their schools; mentorship and coaching, focus and collaboration. Principals in high performing schools, as represented by the participating principals of the study, value relationships with students, parents, teachers, and the community. Many students come with a variety of deficits challenging their ability to learn at the frequency and the level of expectation. According to the participants with purposeful relationships they were able to support students' physiological and socio-emotional needs. This is also consistent with the findings of Marzano et al. (2005).

CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this study established that to be successful in high-performing schools, principals must foster a culture of high expectations focusing mainly on improving student achievement. The creation of a strong culture is in line with high student achievement. The transformation of the school culture is the most critical leadership responsibility in schools and is in relation to the 21 leadership responsibilities described by Marzano and co-workers (2005). Principals should focus on building a culture of collaboration and sharing leadership to increase student achievement. They should be good managers who are compassionate. Principals must develop teacher instructional capacity through mentorship and coaching programs to mitigate the challenges of inexperienced staff. They should create the collective efficacy of their teams by promoting strong relationships through effective communication. Positive school culture and having a clear and concise vision are the most important leadership attributes principals must possess.

Principals must value relationships with students, parents, and the community to be able to support students' physiological and socio-emotional needs. School principals must also master accountability systems in order to increase the school's student's achievement. Having a clear and concise vision help the principal guide the internal processes in running a high performing school. According to Marzano et al. (2005), the purpose of vision is implicit or explicit in almost every theory.

Recommendation

It is recommended that a future qualitative phenomenological research study examine the gender-specific variations in the leadership Practices. The research study did not analyse participants performance by gender, and therefore the potential differences between males and females were not considered. A future study would afford the researcher an opportunity to elucidate the differences and similarities between males and females in their leadership behaviours. Additionally, the study recommends that a replication study or comparative study be performed using principals in low performing schools to determine if the same thoughts and feelings can be shared in leadership practices between high performing schools and low performing schools.

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