More than a principal:

A mixed methods exploration of successful high school leadership in the Western Cape, South Africa

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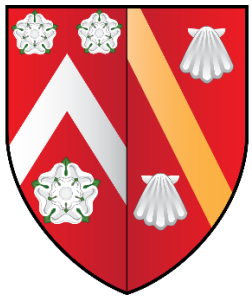

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ABSTRACT

School leadership matters. After teachers and teaching, school leadership is the most important determinant of student achievement in school, although there is still uncertainty regarding what successful school leadership is and what successful school leaders do in non-Western contexts. This mixed methods study explores successful high school leadership in South Africa. Specifically, a questionnaire was administered to 38 principals from academically high-achieving schools in a range of socioeconomic contexts throughout the Western Cape, and 14 principals were interviewed. An integrated analysis reveals the paradox of uniqueness and universality of successful school leadership in South Africa, outlining that while there is no single best approach, various similarities exist between successful school leaders and the established international literature. The study finds that successful principals adapt to their context, amalgamate transformational, instructional and distributed leadership styles, set direction, develop people, constantly redesign the school with teaching and learning, and, importantly, strive to make a difference in the lives of others. By shining a light on these characteristics and practices, the study offers theoretical, practical and personal advice to aspiring school leaders.

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Finally, and most importantly, to the 38 principals who took the time out of their busy day to answer the questionnaire, and, in particular, the 14 principals who were interviewed. Each conversation inspired and enriched me, and left me with a feeling of unwavering optimism and hope for our beautiful, yet troubled, country. At the risk of being too cliché, Nelson Mandela once said that 'education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world'. Successful principals are clearly aware of this, and I hope this thesis can help me emulate the impact they have had on the lives of others. Thank you to the principals, school leaders, teachers, researchers and others in education who are committed to using education to create a more equitable society which allows people to lead meaningful lives – you, have and continue to, inspire me.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
Covid-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CUREC	Central University Research Ethics Committee
DBE	Department of Basic Education
EDLM	Educational leadership and management
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
HOD	Head of Department
ISSPP	International Successful School Principals Project
NSC	National Senior Certificate – South African government schools' final examination (Grade 12)
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
RQ	Research question
SD	Standard deviation
SMT	Senior Management Team
WCED	Western Cape Education Department

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

School leadership matters. After teachers and teaching, school leadership is the most important determinant of student achievement in school (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). International research has consistently demonstrated the impacts of school leadership, especially principal leadership, on student outcomes, through the quality of teaching and learning, school culture and structure of the organisation (Gu & Johansson, 2013; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; ten Bruggencate, Luyten, Scheerens, & Sleegers, 2012). Although the majority of this research has been carried out in Western countries, more recently there has been an increase in the literature from around the world. For example, studies in Kenya (Mwangi, 2011), China (Antoniou & Lu, 2018), Cyprus (Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra, & Angelidou, 2011), Indonesia (Raihani, 2008) and broader reviews of research in Latin America (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018) and Arab countries (Oplatka & Arar, 2017), have all highlighted the importance of school leadership.

After decades of school leadership research, debate still exists as to what strategies and practices successful school leaders employ to positively influence student learning (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018). However, we know that successful school leaders integrate a range of styles of leadership, adopt core practices, and their broad, demanding role includes managerial aspects (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004; Mulford, 2008). However, there is still an overreliance on research from a limited set of Anglo-American contexts (Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Mertkan, Arsan, Cavlan, & Aliusta, 2017). Therefore, there is a critical need for more nuanced, contextualised understanding of successful school leadership. Particularly in South Africa, where 'the schooling system is beset with many problems, including poor management and leadership' (Taylor cited in Jansen, 2016, para. 21).

This study aims to examine a uniquely South African perspective of successful school leadership and explore whether this is consistent with or challenges international literature. Furthermore, the study hopes to shine a light on successful principals' professional and personal characteristics and practices, which could be useful for aspiring South African school leaders by offering insights and narratives of what has worked for certain successful principals. The study is framed by the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What are South African high school principals' perceptions of successful school leadership?

a) How do principals value different aspects of school leadership?
b) Do principals from different types of schools, socioeconomic or demographic groups differ in their perceptions of successful school leadership?
c) How do South African high principals' perceptions of successful school leadership compare with the established literature?

RQ2: What are the self-reported professional characteristics and practices of successful South African high school principals?

RQ3: What are the self-reported personal characteristics and practices of successful South African high school principals?

1.1 CONTEXTUAL POSITIONING OF THE STUDY

South Africa is a complex country with its educational organisations described as 'a cocktail of first and third world institutions' (Chikoko, Naicker, & Mthiyane, 2015, p. 452). Although apartheid officially ended in 1994, this did not mark the end of discriminatory inequality in South African schools, especially those in townships (Mawdsley, Bipath, & Mawdsley, 2012). Although the affectionately known *Rainbow Nation* has achieved near universal access for the compulsory nine years of schooling (Motala, Dieltiens, & Sayed, 2009), according to The World Bank (2020), with a GINI coefficient of 0.63, and the richest 10% of South Africans owning 86% of all wealth (Chatterjee, Czajka, & Gethin, 2020), South Africa is the most unequal country in the world. This inequality is apparent in every aspect of life and is reflected through high unemployment, low literacy rates and high levels of crime (Cramm, Nieboer, Finkenflügel, & Lorenzo, 2013).

The South African education system is in crisis (Gilmour & Soudien, 2009; South African Institute of Race Relations, 2018). Spaull (2019) reported that if you took 100 children who started Grade 1 in 2007, disturbingly only 51 made it to Grade 12, 40 passed and a mere 17 achieved the results eligible for university. Worryingly, this is not a new trend, nor isolated to Grade 12 results. In 2003, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) (2005) reported that only 37% of Grade 3 students passed a numeracy test. In Grade 9, the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest students is approximately five years' worth of learning (Zoch,

2017). The vast inequalities that exist within the South African education system heightens the prominence of school leadership, as leaders in schools in challenging circumstances have an enhanced impact (Harris, Chapman, Muijs, Russ, & Stoll, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). South Africa's Department of Education (2008) is well aware of the importance of school leadership and has specifically created a number of initiatives to empower school leaders, such as the Advanced Certificate in Education – a qualification focusing on school management and leadership, which recognises the crucial role principals play in leading schools (Bush, Kiggundu, & Moorosi, 2011).

This study investigates successful school leadership in a South African context. However, simply including the highest achieving schools would generate a sample of schools highly skewed by affluence, which would not be representative of the inequality in South African schooling. Therefore, another approach was necessary.

In South Africa, government schools are classified by the poverty levels of the learners and community where the school is situated (Zuze & Juan, 2018), in an attempt to reduce the disparities in education inherited by the post-apartheid government (van Dyk & White, 2019). The Department of Basic Education (DBE) determines its allocation of funding to schools on a quintile ranking system, initially constructed by the National Norms and Standards of School Funding in 2000 and refined by the Education Law Amendment Act in 2006 (DBE, 2019), with quintile 1 being the most disadvantaged and quintile 5 the least disadvantaged (Zuze & Juan, 2018). Quintiles 1, 2 and 3 are classified as no-fee paying schools, meaning that schools serving impoverished communities should receive more government funding (van Dyk & White, 2019). However, the ability of upper quintile schools to charge fees has ensured that disparities in quality of education remains vast (Gilmour & Soudien, 2009), as quintile 1-3 schools received a mere minimum government funding of R1 175 per student in 2016, yet certain quintile 5 schools charge more than R40 000 per student (McLaren, 2017). Therefore, the quintile ranking system remains controversial (Davids, 2018; van Dyk & White, 2019).

The official DBE quintile classification system does not work out as equal quintiles as fee-charging schools in higher quintiles have applied for no-fee status (Wills, 2017). Additionally, students attending quintile 4 and 5 schools can apply for school fees exemption to ensure that they too can attend better resourced schools (Kamper, 2008). Each quintile, nationally, contains around 20% of learners, but not 20% from each province (WCED, 2013). Thus, the

national quintile distribution provides an overview of the level of poverty per province. For example, 92% of students in Limpopo attend no-fee schools, while the comparable figure in the Western Cape is only 41% (WCED, 2013).

Although it contains flaws, the quintile ranking system does account for socioeconomic context to a certain extent (McLaren, 2017). Thus, inspired by Wills (2017), but simplified due to time and resource constraints, this study selected high achieving schools per quintile, based on the 2019 National Senior Certificate (NSC) results. Furthermore, South Africa's DBE shares its role with nine provincial departments that have the responsibility to finance and manage their schools (Government of South Africa, 2020). Due to the wealth of diversity within South Africa, and the complexity of coordinating research with multiple provincial departments, the study only included one province, the Western Cape, as the researcher's personal background (Section 3.7) provides a deep contextual understanding of the multifaceted nature of schools in the region.

Independent schools in South Africa are not government owned and, therefore, the quintile ranking does not apply. Although they comprise 6.2% of total schools in South Africa and educate 4.4% of total students (DBE, 2018), provincial departments of education do not hold the jurisdiction to publicly release their results with ordinary public schools. For these reasons, independent schools were not considered in this study.

1.2 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

The study contains six chapters. Following this introduction is a critical review of school leadership research starting with the broad concept of leadership and moving to the specificities of successful school leadership in South Africa. Chapter 3 outlines the study's mixed methods approach and describes the instruments used. Chapter 4 presents the findings, initially each strand of research is reported separately, followed by a combined analysis. Chapter 5 discusses the key findings in relation to existing literature. The study culminates with its limitations, areas for future research and highlights the its contributions in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review, initially, provides an outline of leadership, before discussing school leadership and the three most prominent types evident in the literature, namely transformational, instructional and distributed leadership. Thereafter, the core component of the review, how school leadership influences student learning, is critically analysed. The rationale behind using principal leadership as a proxy for school leadership is explained, before exploring elements of successful school leadership. The review concludes by exploring school leadership in South Africa, which provides further rationale for this study.

2.1 LEADERSHIP

Leadership is a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions, forms and interpretations (Watson & Scribner, 2007). In a review of decades of leadership research, Yukl (1998) defined leadership as:

> A process wherein an individual member of a group or organization influences the interpretation of events, the choice of objectives and strategies, the organization of work activities, the motivation of people to achieve the objectives, the maintenance of cooperative relationships, the development of skills and confidence by members and the enlistment of support and cooperation from people outside the group or organization. (p. 5)

Mentioning 'an individual member' underlines the traditional narrative of a stand-alone leader, although the emphasis on influencing, as opposed to instructing, challenges this view (Gronn, 2002). This coincides with Hughes, Ginnet and Curphy's (2015) understanding that leadership is the art and science of influencing people to perform tasks willing and effectively. Fullan (2005) states that leadership is equally about how the dots combine to create a coherent system and the existence of the dots themselves. Combined with influence, movement and change, leadership is seen more as a journey, or process, than an outcome, considering it involves the capacity to change as the organization evolves and the context requires (Hargreaves & Harris, 2015). Leadership encompasses fusing together different styles and components to uplift, connect and bring people together (Daft & Lengel, 2000). This explains the difference between influence exercised by leadership and influencing others through forms of power such as force, coercion and manipulation (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009).

It is important to differentiate between leadership and management, as these functions overlap in South African schools, hence the terms are used interchangeably (Department of Education, 2008). However, they are not synonymous and have distinct meanings (Bârgau, 2015). While management primarily concerns implementation, operational issues, and systems; leadership relates to a vision, strategic issues, transformations, and people (Day & Sammons, 2014). Robinson et al. (2009) attest that although management involves maintaining operations and routines, leadership gathers support for change. In short, management encompasses implementation, whereas leadership is about purpose (Bush, 2008). However, this distinction need not be absolute as managers need leadership skills, to be influential, and leaders need management skills, to understand how routines can support possible change (Robinson et al., 2009). In a school setting, Day (2000) identifies the tension between leadership and management as principals face the challenge of balancing the demands of both. Although this study focuses on school leadership, it acknowledges the various aspects of management which encompass the practices of school leaders.

Thus, leadership is a multidimensional phenomenon concerned with influencing others, without force or coercion, and, although it overlaps, fundamentally differs from management. This conception of leadership will now be explored in more detail, particularly in the form of a school setting.

2.2 SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

School leadership is also commonly referred to as 'educational leadership' (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018), 'educational management' (Haidar, 2018) and 'educational administration' (Oplatka & Arar, 2017), however these terms broadly refer to the same area of study (Dimmock & Walker, 2000). Simkins (2005) states that there has been an 'explosion' of school leadership literature (p. 9), as it contributes to improving educational outcomes for students (Robinson et al., 2009). Day and Sammons (2014) attest that school leaders play a crucial role in setting direction and creating a positive school culture, which includes a proactive school mindset, supporting and improving staff motivation as well as a commitment to foster improvement.

However, not all school leaders are the same (Hargreaves, 2005). Therefore, this section explores different types of school leadership which, based on empirical research, have been prominent in the field.

2.2.1 Types of school leadership

School leadership strategies have been classified into different types, styles or models. While transformational (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Marks & Printy, 2003; Rafferty & Griffin, 2004) and instructional leadership (Blasé & Blasé, 2000; O'Donnell & White, 2005; Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014) have been the most thoroughly researched (Day et al., 2016), other studies focused on distributed (Chang, 2011; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Mangin, 2005; Spillane, 2006), collegial (Little, 1985; Marks & Louis, 1997; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000), and democratic leadership (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004). In a review of literature pertaining to school leadership in South Africa, Bush and Glover (2016) identified ten types of leadership, however only three, transformational, instructional and distributed leadership, carried importance. Therefore, this section outlines these three prominent strategies in an attempt to provide an understanding of their respective practices, traits and characteristics. However, dichotomising leadership types is not always useful, hence this study follows Printy, Marks and Bowers' (2009) argument for an integrated model of school leadership.

2.2.2.1 Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership is distinguished by the concept of developing followers to their fullest potential (Bass & Avolio, 1993). This involves providing intellectual direction, innovating within the organization, while simultaneously empowering teachers as partners in decision making (Conley & Goldman, 1994; Leithwood, 1994). Furthermore, transformational leadership focuses on problem solving and collaboration with the aim of improving organizational performance (Hallinger, 1992). It has been identified as a pre-condition for school improvement (Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter, & Chapman, 2001). It seeks to engage the full person and motivates individuals by setting goals, in line with their values, thus enhancing engagement in the organization (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Muijs et al., 2004). However, it does not have an explicit focus on curriculum and instruction (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998), whereas instructional leadership does.

2.2.2.2 Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership is a multifaceted construct (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012). According to Portin, Schneider, DeArmond and Gundlach (2003) instructional leadership is the process of 'assuring quality of instruction, modelling teaching practice, supervising curriculum, and assuring quality of teaching resources' (p. 18). This involves coaching, critical reflection, teacher collaboration and critical thinking on the quality of teaching (Glanz & Neville, 1997), which enhances student learning (Antoniou & Lu, 2018; Bush, 2015). It indirectly affects student outcomes by improving the learning culture and staff performance (Leithwood et al., 2004). Similarly, Marks and Printy (2003) found that instructional leadership could improve school effectiveness, but, importantly, its implementation depends on the context (Lee et al., 2012). Day et al.'s (2016) results strengthens Hallinger's (2005) argument that school leadership should be 'viewed as a mutual process of influence' (p. 252), which, in terms of instructional leadership, signifies that leaders influence school outcomes by aligning school structures and culture. Both transformational and instructional leadership have highlighted the influence school leaders hold, however distributed leadership, while offering a distinct dynamic, too affects student learning (Mulford, 2008).

2.2.2.3 Distributed leadership

Often interchangeably used with shared, team and democratic leadership (Spillane, 2005), distributed leadership views social interactions as its key element (Scribner & Bradley-Levine, 2010; Spillane, 2006). According to Watson and Scribner (2007), it is grounded in collaborative participation and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this regard, distributed leadership opposes traditional Western leadership views of hero worship and individualism (Watson & Scribner, 2007), by instead relying on interdependence and coordination (Gronn, 2002). This reclaims leadership from the individual to the collective (Harris & Muijs, 2003). It consists of leaders, followers and the situation (Spillane, 2005), while viewing schools and organizations as 'living systems interconnected by mutual influence' (Hargreaves & Fink, 2008, p. 229). In a criticism of distributed leadership, Watson and Scribner (2007) state that it is merely 'old wine in new bottles' as it fails to capture all of the leadership activities that occur in organizations (p. 447). However, this review demonstrates that successful leaders integrate these leadership strategies.

The concept of distributed leadership sits well with many African leadership models (Department of Education, 2008). Working together, distributing tasks and responsibilities has long been a central component of a *Legotla,* a seSotho word meaning 'meeting circle' or 'tribal management', where community decisions are often collectively made (de Liefde, 2003), which is based on the philosophy of *Ubuntu* – I am because you are (Mbigi, 2000). It is unsurprising then that distributed leadership is commonly used in South African schools (Bush & Glover, 2016; Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010).

This section of the literature review established an understanding of South Africa's three most prominent types of school leadership styles. Attention now turns to the review's primary focus, how school leadership influences student learning.

2.2.2 How school leadership influences student learning

There has been a wide range of international research which consistently demonstrates school leadership's potential impact and influence on student learning (Harris & Muijs, 2003; Mulford, 2008; Robinson et al., 2008; Silins & Mulford, 2002; van Geel, Keuning, Visscher, & Fox, 2018). For example, a study that investigated the relationship between school leadership and student learning in 180 schools in 43 school districts in the United States confirmed that school leadership matters (Wahlstrom, Seashore Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). Studies using mixed methods (Day et al., 2009; Marks & Printy, 2003) were able to generate more powerful findings than those which employed solely quantitative or qualitative methods (ten Bruggencate et al., 2012). However, the majority of these studies are based in Western contexts with a relatively small sample. For example, Gu and Johansson (2013) claim they conducted a 'pan-Europe wide study', yet their sample merely included one English and one Swedish school (p. 301). In a review of the evidence of the influence of school leadership on student learning, Leithwood et al. (2004) conclude that school leadership can play a significant role in improving student learning. In fact, after teachers and teaching, school leadership is the most important determinant of student achievement in the school (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2004), although it is understood that this influence is largely indirect (Fay, 1987; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Witziers, Bosker, & Krüger, 2003).

Having established that school leadership does influence student learning, the question then becomes, how do school leaders influence student learning? Robinson et al. (2009) explain that it involves creating the conditions which allows others to perform in ways that they otherwise would not have been able to. Furthermore, Hallinger and Heck (1996) identified goal setting, school culture and climate, sense of community, programmes and instruction, teachers' expectations, and an orderly environment as some of the factors which mediate the relationship between school leadership and student learning. However, this review paid little attention to the contextual factors that influence student outcomes. Other studies found that school leadership values, qualities and strategies help explain variation in student outcomes (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Moos, Johansson, & Day, 2012; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2011). In sum, school leadership influences student learning by affecting the school culture, teacher behaviour and classroom practices (Witziers et al., 2003).

Schleicher (2012) states that 'effective school autonomy depends on effective leaders' (p. 14), while others found that successful school leadership and effective schooling are inseparable (Dinham, 2007; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Odhiambo & Hii, 2012). Various case studies, where schools have been positively turned around, attribute responsibility to school leadership by enhancing school and teaching effectiveness (Edmonds, 1979; Maden, 2001; Scheurich, 1998). Leithwood et al. (2004) noted that while there are many factors which contribute such school turnarounds, school leadership is the catalyst. School leadership is important, but in isolation it is not enough to drastically improve schools (Day & Sammons, 2014), although there are virtually no documented cases of troubled schools being turned around without strong leadership (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). In fact, in schools facing more difficult circumstances, the effects of successful school leadership are greater (Leithwood et al., 2004).

In a review of the empirical literature on the relationship between the principal's role and school effectiveness from 1980 to 1995, Hallinger and Heck (1996, 1998) conclude that the combined effects, direct and indirect, of school leadership on student outcomes are small, but educationally significant. Creemers and Reezigt (1996) differentiate between school-level factors and classroom-level factors which explain variance in student achievement. Leithwood et al. (2004) discovered that although school leadership only accounts for three to five percent of the variation in student achievement, this actually represents almost one quarter of total school-level effects, after controlling for student intake and background

factors. Classroom-level factors explain only a slightly larger proportion of the variation in student achievement (Hill, 1998; Hill & Rowe, 1996). In terms of direct effects alone, school leadership was found to have a weak effect (Leithwood et al., 2006). However, teacher effects also had a relatively small impact (Creemers & Kyriakidēs, 2008), which demonstrates that, although weak, the direct effects of school leadership are still educationally significant. However, again, these studies were all conducted in Western contexts, or published in Western journals, with a strong dominance of quantitative methods. This calls for more research in diverse contexts with a variety of methods.

On the other hand, there are authors who doubt whether school leadership affects student learning. For example, Murphy (1988) concludes that there is little proof that school leadership matters as there is not enough research dedicated to the area, while the studies which have been conducted are of poor quality. Similarly, Witziers et al. (2003) state that 'there are still doubts about the presumed effects of educational leadership' (p. 399), while Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) discovered that school leadership did have significant effects 'on teachers' classroom practices but not on student achievement' (p. 221). In more than 30 years since Murphy's (1988) claim, there has been an increase in both the quantity and quality of studies which has led various authors to find that school leaders are in fact capable of having significant positive effects on student learning (Robinson et al., 2009; Silins & Mulford, 2002; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). This has allowed the influence of school leadership on student learning to reach the status of a 'truism' (Hallinger, 2011, p. 305).

This section reviewed the research the influence of school leadership on student learning and established that after teachers and teaching, school leadership has the largest effect on student achievement. Although this influence is largely indirect, it is educationally significant and has greater effects in schools in challenging circumstances. Furthermore, studies which employed mixed methods generated more robust findings, however the majority of these studies were conducted in Western contexts with small samples. Therefore, significant gaps in the literature exist, especially relating to whether these findings can be replicated in wider settings. Considering that this study focuses on principals, the following section specifically explores principal leadership.

2.2.3 Principal leadership

Principal leadership meaningfully influences student learning and, similarly to school leadership, this effect is largely indirect (Garcia, 1999; Griffith, 2004; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Nettles & Herrington, 2007; O'Donnell & White, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008). Principals heavily shape school culture, which indirectly affects student learning and outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Marks & Printy, 2003). This influence is primarily directed towards teachers, and teaching, who in turn influence student achievement (Slater, 2011), and by diagnosing the school's needs while being cognisant of the available resources to meet these needs (Portin et al., 2003). However, the issues previously highlighted in regards to school leadership are also prominent in principal leadership, as the majority of studies have been based in Western environments. For example, Griffith (2004) only looked at schools in the United States. O'Donnell and White (2005) investigated 75 middle schools in Pennsylvania, while Garcia (1999) analysed schools in Texas, but did focus on schools with a larger proportion of minority students. In this regard, Dimmock and Walker (2000) raise a sharp criticism as it appears Anglo-American scholars, who comprise a minority of the world's population, are proposing theories and research that purport to represent everyone. Recently, there has been an increase in principal leadership scholarship in a range of contexts. For example, in a study of Kenyan secondary schools, Mwangi (2011) found that principal leadership had a moderate, but significant, indirect effect on student achievement. Antoniou and Lu (2018) evaluated one of the most frequently used frameworks in principal leadership, the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale, in China and, promisingly, found it to be a suitable instrument. Additionally, various studies narrowly focus on transformational and instructional leadership (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016; Day et al., 2016; Hallinger, 2003, 2005; Marks & Printy, 2003; Printy et al., 2009), and thus potentially do not include aspects of distributed leadership.

Nettles and Herrington (2007) recognise that 'much is left to be known regarding the impact of school principals on student achievement' (p. 724), highlighting the need for further research in the field. This study aims to contribute to this gap by identifying practices and characteristics of successful principals and their perceptions of successful school leadership. It follows Slater's (2011) appeal for an international approach that redefines concepts to appropriately suit each context, by focusing on one province in South Africa. The thesis aims

to build on the findings that principal practices vary according to context (Day et al., 2016; O'Donnell & White, 2005), especially considering that this area is largely understudied (ten Bruggencate et al., 2012; Witziers et al., 2003).

The review of the literature suggests that principal leadership plays a central role in influencing student learning. Although research in the field has been dominated by Anglo-American scholars, recently there have been valuable contributions in a wide range of contexts, however there is still a need for further exploration. Gurr (2015) identifies principal leadership as the core component of school leadership, therefore, for the purposes of this study, principal leadership will be used as a proxy for school leadership. It has been established that school leadership, and particularly principal leadership, influences student learning, but what exactly does successful leadership entail?

2.2.4 Successful school leadership

The International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP), began in 2001 and consisted of members in 25 countries in 2015, is a coherent, comparative study of school principals which aims to contribute to the knowledge, practice and policy of principalship (Day, 2015). There are more similarities than differences among successful principals, as they address the wider moral, social and ethical issues in educating students, as well as achieving exceptional academic outcomes, regardless of country, culture and socioeconomic context (Day, 2015). High expectations, both at a personal and collective level, are a consistent feature of more than 50 years of research into successful school leaders (Leithwood et al., 2008). Acting with integrity, transparency and fairness, modelling good practice and involving others in decision-making, fosters respect and trust (Day & Gurr, 2014), which is another defining trait of successful school principals (Day, 2015). Furthermore, Hargreaves (2004) outlines the importance of emotional intelligence, which is complemented with a core set of deeply held values, a sense of moral purpose and individual identity (Day, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2008). This emotional intelligence helps build a strong school culture as 'leadership and organizational culture are two sides of the same coin' (Mawdsley, Bipath, & Mawdsley, 2012, p. 391). Successful principals are committed, resilient individuals who work long hours and continuously develop themselves (Day, 2015; Gu & Johansson, 2013; Gurr, 2015). A range of literature demonstrates that these principals are as interested in promoting social values, such as integrity, compassion, fairness and lifelong learning, as well as fostering creativity,

citizenship, curiosity and the personal, economic and social capabilities of their students, as academic outcomes (Day, 2015; Day et al., 2016; Day & Leithwood, 2007; Ishimaru, 2013; Mulford & Silins, 2011).

The methodology used to select schools and principals to participate in the majority of these studies has solely been based on examination results (Day et al., 2016; Harris, 2002; Wills, 2017), meaning that only high achieving schools, or schools which have shown recent academic improvements, comprise the sample. This could be problematic as solely defining success in terms of academic achievement ignores other major purposes of schooling, such as preparing students to be full participants in society (Finn & Ravitch, 2007). Although various studies have shown that successful principals do not fall into, what Cochran-Smith (2005) terms, the 'outcomes trap' (p. 11), the initial school selection can dictate the trajectory of many studies by placing too heavy an emphasis on academic achievement and overlooking schools which might be successful in other ways.

A series of extensive reviews of successful school leadership research (Leithwood et al., 2006, 2008, 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005), point to three broad categories of successful school leadership practices, namely: setting direction; developing people; and redesigning the organisation. Setting directions entails 'charting a clear course that everyone understands', establishing high expectations, and tracking progress and performance with data (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 2). Articulating a clear vision, effective communication and fostering group goals contributes to setting direction (Leithwood et al., 2004). Developing people concerns professional development, offering intellectual stimulation and providing teachers with the necessary individualised support to succeed (Leithwood et al., 2004). Redesigning the organization is required to match the organization with the changing and ever-evolving nature of education (Leithwood et al., 2004). Aligning organizational structures with student learning, strengthening the school culture and building collaborative processes are at the heart of redesigning the organization (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Based on the ISSPP, Gurr (2015) synthesised a comprehensive model of successful school leadership. Unsurprisingly, this model included the aforementioned three broad categories, but also highlighted the importance of distributed leadership. This is line with the view that successful school leadership is more distributed and democratic, than traditional and individualistic (Gu & Johansson, 2013; Muijs et al., 2004). Similarly, Leithwood et al. (2008)

found that, at least under challenging circumstances, 'the most successful school leaders are open-minded and ready to learn from others' (p. 36).

Understanding successful leadership traits, behaviours, styles and aspects is only useful if we know what works in different settings. Unfortunately, as Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) attest, there is not an abundance of empirical research on school leadership which has focused on the importance of context, even though certain authors claim that context is everything (Day et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2008). For example, Osborn, Hunt and Jauch (2002) state that 'one cannot separate leadership from the context any more than one can separate a flavour from food' (p. 799). Similarly, as Hallinger and Heck (1996) conclude, it is almost meaningless to study school leadership without reference to school context.

It is important to note that, according to Day et al. (2016), 'there is no single leadership formula for achieving success' (p. 253). In a study of effective schools in disadvantaged areas, although there was shared decision-making, Maden and Hillman (1993) did not find that any one particular style of leadership existed. Successful principals combine a range of leadership strategies according to their particular context and phase of development of the school (Day, 2015; Day et al., 2016). This depends on the principal's diagnosis of the needs of the students, staff and general school community, thus implementing a 'fit-for-purpose' approach, which defines their level of success (Day et al., 2016, p. 225). Therefore, successful principals are intuitive, strategic, informed by knowledge and aware that what works depends on their particular context (Day et al., 2016).

An interrogation of the relevant literature suggests that, although many studies have based their criteria of a successful school on academic results, successful school leaders define success in broader terms, such as moral, social and ethical values. Leithwood et al.'s (2004) three broad categories, of setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization, have proved a useful framework for evaluating school leadership success. This study will follow these established guidelines and select schools to participate in the study based on academic results and use Leithwood et al.'s (2004) framework to investigate successful school leadership. Furthermore, the methodology of the study has been guided by prominent researchers who found that successful school leaders combine, integrate or layer leadership strategies according to the context. Therefore, the following section specifically focuses on school leadership in the relevant context of this study, South Africa.

2.2.5 School leadership in South Africa

In a systematic review of educational leadership and management (EDLM) research in South Africa, Hallinger (2019) discovered that the majority of research is dominated by a small number of Anglo-American societies resulting in the knowledge base being highly uneven (Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Hallinger, 2011, 2018; Mertkan et al., 2017). However, over the last few years there has been an increase in publications from Asia, Africa and Latin America which has enriched the field (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018; Hallinger & Chen, 2015; Oplatka & Arar, 2017). In a review of the field in Africa, Hallinger (2018) identified South Africa as the 'leader in knowledge production' as it was the largest contributor to EDLM knowledge in Africa, with a total of 160 studies (p. 375). These studies were conducted in a range of contexts, including small schools (Lumby & Azaola, 2011), rural schools (Brown & Duku, 2008; Mestry & Khumalo, 2012; Msila, 2010; Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010; Smit, 2013), schools in challenging contexts (Chikoko et al., 2015; Kamper, 2008; Naidoo & Perumal, 2014) and others which focused on the 'socio-cultural context' (Msila, 2008; Naicker, 2015; Prozesky, 2016). However, of the 12 aforementioned studies, 10 employ qualitative methods, one is a literature review and the other adopts a mixed methods approach. Furthermore, apart from Brown and Duku's (2008) study, which included 48 participants, although these participants were parents and not school leaders themselves, the largest sample size, of 13 schools, is seen in Ngcobo and Tikly's (2010) investigation into effective leadership in township and rural schools in Kwa-Zulu Natal. This outlines two trends, and possible flaws, in South African school leadership research: qualitative methods and small samples. While this approach does generate in-depth, context specific findings, it highlights the need for further research, implemented on a larger scale, to uncover more generalizable findings that could be relevant for larger parts of South Africa.

The South African Standard for School Leadership's (SASSL) six key areas of successful principal leadership, clearly similar to Leithwood et al.'s (2004) aforementioned core practices, demonstrates that South African literature and policy is consistent with international norms. For example, Botha (2013) attests that principals cannot lead in old or traditional ways. Rather, successful school leadership requires a vision, a commitment to the community, organizing and aligning the school's function, and maintaining a strong social and moral purpose (Botha, 2013). In a study comparing leadership in functional and dysfunctional

schools in Gauteng, Mawdsley et al. (2012) found that successful principals effectively communicated the vision of the school by setting goals for the students. The study also highlights the importance of school culture, community involvement and distributed leadership (Mawdsley et al., 2012).

It is important to note the uniqueness and diversity of the South African context. In an example of how challenging the circumstances can be in certain schools, one principal expressed, 'We are functioning in schools with no resources. We don't even have water and electricity, yet we are expected to perform like the well-resourced schools' (Mawdsley et al., 2012, p. 388). Smit (2017), in an investigation into school leadership in two rural schools in Gauteng, highlights several social issues, such as 'the community burnt down the local library, the health clinic and the police station' and 'some of the learners are being raped by their stepfathers' (p. 11-12). Therefore, Mawdsley et al. (2012) conclude that, due to high levels of inequalities and vast discrepancies between functional and dysfunctional schools, school leadership is the most important tool for effecting change. In fact, school leadership has been identified as the primary factor contributing to successful school improvement (Botha, 2006; Marishane & Botha, 2011), as schools can only be as effective as their leaders (Msila, 2016). Worryingly, Farkas, Johnson and Duffet (2003), analysing public schools in the US, outline how 'typical leadership programs in graduate schools of education are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today's school districts' (p. 39). Sadly, this is also the case in South Africa as very few principals have received training or preparation to be effective leaders (Marishane & Botha, 2011).

However, there continue to be principals who lead schools which defy these overwhelming challenges, such as Mbilwi Secondary School in the Limpopo, which despite minimal resources, consistently produces some of the country's highest achievers (DBE, 2020). As Mawdsley et al. (2012) state 'the fact that one principal has been able to create an effective, functional school in a dysfunctional setting demonstrates that it can be done' (p. 390). While various studies have contributed to understanding the nature of South African school leadership, Bush and Glover (2016) outline that the majority of these studies use qualitative methods, which are based on only a few schools, leading the authors to conclude that more research is needed as it 'remains inadequate to draw conclusions about many aspects of school leadership' in South Africa (p. 226).

This section has outlined the prominence of school leadership in South Africa. A review of the existing literature demonstrated that South African research and policy is consistent with international literature. Furthermore, examples were highlighted where principals and schools have overcome severe adversity to produce outstanding academic results. This study hopes to shine a light on some of these practices. Finally, considering the heavy reliance on qualitative methods and small samples in South African school leadership research, opportunities exist to generate more comprehensive findings and meaningful conclusions by conducting a larger, mixed methods study.

2.3 SUMMARY

As a result of critically reviewing the relevant research literature, leadership was established as a multidimensional phenomenon that is concerned with influencing others. In a school context, although there are three prominent types of leadership, namely transformational, instructional and distributed leadership, successful leaders integrate and adapt these strategies to suit the context of the school. Furthermore, although the effect is largely indirect, school leadership, after teachers and teaching, has the strongest influence on student learning in schools. Crucially, principal leadership plays a central role, and therefore will represent school leadership in this study.

However, the majority of literature on school leadership has been dominated by Anglo-American scholars conducting studies in Western contexts. Although, recently, there have been valuable contributions from authors in a wide range of settings, further research is needed, particularly in South Africa – where studies have been overwhelmingly qualitative in nature and conducted in a small number of schools. Therefore, this study aims to generate more robust findings by employing a mixed methods design to develop a comprehensive understanding of South African principals' perceptions of successful school leadership.

CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the study's aims, research questions and mixed methods design, while justifying this approach. It then describes how schools were selected, and the sample itself, before directly addressing the quantitative and qualitative components of the study. Thereafter, the chapter explains the integration of questionnaire and interview findings. Finally, it concludes with ethical considerations that were taken into account throughout the study.

3.1 AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overarching aim of this paper is to investigate how successful school leadership is understood by South African high school principals, while simultaneously identifying characteristics of successful South African high school principals. The study is framed by three central research questions:

RQ1: What are South African high school principals' perceptions of successful school leadership?

a) How do principals value different aspects of school leadership?
b) Do principals from different types of schools, socioeconomic or demographic groups differ in their perceptions of successful school leadership?
c) How do South African high principals' perceptions of successful school leadership compare with the established literature?

RQ2: What are the self-reported professional characteristics and practices of successful South African high school principals?

RQ3: What are the self-reported personal characteristics and practices of successful South African high school principals?

3.2 MIXED METHOD RESEARCH DESIGN

In a study dedicated to defining mixed methods research, and after reviewing multiple prominent definitions from leading authors, Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007) define mixed methods research as:

> The type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of

> qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (p. 123)

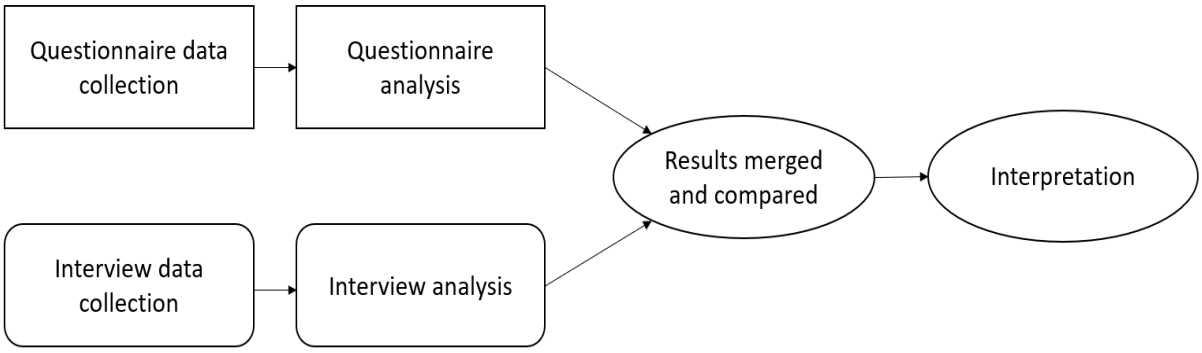
Mixed methods have been developed as a non-hierarchical, diverse approach, consisting of 'multiple ways of seeing and hearing' (Greene, 2007, p. 20), to address research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Specifically, mixed methods allow researchers to 'encapsulate quantitative variables with phenomena that cannot easily be quantified in the same project' (Morse, 2015, p. 339). School leadership is such a phenomenon, in that certain aspects, such as how regularly principals observe classes, can be quantified, while other elements are more challenging to translate into numbers, such as how principals use classroom observations to enhance teaching and learning. Therefore, in an attempt to address the aforementioned research questions, adopting a mixed methods approach allows the study to incorporate meaning, context and quantity into the same project (Morse, 2015).

Employing mixed methods alone does not imply a high quality, rigorous academic study. The following section outlines the study's research design, which includes assessing the quality of each strand of research, but also considers how these strands are integrated. Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) highlight the need of a rationale in order for a study to employ mixed methods, which is explained in section 3.2.2.

3.2.1 Overview of research design

A convergent mixed method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) was employed to investigate South African high school principals' perceptions of successful school leadership. Therefore, questionnaire and interview data were collected simultaneously, analysed separately and finally the results were merged for a combined analysis. Figure 1, below, depicts this process.

Figure 1: Overview of convergent mixed method design



The research design, modelled on Day et al.'s (2016) study, follows the most common mixed methods approach by employing two primary instruments, questionnaires and interviews (Fielding, 2012). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all research was conducted online. The questionnaire, further outlined in section 3.4.1, includes items relating to key aspects of school leadership which were identified in the literature review. Often in leadership research, the latent variable is measured by means of perceptions (van Geel et al., 2018), hence principals completed the questionnaire themselves. Although this has led school leaders to overestimate their leadership actions and qualities, and underestimate their weaknesses (Burke, 2018; van Geel et al., 2018), it is still deemed a suitable approach for this study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals to complement the questionnaire and further explore principals' perceptions of successful school leadership. According to Bryman (2016), a semi-structured interview is when:

> The interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview guide but is able to vary the sequence of the questions… the interviewer usually has some latitude to ask further questions in response to what are seen as significant replies. (p. 201)

Although the semi-structured interviews consist of a core set of questions relating to school leadership, participants were prompted to speak about issues or aspects which were most significant to them, in relation to the study's research aims and questions. This granted participants the freedom to explain their perceptions, while not feeling constrained by the rigidity of a structured interview. Follow up questions were used to obtain deeper data and generate a richer analysis (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

The final stage of the research design combined the findings of the questionnaire and interviews to allow for a holistic analysis. This integration permitted comparisons between the quantitative and qualitative data, while exploring differences and similarities, producing a more powerful analysis.

3.2.2 Justification of mixed methods for this research

Oancea (2016) attests that the growing awareness of the limits of solely employing quantitative or qualitative methods has led to an increase in the popularity of mixed methods research. Scholars adhering to the positivist paradigm ignore Stenhouse's (1981) view that research is always conducted through the lens of the researcher, and thus knowledge cannot be separated from the individual (Polkinghorne, 1989). Particularly in research involving human participants, such as this study, Bowden and Green (2010) claim that objectivity is a myth. Therefore, considering this research explores perceptions, it is necessary to adopt an interpretivist approach which values the participants views, in their subjective nature.

Pearce (2015) highlights how social inquiry cannot advance without a mix of perspectives and that mixed research grants a more holistic view. In this light, quantitative methods initially gauge principals' perceptions of successful leadership, while qualitative interviews add power and variety to complement the quantitative findings (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002). For example, in terms of RQ1a, the questionnaire reveals which aspects of school leadership principals more highly value, while interviews allow participants to explain their perceptions. This follows Kara's (2015, p. 27) reasoning that quantitative methods investigate 'how much, which, when and where', while qualitative methods explore 'why and how'. Furthermore, the study heeds Hallinger's (2019) call for a diversification of research methods in empirical research in South African EDLM after it was found that 67% of the empirical studies employed purely qualitative methods, 21% solely quantitative methods and only 12% adopted mixed methods.

Magrath, Aslam, and Johnson (2019) affirm that mixed methods research generates more robust findings than singularly quantitative or qualitative research. For example, Taylor, Wills and Hoadley (2019), investigating the role of school leadership in literacy development in South Africa, found that qualitative research uncovered a strong effect between school leadership and learning, however the quantitative data discovered the effect to be weak.

Solely conducting research through the lens of one method, therefore, would have granted an incomplete picture. As Fetters and Freshwater (2015) aptly suggest, mixed methods provides the research equivalent of the equation 1 + 1 = 3. That is, the whole is greater than the sum of the individual components (Fetters & Freshwater, 2015). Or simply, the strengths of one approach make up for the weaknesses of the other (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Specifically, in terms of school leadership research, Day et al. (2016) state:

> Future research should move beyond the use of single-paradigm models that may, despite their apparently technical rigor, provide somewhat simplistic dichotomies or limited accounts of successful school leadership. Rather, to increase understanding, we need research that combines and synthesizes results and evidence from different methodological perspectives to provide more nuanced accounts and insights that can inform and support improved practice. (p. 254)

Therefore, adhering to this advice, mixed methods were chosen to address the study's research questions.

3.3 SELECTION AND RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

High-achieving schools, in terms of academic performance, is a necessary, but not sufficient, indicator of successful school leadership (Day et al., 2016). Therefore, following previous studies (Day et al., 2016; Garcia, 1999; Mawdsley et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2019), high achieving schools, based on academic performance, were selected to participate in the study. While various limitations of this approach exist, which will be further discussed in section 6.1, it is believed to be the most suitable metric available to the researcher. However, simply choosing the highest achieving schools would generate a sample of schools highly skewed by affluence, which would not be representative of the most unequal country in the world. Therefore, an alternative approach, outlined in Section 1.1, was used. The 2019 NSC results were obtained from the WCED, classified by school quintile and schools which performed in the top third, of each quintile, comprised the sample for this study, demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of schools in the Western Cape classified per quintile

Quintile	Number of schools	Percentage of total	Number of schools to select (top third of quintile)
1	22	6	7
2	30	8	10
3	67	18	22
4	91	24	30
5	162	44	54
Total	372	100	124

The table depicts the uneven distribution of schools in the upper quintiles in the Western Cape. Therefore, in order to maintain the same ratio of schools per quintile as the Western Cape, 7 quintile 1 schools, 10 quintile 2 school, 22 quintile 3 schools, 30 quintile 4 schools and 54 quintile 5 schools were selected to participate in the study. Of the 124 schools selected, only 25, or 20%, of the principals were female. Additionally, the average school size comprised 939 students.

3.3.1 Questionnaire participant recruitment

Fieldwork took place during the months of April and May 2020. This directly coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in lockdowns around the world. South Africa experienced one of the toughest lockdowns, including the banning of outdoor exercise, the sale of cigarettes and alcohol. Like many other countries, schools were closed throughout this period. Additionally, in line with the National Education Information Policy and Protection of Personal Information Act, the WCED does not share individual contact details to external entities. Therefore, the WCED could only provide landline numbers and generic school email addresses, the majority of which are only accessed through computers on school premises. Although this made contacting schools challenging, many schools had websites and social media accounts which were used to contact schools. Of the sample of 124 schools, only 87 schools were able to provide their principal's direct contact details.

The online questionnaire was sent to these 87 principals, of which 45 attempted the questionnaire and 38 fully completed it, providing a relevant response rate of 44%, or an overall response rate of 31%, which is considerably higher than similar studies. For example,

Day et al. (2016) achieved a 22% response rate, which, although not high, is typical of surveys in England in recent years. In a recent study of deputy principals in South Africa, Khumalo, van Vuuren, van der Westhuizen, and van der Vyfer (2018) received such a 'poor' response rate from attempting to contact deputy principals, the authors had to resort to convenience sampling (p. 194). Therefore, the study's response rate is sufficient.

3.3.2 Interview participant recruitment

Purposive sampling was employed in a sequential manner (Bryman, 2016). The final section of the questionnaire asked participants whether they would be interested in being contacted to conduct an in-depth, semi-structured online interview. Of the 38 respondents who successfully completed the questionnaire, 20 indicated a willingness to be interviewed. While interviews were attempted to be arranged for all 20, only 14 were accomplished. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted online using whichever platform suited the participant, such as Skype, WhatsApp, Google Meet or Microsoft Teams – but not Zoom, as per the university's recommendations.

3.4 QUESTIONNAIRE

This section outlines the questionnaire used in the study. Thereafter, it describes the participants and how the data was analysed.

3.4.1 Online questionnaire

The questionnaire (Appendix 5), consisted of 50 items related to school leadership, was adapted from Day et al.'s (2016), as it is vital to select instruments which provide the most accurate measure of the variables under investigation (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). The questionnaire was suitable as it included Leithwood et al.'s (2006) core leadership practices and items relating to transformational, instructional and distributed leadership. Additionally, it was a recently published study that received considerable attention in the field (University of Oxford, 2017). However, minor adaptations to the wording of certain items were made as May (2011) highlights that the 'phrasing of questions matters' (p. 113). Day et al. (2016) conducted a longitudinal study, while this research was cross-sectional, therefore alterations to the questionnaire represent the differing nature of the study.

Participants were asked to what extent they agreed, or disagreed, with 50 statements on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree. Nine additional questions, relating to background information and demographics, such as gender, age and years of experience as a principal, were added to provide descriptive data. The questionnaire was sent to school principals, via email or WhatsApp, who had indicated that they would be interested in participating in the study. The participants took an average of 14 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was piloted with three current high school principals and three teachers. The feedback was generally positive, with participants taking an average of 7 minutes to complete the questionnaire. A critique included that the questionnaire should include open-ended questions where principals could air their views more thoroughly, however this was the idea behind adopting a mixed methods approach and incorporating semi-structured interviews to complement to the questionnaire. Otherwise, no major concerns were noted.

The internal consistency reliability test, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.906, suggests a high level on consistency of the 50 items measuring the underlying construct of school leadership. Additionally, an initial factor analysis revealed that all items had an extraction value of higher than 0.7, indicating sufficient validity. These values indicate an acceptable degree of validity and reliability.

3.4.2 Participants

The study aimed to replicate the nature of schools in the Western Cape as far as possible. Overall, the sample was skewed to upper quintile schools. This was to be expected due to their higher socioeconomic status, enabling them to be easier to be contacted, in contrast to schools which had no online presence, and only a landline number to contact, which was unhelpful as all schools were closed during the time of fieldwork. As Appendix 7 depicts, no principals from quintile 2 schools completed the questionnaire, while 63% of the participants were from quintile 5 schools, highlighting the uneven nature of the sample. Although the majority of schools were in urban areas, a range of types of schools were included in the study, in terms of the number of students and school fees charged. This aligned with the study's aim of obtaining a sample reflecting the diversity of schools within in the Western Cape.

The majority of the participants were males aged between 50-59, holding an honours degree or equivalent with more than 7 years of experience (see Appendix 8). The low amount of female principals is unsurprising as only 36% of principals in South Africa are women (Davids, 2018), while only 20% of the principals in the original 124 schools selected were women. The sample represents one of the largest cohorts of principals in empirical South African research designed to explore perceptions of successful school leadership.

3.4.3 Data analysis

Initially, data were analysed by means of descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, means and percentages in order to determine how principals value different aspects of leadership, RQ1a. Inferential statistics, such as t-tests, one-way ANOVA tests, Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U tests were used to ascertain whether differences in perceptions existed between principals of different types of schools, socioeconomic or demographic groups, RQ1b. Thereafter, a multi-linear regression was conducted to complement these findings by exploring associations between these groups. An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) were conducted to extract school leadership factors to help understand how South African high principals' perceptions of successful school leadership compare with the established literature. Factor analyses are appropriate because it reduces the amount of data from a large data source into variables that have a shared variance (Costello & Osborne, 2005), and can be compared with results of previous studies, particularly Day et al.'s (2016) study, to determine whether South African high school principals' perceptions are consistent with international literature, RQ1c. Findings are reported in chapter 4.

3.5 INTERVIEWS

The following section outlines the nature of the online semi-structured interviews conducted in the study. Thereafter, it describes the participants and how the data was analysed.

3.5.1 Semi-structured interview

The interviews followed the guide (Appendix 6), which contains three main sections: an introduction, relating to the principals' personal journey, motivation and perceptions of school leadership; the core part of the interview, concerning the practicalities of being a principal and the challenges involved; and the conclusion, which allowed principals to speak

freely and ask questions. The interview was piloted with the entire 2019-20 Oxford MSc Comparative and International Education cohort, who are aware of the standards and procedures of interviewing. Additionally, it was piloted with an experienced, former South African principal. Interviews were expected to take between 30 minutes and 1 hour. The average interview took 48 minutes, with the shortest taking 31 minutes and the longest 1 hour and 18 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed.

3.5.2 Participants

14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals of high-achieving government schools in the Western Cape. Similarly to the questionnaire, the respondents were skewed to upper quintiles fee-charging schools, with only 3 non-fee-paying schools being included, although the quintile 5 schools did encompass a range of school fees (see Appendix 9). As expected, the majority of schools were in urban areas, as they were easier to contact. Finally, there was a variety of schools in terms of school size. While there was a mix principal age, again, the overwhelming majority of participants were males (see Appendix 10). However, the 21% of female principals interviewed constitutes a slighter higher percentage than in the original selection of 124 schools in the Western Cape.

3.5.3 Data analysis

A thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate qualitative method in order to identify, analyse and report patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. First, the researcher became familiar with the data by transcribing the interviews, reading and re-reading the data and noting initial ideas. Second, initial codes were generated by systematically coding interesting features of the data. Third, initial themes were searched for by collating codes into potential themes. Fourth, these initial themes were reviewed by checking if they resembled the coded extracts and the entire data set. Fifth, the researcher defined and named themes through an ongoing analysis of the overall story. Finally, the sixth phase, producing the written analysis, involved selecting vivid and compelling extracts, constantly relating analysis back to the research question and literature, and creating an academic report of the analysis. This analysis was performed using NVivo research software.

3.6 INTEGRATION OF FINDINGS

It is important to note that, according to Fielding (2012), part of the reason for mixing data is to 'integrate two fundamental ways of thinking about social phenomena' as this offers the 'depth of qualitative understanding with the reach of quantitative techniques' (p. 124). However, effective data integration requires a well-considered approach that allows for convergent validation, or synthesises certain findings, due to their equivalence, but investigates others which are contradictory (Fielding, 2012). Therefore, in line with the study's convergent design, aspects of Creswell and Plano Clark's (2017) integrative processes were followed by initially merging and comparing the results of the analyses of the questionnaire and interview data. Secondly, connecting the questionnaire analysis to explain certain findings drawn from the interviews and vice versa. This process 'involves frequent stepping back to move forward' as it continuously requires investigating the data and challenging initial findings until a warranted conclusion develops (Bazeley, 2017, p. 78).

3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researcher adhered to the ethical considerations set out by both the University of Oxford and the WCED, while also ensuring that the British Educational Research Association (2018) guidelines were followed. Approval from the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) was received on Friday 6 March 2020 (Appendix 1) and Thursday 24 March 2020 from the WCED (Appendix 2) to conduct the research.

The interviews were fully transcribed and identifying nouns were changed to pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. All participants agreed to participate in the study before completing the questionnaire, while interviewees consented to be audio recorded and understood that the data and transcriptions were going to be securely stored. Additionally, participants were aware that they could skip questions or withdraw from the study, with no repercussions, at any point. No ethical issues were encountered throughout the duration of the study.

The positionality of the researcher, as a privileged white, male, English-speaking South African who attended a well-known school in the leafy Southern Suburbs of Cape Town, was considered both a strength and weakness of the study. This positionality positively influenced the study in that the researcher had a strong understanding of the context of the Western Cape, which was used to set the interviewees at ease and helped establish rapport, as well as

a resourceful personal network which assisted gaining access to principals (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017). However, this may have impacted the researcher's neutrality (May, 2011), and contributed to skewing the sample towards upper quintile schools. Additionally, the researcher's inability to fluently speak Afrikaans or isiXhosa meant all interviews were conducted in English, which was not the first language for the majority of the participants and thus could have negatively affected the power dynamics (Mertens, 2012). To compensate, the researcher explicitly notified participants that if there was anything that they were not comfortable expressing in English, they could do so in their preferred language and the researcher would conduct the necessary translations, although this was rarely necessary.

CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

This chapter presents the overall findings of the study. Initially, it contrasts the mean and standard deviation (SD) scores of the individual questionnaire items, outlines the EFA and CFA, and compares differences between groups. It then describes the themes derived from the analysis of the interview data. Finally, these findings are merged to allow for an integrated analysis to produce more holistic understandings of successful school leadership in the South African context.

4.1 QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

Analysis of the questionnaire generated a formidable understanding of the study's primary research question, what are South African high school principals' perceptions of successful school leadership. The following section systematically addresses RQ1a, RQ1b and RQ1c.

4.1.1 RQ1a: How do principals value different aspects of school leadership?

In order to explore South African high school principals' perceptions of successful school leadership, initially mean scores and SDs were compared for all 50 questionnaire items to address RQ1a. As shown in Table 2, items related to high expectations, developing people and collaboration had the highest mean values, tending towards strongly agree, while items relating to classroom observations, direct principal impact and the use of data had the lowest mean values, tending towards slightly agree. Two items, both relating to student attendance and punctuality had significantly lower means than the other items, due to these being the only negative outcome-based items in the questionnaire. The SDs emphasise the consistency in principals' perceptions as the 10 most strongly agreed items had a significantly lower SD (0.49) than the 10 least strongly agreed items (0.94).

Table 2: Questionnaire items ranked by mean score

	Mean	SD
10 mostly strongly agreed questionnaire items		
1. I have high expectations for the staff's work with students	5.87	0.34
2. I have high expectations for student behaviour	5.79	0.41
5. I encourage staff to consider new ideas for their teaching	5.76	0.43
6. I promote professional development among teachers	5.76	0.49
3. I have high expectations for student achievement	5.74	0.45
37. I promote an orderly and secure working environment	5.68	0.47
44. This school sets high standards for academic performance	5.68	0.53
9. I encourage collaborative work among staff	5.63	0.49
20. I feel a strong loyalty to my teachers	5.61	0.82
4. I work collaboratively with the governing body	5.58	0.50
10 least strongly agreed questionnaire items		
41. There are more opportunities for students to take responsibility for their own learning in the school than before I started as principal	4.97	0.49
39. Parents often visit the school	4.87	0.99
17. I coach and mentor staff to improve the quality of teaching	4.87	0.70
48. There has been a positive change in students' lateness to lessons since I've been principal	4.82	0.80
16. After observing classroom activities, I work with teachers to improve their teaching	4.76	0.97
15. I regularly observe classroom activities	4.74	0.89
35. Class teachers regularly use student data to set individual student achievement targets	4.66	0.70
21. Most leadership tasks in this schools are carried out by the principal and SLT	4.42	1.24
49. Students are often late to school	2.71	1.39
50. Students often miss class	2.16	1.20

4.1.2 RQ1b: Do principals from different types of schools, socioeconomic or demographic groups differ in their perceptions of successful school leadership?

In order to investigate RQ1b, the 50 questionnaire items were collated to one mean leadership score, which was then tested for differences between groups. No significant differences were reported in eight of the nine categories, including: age, gender, level of education, school size, school quintile, school fees, time as principal at the current school, and time as principal in total. However, school location had a significant difference (F=3.532; p value = 0.04) as principals from semi urban schools (n=7; mean = 4.93) had a significantly lower score than schools from urban (n=20; mean = 5.23) and rural (n=11; mean = 5.27) areas.

To further examine RQ1b, all 50 individual questionnaire items were compared for differences between groups. The following significant differences were found:

- Older principals more strongly agreed with items number 3, 14 and 20, relating to expectations for student achievement, encouraging staff use of data and loyalty towards teachers
- Male principals more strongly agreed with item number 8, relating to encouraging staff to thinking of learning beyond the academic curriculum
- Principals from smaller schools more strongly agreed with item number 20, relating to loyalty towards teachers
- Principals from upper quintile schools more strongly agreed with items number 2, 19, 20, 32, 42 and 47, relating to expectations for student behaviour, trust in teachers, teachers' collective responsibility for student learning, high academic standards and students feeling safe at school
- Principals from lower quintile schools more strongly agreed with items number 49 and 50, relating to how often students are late or miss class
- Principals from urban schools more strongly agreed with items 22 and 47, relating to how distributed leadership is within the school and how safe students feel at school

Finally, a multi-linear regression was used to explore associations between the overall leadership score and school type, socioeconomic and demographic groups. Considering the aforementioned results, it was unsurprising that the regression model was not even remotely close to being statistically significant ($F_{[29,8]} = 0.412$; $p = 0.962$).

While there was a significant difference in the means relating to school location of principals from semi-urban areas, principals from urban and rural areas had similar mean scores which urges caution in claiming that school location significantly affects principals' perceptions of successful school leadership. Therefore, it appears, principals from different types of schools, socioeconomic and demographic groups do not significantly differ in their overall perceptions of successful school leadership.

4.1.3 RQ1c: How do South African high principals' perceptions of successful school leadership compare with the established literature?

An EFA was conducted to determine whether the 50 questionnaire items loaded onto latent factors representing different aspects of school leadership. The analysis had to be run several times, as items which cross-loaded were removed, before running the analysis again. Finally, only 10 individual items remained in the analysis, which loaded onto 4 factors and explained 69.54% of the variance, with results depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: Rotated EFA factor matrix

	Factor			
Item	1	2	3	4
7. I promote a range of professional development experiences among all staff	0,050	0,087	**0,929**	-0,088
8. I encourage staff to think of learning beyond the academic curriculum	0,020	0,044	**0,879**	0,005
15. I regularly observe classroom activities	**0,914**	-0,060	0,047	0,028
16. After observing classroom activities, I work with teachers to improve their teaching	**0,905**	-0,084	0,130	0,120
40. The school is actively involved in work with other schools or organizations within the community	**0,381**	0,204	-0,195	-0,177
21. Most leadership tasks in this schools are not carried out by the principal and SLT	-0,103	0,169	-0,207	**0,731**
38. There has been improved student behaviour and discipline as a result of a whole school approach	0,286	-0,038	-0,020	**0,728**
42. Students in this school can achieve the goals that have been set for them	-0,089	-0,129	0,234	**0,601**
49. Students are often late to school	-0,197	**0,913**	-0,026	0,007
50. Students often miss class	0,113	**0,916**	0,158	0,057

The four leadership factors extracted can be labelled as follows:

- Factor 1 – Observation: items linked principals observing classroom activities (although item 40 does not match this label)

- Factor 2 – Attendance: items linked to student attendance and lateness at school
- Factor 3 – Developing people: items linked with how principals develop staff members
- Factor 4 – Items show no consistent latent construct

Factor 1 contained two items related to classroom observations, but item number 40, which relates to community involvement, also loaded on this factor. No existing literature explains this, and thus represents a limitation of EFA, even though the item's λ of 0.381 was significantly lower than the other two items. Similarly, factor 4 does not appear to represent a latent construct as it includes items relating to distributed leadership, student behaviour and goal setting. Due to these conflicting results, and the number of items that were removed due to cross-loading, a CFA followed to determine if previously identified dimensions of school leadership were apparent in the current study. All items loaded strongly on their theorised factors.

Furthermore, previous research grouped all items into four broad school leadership constructs. To further explore these theorised factors, a CFA was conducted with all 50 items, but limited to four factors. Again, the analysis had to be run several times, as items which cross-loaded were removed. In the final analysis, only 25 items remained, which loaded onto the four factors and explained 57.14% of the variance, with results in Appendix 11. Two of the factors are not directly linked to the theorised factors which provides considerable insight into RQ1c. Perceptions relating to principal leadership and distributed leadership correspond with previous findings, but perceptions relating to improved school and classroom practices and intermediate outcomes differ. Further discussion of this research question is provided in section 5.1.

4.2 INTERVIEW FINDINGS

A thematic analysis of the 14 semi-structured interviews identified, in line with the previously mentioned series of extensive reviews (Leithwood et al., 2006, 2008, 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005), three broad themes of successful school leadership practices, namely: setting direction; developing people; and redesigning the organisation. These themes emerged after a rigorous coding and recoding process. Initially, the codes were in vivo, or indigenously, collated to represent preliminary themes and then a priori, or theoretically, merged (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). All individual names mentioned in the analysis are pseudonyms, which were

created to ensure the anonymity of participants, and refer to principals who were interviewed.

4.2.1 Setting direction

Setting direction revolves around the school's vision. Willie describes that 'you have to give a vision. And you have to get everybody on board. And have them move in the same direction'. This is crucial, as Pieter states, 'so everybody knows where they are going'. Essentially, it encompasses, in Pat's words, getting 'the ship from A to B'. John demonstrates how successful principals are concerned with a holistic vision:

> Delivering a product to the young men in our care that is going to enable them: one, to get the best matric result that they can possibly get after 5 years; but more than that, equip them with the life skills to go out into the world and be able to cope, and do positive things, and excel, and be an asset to their families, to their communities, and to wherever they reside, the people around them.

Similarly, Caster illustrates the interconnected nature of the vision, values and holistic approach, 'What was important is that learners become good citizens, that they have values entrenched in themselves… Trustworthy, honest and with integrity'. Pat explains that 'you have to have more of a diverse approach, because you have such a diverse group of people in your school'. Duane aptly conveys this, in terms of an individual's development:

> The kids must be kids as long as they are kids. So, they must enjoy things at school like kids want to enjoy… A kid who doesn't through all the phases, is going to be a difficult adult… Because I think, I believe, if you follow all the stages of a kid, you must play, you must enjoy, you must dance, you must play rugby, you must play interschools, all those things. Even if you are 18 years old. Then you will be a balanced adult… There must be all things to enjoy and if you have happy children, then you have happy parents. If you have happy parents, they will support you when there is a problem.

Practically, setting direction involves principals setting the example, holding high expectations, communicating clearly, maintaining consistency and always looking to the future. In terms of high expectations, John simply states that 'there is an expectation to achieve', while Caster's sentiments add further insight:

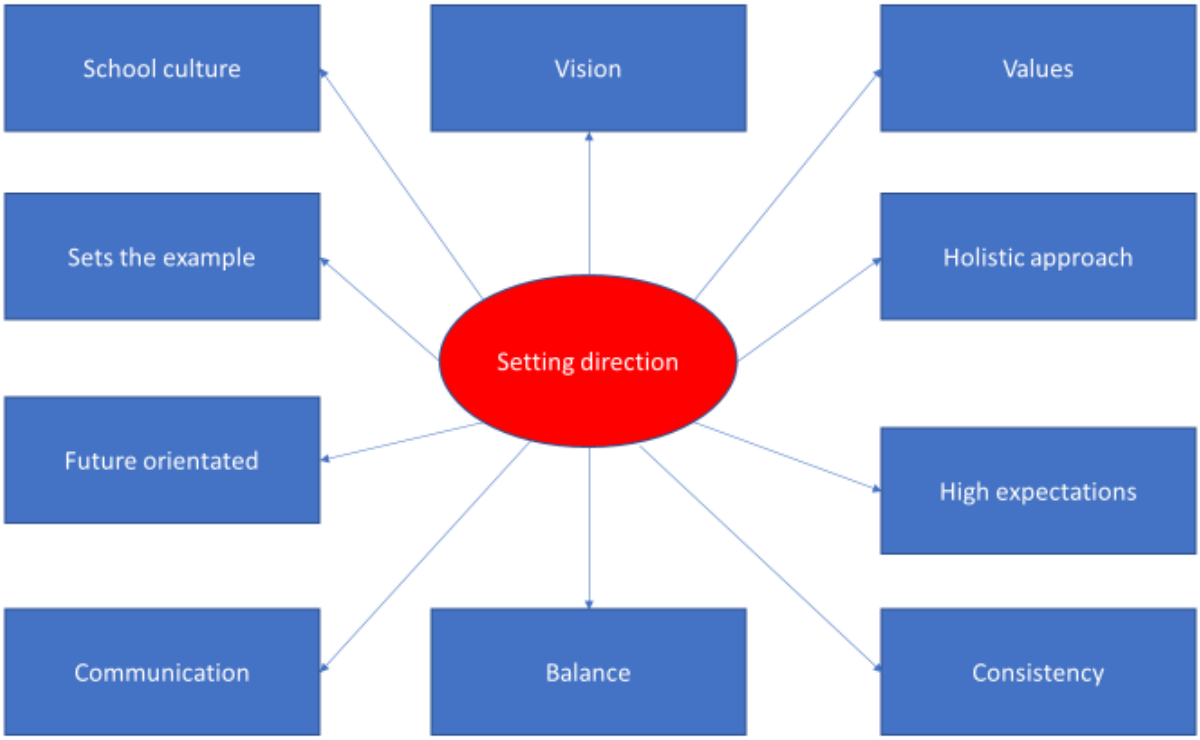
> The focus on achievement was because they can do it. To bring out their potential and so that they know that we have high standards and they must work very hard if they are accepted in this school. And so, the reputation of the school, the brand, is now that if want to go to [school name] you must work hard.

Willie expresses that 'communication is very important', while Steve demonstrates how communicating is linked to outlining the school's direction:

> I feel you need to communicate with parents where we are going, what our focus is, what's happening in the class, we are moving in this direction, or we just had a professional growth seminar on that. I want parents to know what we are doing. So they can think ok, it's good, the school is moving forward.

Furthermore, setting direction, as Pat testifies, requires principals 'to be futuristic, to plot the course', which obliges principals to 'walk the talk', as Siya declares. Fittingly, Caster clarifies that 'there are a lot of responsibilities that you have, but the role is to lead by example'. Malcolm explains how this is derived through servant leadership, 'Don't expect anyone to do something which you are not prepared to do yourself'. Figure 2, below, was developed after the coding process, which created a clearer picture of how codes were connected and overlapped to form a central theme of setting direction.

Figure 2: Theme 1 – Setting direction



4.2.2 Developing people

The second theme, developing people, concerns growing others and professional development. Caster highlights that 'there must be opportunities for staff to develop themselves', while Charlize emphasises 'it's important to invest in your staff. The schools that

I have felt that I really enjoyed… were the schools where there was a lot of investment in staff training, developing skills'. Duane's use of observations as an improvement, not punitive, measure underlines this theme, 'I do class visits to try to help staff… not to evaluate them'.

It is clear there was a strong link between developing people and adopting a distributed style of leadership, by trusting others and giving them autonomy. Siya succinctly outlines that 'what I have learnt is that leadership needs to be shared'. Frans explains that:

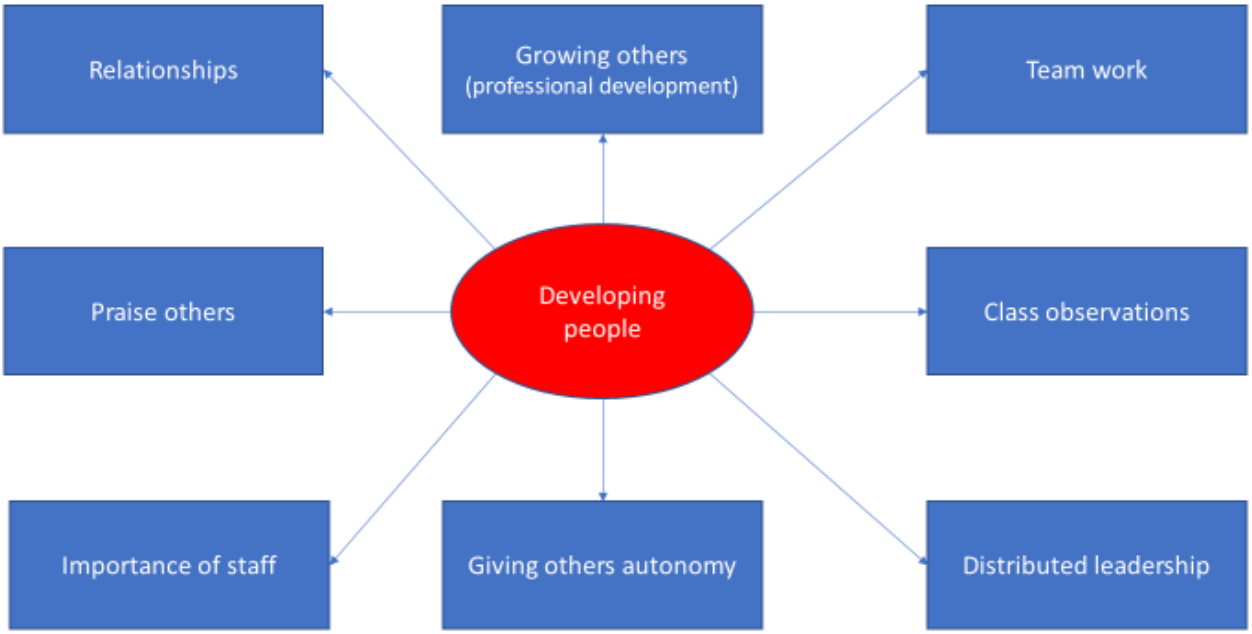
> We have eight HOD positions, and each of those people have an area of responsibility within the school. It takes a load off my shoulders, in terms of not running things from the centre, but also allowing people to get on with the job. I have high expectations, I expect them to get on with things, we have regular meetings, but by in large they are given the freedom to be innovative and develop things as well. As long as they are asking the questions, I am quite happy for them to do so. So, we have seen a loosening up of the school, to express the stuff you are passionate about. It is not Frans' view; it is everybody's collaborative view.

Caster emphasises that you must 'engage with people and have a collaborative approach to running the school'. Developing people centres around the importance of staff, praising others, teamwork and relationships, which Siya illustrates, 'It is like an engine, you see. Every component in the engine is working together'. Malcolm's hidden agenda further encapsulates this theme:

> The stated goal of the staff meeting is to do the administrative tasks for the day ahead. My hidden agenda is to launch the staff into the day with an added feeling of camaraderie and a reminder that they are doing an amazing job. So, in the staff meeting, if it is your birthday, we will sing to you. If someone has done something, we will make a bit of a joke of it. There is often quite a lot of teasing between people about things that have happened. Someone left a child somewhere by mistake, or locked their keys in their classroom, or you know, those kinds of things are, no one lets them slip by. They are planned and everyone laughs.

Frans highlights the importance of relationships by stating that 'I also walk around, getting out, circulating, meeting the boys, making sure they know that I know who they are. It is part of the act, the stage, is to service that need as well. Meeting with staff, bumping into staff, keeping relationships with staff alive. Having a bit of banter with the boys and staff from time to time as well'. Hestrie aptly concludes that 'human relationships are the most important thing.' Figure 3 depicts the various aspects of developing people.

Figure 3: Theme 2 – Developing people



4.2.3 Redesigning the organisation

The final theme, redesigning the organisation, involves building structure, developing the curriculum and aligning the school with teaching and learning. Casters asserts that 'making sure that the school curriculum is delivered, as well as the conditions for the most efficient curriculum delivery are there. Making sure that you assist in getting the conditions perfect for quality learning and teaching to happen'. This often requires change, as Pieter explains, 'a reorganization of the school structure, to a certain extent… we had to reorganise. Mainly, some structural changes'. Hestrie explains her approach:

> I did not change anything immediately. I said I would wait two years first. I met each staff member individually, all staff, including ground staff and hostel staff. There were about 70 in total and I met everyone individually and gave them the opportunity to speak about what they thought was positive about the school and some potential solutions to existing problems. I was not interested in the things that were too negative, rather having solutions. This allowed me to see the whole picture of the school and built trust with the staff. They also got to know me. And then I did make lots, and lots, of changes, after two years. I said this is not working because, and gave the reasons that I had seen.

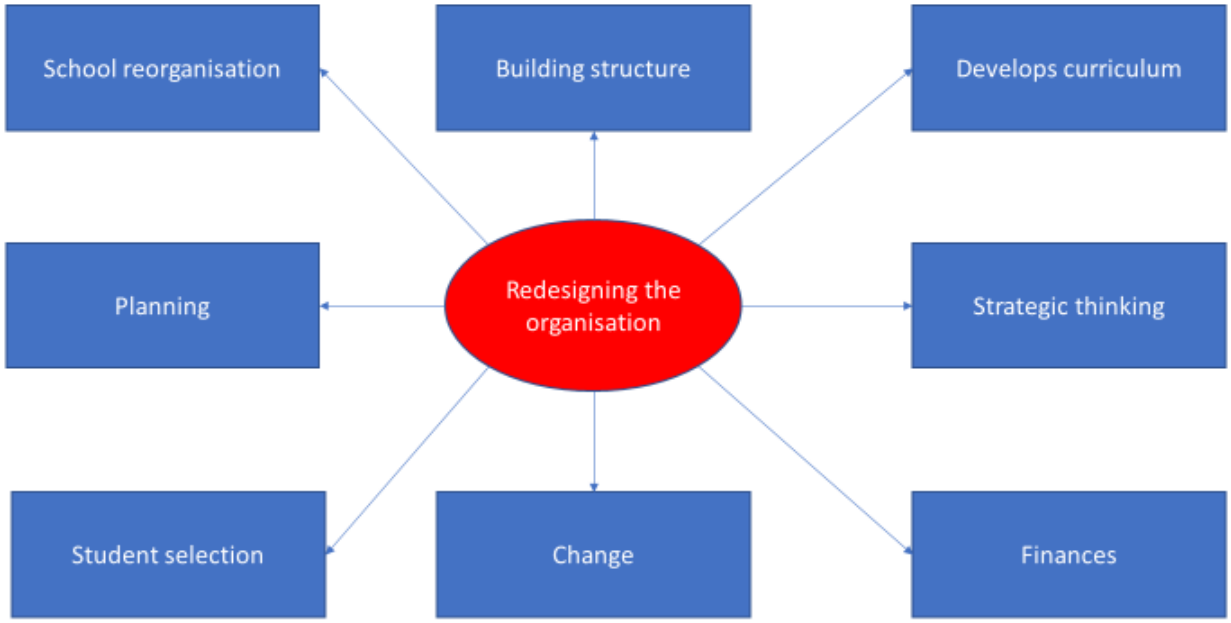
However, Willie used a different strategy:

> But there was so much wrong, that I just decided, you can't go and try and change a ship, and then just keep on sailing knowing that you are going the wrong way. So, you had to change. So, that was really, I can tell you, it was

> problematic, because I had to make big changes, from the beginning, to try and turn it around. So, that is what I did. It was really tough. Especially from the teacher's side, which didn't want to do that.

The different approaches highlight that although there are similar themes and trends, principals differ in their practical applications. Figure 4 illustrates this theme.

Figure 4: Theme 3 – Redesigning the organisation



In addition to the three core themes of school leadership practice, the interviews unveiled distinct professional and personal characteristics and practices of successful principals.

4.2.4 RQ2: What are the self-reported professional characteristics and practices of successful South African high school principals?

In terms of professional characteristics, three common themes emerged: leadership style; being embedded in the school; and the functioning of the school day. Although most principals openly spoke about a democratic and distributed style of leadership, their approach changed and adapted to the context and environment. For example, Cheslin states that 'when you are in leadership position, you must use all types of leadership that is available at a specific time. Sometimes you must be an educationalist, sometimes you must be a dictator, sometimes you must be democratic'. Additionally, a problem-solving mentality, with a willingness to improve things, is an important factor, as Malcolm explains:

> I often say to the staff, in the staff room moaning and grumbling breaks out about some grade 9 class, you know. Ahhh, the grade 9 Es are petty, they don't work, they are undisciplined, then oh Joey in the class, he's useless... And then you just, you've got to jump in there and go, you know what, we have control over everything, and if you don't like how things are happening, then let's make a change.

Secondly, principals were embedded in the fabric of the school by being aware of what was going on, at the ground level, and knowing the staff and students. Siya explains that 'I am a person who is not an office person. I am not who normally stays long in the office, I move around. I chat with the kids. I listen to the kids'. While Steve goes further, 'What I do once a week is have a lunch time meeting with a different grade. So, I invite six grade 8s one week, next week six grade 9s, and they have lunch with me in my office and we chat about school. School issues, particularly, to see what is itching, what is working and what is not working. Just to stay in touch with pupils'. However, for schools in challenging areas there is another reason for staying on the ground, as Cheslin outlines:

> I must be on patrol on the school grounds and check that everything is there, that learners are in the classes and teachers are teaching, that everything is fine. Because, why? We are here on the edge of the town, the border of it, there are people outside, criminal elements, that want to intrude, you must be alert of that also.

Cheslin's use of the word 'patrol' is in stark contrast to principals in more affluent schools, who 'take a few moments to walk around the school'. Additionally, most principals continued to teach as, according to Charlize, it 'is important that the principal is seen as not having lost touch of what goes on in a classroom', while Eben highlights that 'a principal must be in the curriculum, you can't stay outside and yes, you have to do this, and you have to do that'. Furthermore, Hestrie has 'a book with a picture and names of all 736 girls in the school. I study it because I must know all of the girls' names'.

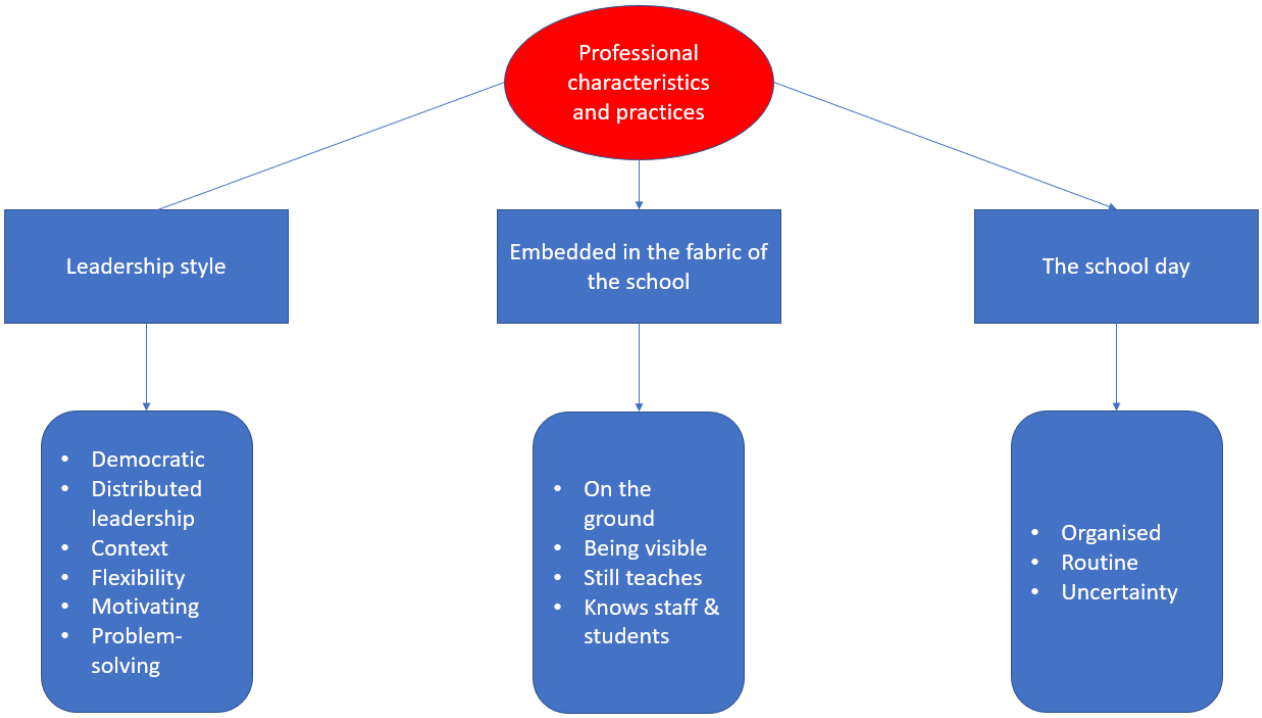
Finally, successful principals are well-organised individuals although, paradoxically, the school day is filled with both routine and uncertainty. In terms of routine, Frans explains that:

> There is a lot of predictability of being a head of a school because there is a cycle that runs, there are sporting seasons, there is a cycle of curriculum, exams at certain times, matric exams, and I know that we'll have a matric dance at some stage, and we'll have a matric farewell, and we'll have a valedictory, and we'll have certain assemblies at certain dates. So, there is a regular routine that runs, and that routine is planned and ticks over. You can

almost take last year's calendar and put it into next year and follow that routine.

However, Pat mentions how 'it is never the same' as Frans, again, describes 'it's never quite what you think it is going to be. Education is a fascinating arena to work in because the curve balls are many and no two days are the same, even though much of it is a bureaucratic process. It has a human factor that always makes the unexpected happen'. Pieter provides examples, 'There have been quite a lot of crises that we have had to deal with… we had a major flood, we've had fire, we've had drought, we've had pestilence, we're getting it all. I think it's dealing with the unexpected and the unplanned'. Figure 5 illustrates the components of RQ2.

Figure 5: Professional characteristics and practices of successful South African high school principals



4.2.5 RQ3: What are the self-reported personal characteristics and practices of successful South African high school principals?

Successful principals have distinct interpersonal and intrapersonal traits. On an intrapersonal level, principals are positive, passionate individuals who love school and have strong morals, values and ethics, which Malcolm outlines:

> You need to be someone who has a higher than normal set of moral standards and the ways you conduct yourself. And if you think that you have got a firm grip on your ego, and you recognise that your role in the organisation, as a leader, is one function. It is not the most important function. It is a function. And you need to exercise those functions. If you can get your ego off the table, and you've got high moral values, good integrity, you've got a love for children, and you like the people you work with, then you are well on your way… The organisation aspects and the, let's call it the functional aspects of leadership, whether you are this kind of leader, or that kind of leader, I don't think it makes a massive difference.

Malcolm's emphasis of getting 'your ego off the table' highlights the humble nature of principals, which Hestrie confirms by stating that 'I am human. So, be human, make mistakes and apologize for making a mistake'. Additionally, they are determined, resilient and ambitious, which often leads principals to bend the rules in their favour, as Pat crudely illustrates:

> I go to the South African Education Law Association conference every year and every time I come out of it, my nose is sometimes just above the level of poo I am in, and sometimes I need a snorkel. Because if you were to stick to the letter of the law, you would get nothing done.

Additionally, successful principals are constantly looking to improve themselves, by being lifelong learners, which Charlize explains, 'For me, it is always a challenge of developing myself, of learning something new, of taking on something new, learning new skills'.

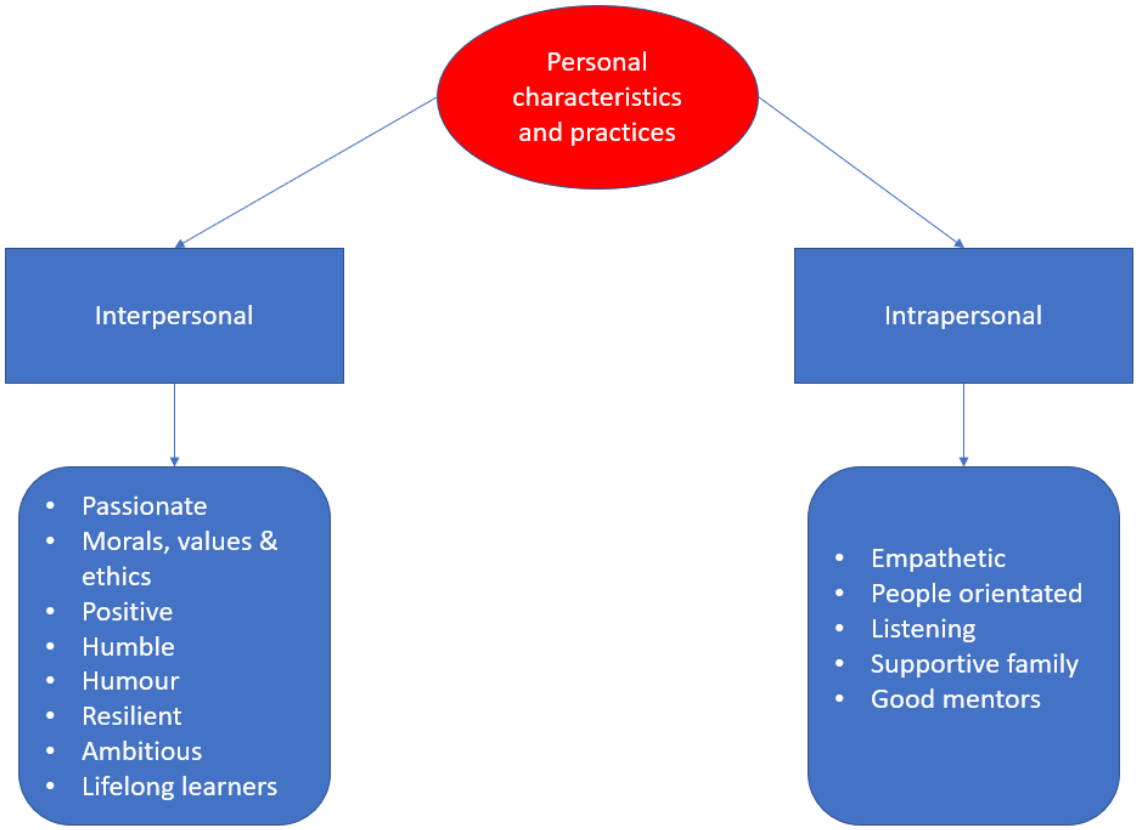
In terms of the interpersonal characteristics, successful principals are empathetic, people orientated individuals who know that, in Hestrie's words, 'it is important to listen to people'. Cheslin outlines this practically:

> My teachers, sometimes it is very difficult for them, they've got their own circumstances, their own problems, their own things at home, personal issues. But you must have an ear to listen to them. If they come to you with problems, you must have an open door. They must come to you at all times. They must be comfortable in your presence.

Various principals mentioned the importance of a supportive family. John highlights how 'interestingly enough, Jess and I have been married for 18 years, and it was the second Easter we got to spend together in 18 years, because in all those other years I am usually up in Johannesburg at that time at those Easter sports festivals'. Pat explains that 'my daughters… always used to say to me, why are you at home tonight Dad? Isn't there something at the school you should be attending?' Furthermore, having good mentors offered tremendous

assistance. For example, Malcolm states that 'when I started at my first school, there was a group of principals who took me under their wing and without them I think I would have been in big trouble'. Figure 6 portrays the components of RQ3.

Figure 6: Personal characteristics and practices of successful South African high school principals



4.2.6 Overarching themes

While addressing the study's primary research questions, certain overarching themes emerged. Firstly, the principals are well aware of the unequal nature of South African society and education's role in building a brighter future for the country. This perspective, coupled with an unwavering desire to make a difference in the lives of others, was expressed in all interviews. For example, Pat states that 'I just felt I could make a difference here, make a difference to the kids' lives, to the community… I believe that I've got a lot to offer in changing the future of this country and the kids in this country'. Cheslin further expresses this notion:

> I want to make a change, and that change must be significant. Because, why? You see, if you are dealing with a community like this, this is a no-fee school and the circumstances of these learners… there is a high rate of poverty and

> for lots of them, the circumstances at home are so bad that the school is the only escape for them from their circumstances. So, for me it was not to change them, but be a part of changing them. That was my motivation. To make a difference.

Principals in affluent schools are conscious of their privilege, as Frans outlines 'the kind of harrowing stories I hear, the kind of lives these guys lead in comparison to me, in terms of gang warfare, violence... There are very different lives out there in this country and I am constantly aware how lucky I am to be in the sort of first world environment, when so many people are never in that'. The high levels of inequality bring severe differences in the types of challenges principals face. Siya, a quintile 1 principal, explains that 'the intelligence came to me to tell me that Mr Siya, you are doing to die… There are seven educators who are planning with other learners here at school, that you will be assassinated, and they came with the teacher of how the assassination will go'. While in upper quintile schools the challenges often concern the demographics of the school, as John concedes 'it is a fact our student body does not reflect the demographics of the country, but it does reflect the demographics where we live, where we are situated. But that is something that we are very conscious of'. Frans, another quintile 5 principal, explains:

> So, when I get accusations thrown at me, through the press, about being a school of white privilege, I can say we are not a school of white privilege. We are a South African school. Yes, we are a school of privilege, there is no doubt about it, we've got a lot of money, more money than most schools have got, but we are using that to change lives, to create leaders and we are giving a slice of that pie to kids who would not have had it in any other circumstance.

Another common thread was the broad nature of the role of a principal. Charlize highlights that 'it is a very difficult job. You've got to please parents, teachers, students, and then the government. It's an impossible task, to please everyone'. John states that 'the role has changed tremendously over the last 20 years, but it is evolving all the time'. This evolution, as Duane confirms, now includes financial management 'because nowadays with schools, it is a business. There are millions of Rands involved and you need to not just to be an educator, you also have to be a businessman'. Steve explains:

> The whole idea of the head being the big person who calls every shot is over. I've got to be humble and share with the people who do know what is going on. It is a far wider managing role now and trusting people who know what they are doing. The old instructional leader, it is impossible, I feel, to be the

> expert in IT, in law and maintenance and staff welfare. I've got to trust and motivate people in those groups to do that.

Pat metaphorically sums up the principal's broad role:

> I equate it to the question of who packed your parachute equivalent. You know every one of those little strings on the parachute play a role and help you succeed and self-landing. I think the role of the principal is actually to make sure that the parachute is packed correctly, that you have the right fabric, that you know that all of the strings are playing a role, but ultimately the principal is holding the two toggles. The principal is able to direct the school to safe landing.

This means 'you are accountable and responsible for everything that happens on the school. Even if there are things you are not responsible for, but it is included there, you must be responsible for that. Your shoulders must be big enough to carry all of these things', as Cheslin attests. This overarching responsibility results in principals working extremely long hours. Pat fittingly expresses that 'when school starts, I belong to the school. It is a 24/7 job'. Certain principals arrive at school at 05h30, while others, such as Pat, mention 'then you have all your evening functions. Maybe 3 nights a week, excluding the sport, maybe 4 nights a week I am the school until 23h00'. However, as previously explained, these principals love their job and the long hours do not deter them in the slightest, which Malcolm epitomises:

> So, I make it sound like I work the whole time, but I have a great life. You see, this work I like. It's great work. So, you know, they always say if you find a job [that you like], then you don't actually have to work a day. Working with teenagers is a real reward.

4.3 INTEGRATED FINDINGS

This section merges the findings of questionnaire and interview to provide the integrated findings of the study. Questionnaire items 49 and 50, relating to student lateness and attendance, were among the items with the highest SD. This is unsurprising as principals from lower quintile schools are expected to face more challenges, of this nature, than their colleagues in upper quintile schools. Interviews were able to outline why this is the case. For example, Siya explains:

> So, the problem here, our kids, in fact our parents, mostly are single parents and they do not have good working opportunities. Most of them, they are working in the farms. They leave very early in the morning and they come back later. That is affecting the school in that the kids are left alone, so they arrive at school very late, because they are not being monitored.

Similarly, Cheslin mentions that 'there around 700 [students] that are coming from outside. They commute by bus every day'. Some of these students travel from 30 kilometres away, via public transport, which is notoriously problematic, as Charlize highlights, 'because they use public transport, they leave the moment the bell goes because they need to get home before it gets too dangerous. So, they don't often take our extra classes'.

Another item, number 39 relating to how often parents visit the school, had a large SD. Again, there is a considerable difference between the responses of lower and upper quintile school principals. Cheslin, a quintile 3 principal, explains some of the challenges he faced in this regard:

> The other thing is to get the parents on board. It was difficult starting with them. When we had these parents' meetings, attendance was 40 to 50%, but then I did some home visits to get the parents involved. My SMT and my deputies, we went to the parents and had meetings… For me, it was very, very critical at the time to get these learners and parents on board. These parents would say no, I can't go to school, there's a problem, I don't have transport... If Mohammed can't go to the mountains, the mountains must come to Mohammed. You see what I want to say. So, we went and split up in groups… To get these parents on board was something heavy to do. When we have these meetings, we have 95% attendance of parents now.

The questionnaire analysis reveals that principals from upper quintile schools expressed a greater trust in their staff. More privileged schools often can 'recruit people who want to contribute', as Charlize mentions, hence it is easier to foster trust and loyalty. However, this contrasts with lower quintile schools, as Siya experienced:

> Most educators at the school were temporal, and the area we are in, is a small area, it is difficult to find educators. We only receive educators who come from Cape Town and received no post there. That means that we get the educators who are not experienced, some are not well-developed in terms of the content. We are only taking the leftovers. And they do not even stay here over the weekends, on Fridays they want to go back to Cape Town.

Similarly, there was difference between lower and upper quintile school principals' perceptions about student safety at school. This highlights the inseparable nature of schools and the communities they serve, as Caster explains:

> We have been burgled quite a lot. The social problems of the community are spilling onto the school. There are quite a number of cases where our kids abuse drugs and, again that is part of the social, we are part of the community. Community problems just, they become part of the fabric of the school as

> well… They live in a very violent society. If they are at school, and they are in a safe space during the day, we can't expect them not to think of their home circumstances'.

While the questionnaire findings reveal that principals from different types of schools, socioeconomic and demographic groups do not significantly differ in their overall perceptions of successful school leadership, the interviews demonstrate that context permeates every aspect of school leadership. For example, Siya outlines that:

> Our parents haven't gone to school, they cannot assist their kids with homework, so we need to organise extra classes after school, so that learners can also be assisted in doing their homework. Or, to make sure they complete their work at school. So, luckily our work that is being done, is not homework mostly, they are school-based activities that are done at school.

This affects how the school structure, community involvement, how staff are developed and the school culture, among other elements. Cheslin's experience adds further insight:

> These types of schools... the learners come from very poor backgrounds. To deal with these learners every day is very hard. Some of them, you see we are here on the border of the Eastern Cape, so some of these learners come from another type of culture, using another type of language, this school uses Afrikaans as the language of instruction. So, now, we must learn to adapt to these learners. And they have special issues that we must adhere to. Now, you are sitting with these learners here. Number one, they are poor. Number two, most are coming from the Eastern Cape, they are staying all by themselves. There are no adults who are responsible for them. They are responsible for themselves. So, you must try and keep those learners in the school.

These challenges are not isolated to lower quintile schools, as John illuminates, in terms of providing virtual classes during Covid-19, 'There was an expectation from those few, you know, why are you not streaming every lesson online into my living room where, you know, our family has 5 laptops, you know. But there is a guy sitting in a shack in Khayelitsha with his pay-as-you-go phone, who we are providing data for. Those are real issues in a South African context'.

Although male principals more strongly agreed with item number 8, relating to encouraging staff to think of learning beyond the academic curriculum, the interview data contradicts this as female principals also spoke about the importance of a holistic education. For example, Caster states:

> The social, the mental health and emotional health of learners is important… I think that also helps if they see that we care for them. It helps in the overall

> grand scheme of things. The school is not just about academic achievement, and curriculum delivery, there are a lot of soft issues that we tackle, and we have programmes in place for.

The integrated findings suggest there are various common aspects of successful school leadership, however how these are implemented depends on the context of the school. Frans succinctly portrays this paradox:

> Each context is unique to some extent. And so the qualities of leadership are the same and the impetuses are the same, but you can't just go in there. No man is an island. You've got an environment around you that also shapes the way you interact and behave, and sometimes some of your self-held beliefs have to change completely, depending on the environment you find yourself in. Sometimes you have to give up some things, because you sacrifice things that are important to you so that the system can improve. I'm thinking about what you said earlier, what are the qualities of a headmaster? I don't know if that is a simple question to answer because you are part of an ecosystem, you have to understand that ecosystem.

4.4 SUMMARY

The analysis of questionnaire and interview data revealed that successful South African high school principals place more importance on aspects such as high expectations, setting direction, developing people, collaboration and redesigning the organisation than other elements of school leadership, such as classroom observations, their personal impact, the use of data, student attendance and punctuality. Importantly, principals from different types of schools, socioeconomic and demographic groups do not significantly differ in their overall perceptions of successful school leadership. While these findings are consistent with international literature, this chapter has demonstrated the unique South African flavour principals incorporate into their practices.

Successful South African principals do not adhere to a specific leadership style or strategy, rather they continuously merge transformational, instructional and distributed leadership styles to suit their context, personal and professional strengths. These principals are embedded in the fabric of the school by visible, on the ground and consciously aware of those around them. They are passionate individuals who love what they do and adhere to the highest moral and ethical values. They are driven to make a difference in the lives of others and are well aware of their broad and demanding role of using education to create a better

South Africa for all, as John states, ‘We don’t want to be the best school in South Africa, how can we be the best school for South Africa’.

CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the study's key findings as systematic responses to each of the research questions, while theorising them in terms of the relevant literature. Throughout these discussions care is taken when making generalisations, as the limitations of the study are recognised in the final chapter.

5.1 RQ1: WHAT ARE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP?

The questionnaire results revealed that principals highly valued items relating to high expectations, developing people and collaboration, and least valued items relating to classroom observations, their personal impact, the use of data and attendance. This places doubt on the importance of the findings of the EFA, considering attendance and classroom observations were two of the latent constructs, although developing people was a highly valued latent construct. Similarly, the results of the CFA need to be questioned as only half of the factors, principal leadership and leadership distribution, coincided with the four factors in Day et al.'s (2016) study, while improved school and classroom practices and intermediate outcomes did not. This is understandable as Day et al. (2016) conducted a longitudinal study and thus could evaluate whether school and classroom practices improved, as well as measure intermediate outcomes. Considering the current study was cross-sectional, it did not capture these constructs to the same extent of the other factors, principal leadership and distributed leadership.

The interviews, enhanced by the integrated analysis, uncovered rich narratives of principals' understandings which demonstrated that there is no straightforward answer to the study's primary research question. Broadly, it encompasses setting direction, developing people and redesigning the organisation. This includes maintaining high expectations, strong moral and ethical values, especially the desire to make a difference in the lives of others and understanding the extensive role of being a principal. Importantly, the study found that principals from different types of schools, socioeconomic and demographic groups did not significantly differ in their overall perceptions of successful school leadership. These results indicate that while the perceptions of successful school leadership appear to be similar for high-achieving high school principals in the Western Cape, implementation depends on the

individual and school context, as the environment heavily shapes the nature and application of school leadership.

These results indicate that South African high school principals' perceptions of successful school leadership are consistent with established literature, particularly Gurr's (2015) model. However, there is a distinct 'South Africanness' to successful school leadership, most notably the desire of principals to make a difference in the lives of others and understanding the importance of education. The considerable discrepancies in experiences between principals from lower and upper quintile schools demonstrate the array of challenges in a vastly unequal society – a situation to which many other developing countries can attest. However, in line with previous research, the study's results indicate there is no single successful leadership style (Day, 2015; Day et al., 2016; Harris & Chapman, 2001; Maden & Hillman, 1993), which is further discussed in the following section.

5.2 RQ2: WHAT ARE THE SELF-REPORTED PROFESSIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND PRACTICES OF SUCCESSFUL SOUTH AFRICAN HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS?

The study's results indicate three common professional themes of successful principals, namely leadership style, being embedded in the school, and the nature of the school day. The data confirms recent research that objects to the narrowing of school leadership to dichotomising styles (Day et al., 2016; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Wang, Gurr, & Drysdale, 2016). Successful principals amalgamate transformational, instructional and distributed leadership styles in their everyday practice, although the emphasis of each style changes to suit the context. For example, it is clear that principals value and implement certain transformational leadership strategies, such as setting direction, redesigning the organisation and collaboration; instructional leadership strategies, such as professionally developing teachers, the curriculum and creating an environment for effective teaching and learning; and distributed leadership strategies, such as sharing leadership, giving others autonomy and adopting a collaborative approach. These findings resonate with Day et al.'s (2016) concept of 'the layering of leadership' (p.244), and Hargreaves and Harris' (2015) notion of 'fusion leadership' (p.43), demonstrating that there is no single successful leadership strategy, style or formula for success. Rather, successful principals integrate styles and use whichever strategy they believe is necessary based on the current situation, context, staff capabilities, community expectations, school culture and their personal and professional

strengths. While previous studies (Day et al., 2016; Printy et al., 2009; Shatzer et al., 2014) have focused on transformational and instructional leadership, the value of the current study lies in the prominence of distributed leadership, after heeding the advice of earlier research in South African school leadership (Bush & Glover, 2016; Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010)

Additionally, principals were embedded in the fabric of the school by being on the ground, knowing staff and students, and visible to the community. Continuing to teach classes aided in this regard. Furthermore, the contradictory combination of uncertainty and routine means that successful principals are simultaneously strategic and well-organised individuals, yet equally flexible to adapt to the inevitable changes, or unexpected events, that typically arise in a school environment. This uncertainty does not deter successful principals, rather, as Boyatzis and McKee (2005) state, 'great leaders face the uncertainty of today's world with hope' (p. 12). This hope comes in the form of the school's vision, allowing others to see how their role fits in the bigger picture, and their personal optimism. Additionally, this flexibility reinforces Taylor et al.'s (2019) assertion that the most skilful leaders 'are those who bend restrictive external forces to serve the best interests of the school' (p. 34).

These professional characteristics are entwined with the core leadership practices of setting direction, developing people and redesigning the organisation. The combination of professional characteristics and practices ensures successful principals create an open environment where others can grow and develop. They invest in people and trust others to do their job by giving them freedom and autonomy. This echoes Naicker (2015) findings which explains the influence of *Ubuntu* in South African school leadership through developing people as well as being empathetic and open to staff. Finally, they set the example by working extremely hard, although this does not discourage them, as they love what they do.

5.3 RQ3: WHAT ARE THE SELF-REPORTED PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND PRACTICES OF SUCCESSFUL SOUTH AFRICAN HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS?

Successful high school principals are passionate, resilient individuals with strong moral and ethical values, confirming Prozesky's (2016) claim that 'ethical quality is seen as paramount' (p. 6). Furthermore, successful principals are ambitious, positive and humble people who are always looking to improve themselves by being lifelong learners, which reinforces Leithwood et al.'s (2008) view that 'the most successful school leaders are open-minded and ready to

learn from others' (p. 36). This, coupled with their hardworking temperament, resonates with Chikoko et al.'s (2015) idea that successful principals go 'the extra mile' (p. 459). They are people orientated, empathetic and highly value the importance of listening to others, unveiling their democratic ideals, while they have often been aided by a supportive family or influential mentors. The importance of being empathetic and caring, previously highlighted by Grobler, Moloi and Thakhordas' (2017), explains why successful principals place such importance on the people around them.

They tend to have a problem-solving mentality and relish challenges, which supports Hargreaves and Harris (2015) finding that 'for leaders who perform beyond expectations, crises are catalysts for change' (p. 38). Most importantly, their social conscious ensures they strive to make a positive difference in the lives of others and understand their role in terms of the big picture, the potential of education to create a better South Africa, by being well-aware of the vast inequalities throughout the country.

Few of the above traits are unique to this study as considerable research has outlined the personal composition of successful principals (Day, 2015; Day et al., 2016; Hargreaves, 2004; Mawdsley et al., 2012). However, it is useful to see how these play out in a South African context and influence professional characteristics and practices. For example, being people orientated corresponds with developing others and getting everyone moving in the same direction, therefore demonstrating how principals acknowledge Hargreaves and Harris' (2015) notion that 'performing beyond expectations involves everyone in the organization'. Successful principal's problem-solving mentality, coupled with being lifelong learners and personal ambition, helps explains why they are continuously redesigning, or improving, the organisation. Their strong moral compass, social conscious, perspective and passion assists understanding of how and why successful principals set the direction of the school. Their empathetic disposition unveils their concern for the social and emotional wellbeing of their students and sheds light on their holistic approach and not viewing success purely in terms of academic results.

The study's key findings reveal that South African high school principals' perceptions of successful leadership are largely consistent with international literature. While certain aspects are more highly valued than others, these views are held by successful principals irrespective of their type of school, or socioeconomic and demographic background. In terms

of professional characteristics and practices, successful principals layer, fuse or amalgamate a range of leadership styles, including transformational, instructional and distributed, depending on the context and their individual strengths and weaknesses. They are on the ground, organised, yet flexible, individuals who set the direction, develop people and continuously redesign the school to improve teaching and learning. On a personal level, successful principals are hardworking, resilient, ambitious and passionate people who are guided by their strong moral and ethical values. Finally, their firm social conscious ensures they have an unshakeable desire to make a positive difference in the lives of others.

CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION

The dissertation concludes with limitations of the study, areas of future research and the study's theoretical and practical contributions to the field and practice.

6.1 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The 50-item questionnaire was completed by 38 principals, of which 14 were interviewed. While there was a relatively high degree of consistency of opinion between respondents, this may not be representative of the entire country, considering the sample was derived from one province. Although the range of participants reflected the composition of high school principals in the Western Cape in terms of gender, it did not in terms of school quintile. The sample was heavily skewed to principals of quintile 5 schools. Conducting interviews with principals online may have detracted from the richness of the study and the researcher's ability to understand the differences in individual contexts. Additionally, the only participants were principals, who potentially inflated their strengths and leadership qualities, but underestimated their weaknesses.

Another limitation was the study's approach of using high-achieving schools as a proxy for successful school leadership. While this was necessary due to time and resource constraints, many of the participants, particularly of upper quintile schools, expressed that the major contributing factors to the consistent high-achieving nature of their schools was due to their ability to charge schools fees and an oversupply of students applying to the school, allowing them to be highly selective in their admissions process.

6.2 AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the aforementioned limitations of the current study, future research would benefit from incorporating a larger sample size and including more, if not all, of the country's provinces to determine if this study's findings are consistent for the entire country. Additionally, conducting interviews in person and including staff, student, parent and community views will enable future studies to generate a more complete picture of the perceptions of successful school leadership.

Longitudinal studies would be better suited to track the relationship between principal practices and student achievement, or wellbeing, over time in a South African context, as this

has yet to be done. Continuing to investigate personal characteristics and practices, along with professional characteristics, should be a hallmark of future research as this study's results suggest that who you are and what you do, as a leader, are inseparable. In this light, further investigation of Clarke and O'Donoghue's (2017) concept of 'contextual intelligence', borrowed from Kutz (2008), is needed to explore how exactly principals adapt their practices due to context (p. 179). Additionally, although the questionnaire, developed by Day et al. (2016), was useful, the study's findings suggest elements which were not compatible with a cross-sectional section approach. Future cross-sectional research would benefit from using an established questionnaire designed for this purpose.

Two trends in South African school leadership research were established: qualitative methods and small sample sizes. This study illustrates the value of mixed methods and future research in the field could benefit from synthesizing results from different methodological approaches to provide richer insights. Additionally, the findings reveal the complex and challenging role of being a principal. One participant noted that 'nobody trained you in your PGCE for these conversations'. Aspiring principals would benefit from research that focuses on training and preparing principals for the demanding role that awaits them, in a South African context.

6.3 CONTRIBUTIONS

Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) state that 'we need to know not only what works, but what works in different settings' (p. 178). The study's primary contribution lies in unveiling what works in successful school leadership in a South African context. The study has contributed to the limited mixed methods literature on South African school leadership by illuminating successful high school principals' perceptions of successful school leadership as well as their professional and personal characteristics and practices. It has gone beyond previous studies in South African school leadership research by including a larger sample and providing a more holistic analysis.

Schools are complex. Being a principal is complex. Being a successful principal is so much more than just being a principal. It is about setting the direction, developing people, redesigning the organisation, adapting your leadership style to suit the particular situation, being embedded in the fabric of the school, being equally organised and flexible, dedicated, passionate, empathetic, hardworking, people-orientated, but most importantly, wanting to

make a positive difference in the lives of others. These results reveal the interdependence of perceptions of successful leadership and the professional and personal characteristics and practices of successful high school principals in the Western Cape. Successful school leadership is equally concerned with who you are as well as what you do.

Ultimately, the study's primary contribution lies in confirming the findings of previous established international literature, particularly Day et al. (2016), Hargreaves and Harris (2015) and Leithwood et al. (2004), but presenting these in a South African context. In this light, the study points towards both the uniqueness and universality of successful school leadership in South Africa. Universalities identified in this study have been found in other school leadership research, in terms of leadership practices and styles, but there is a distinct manner in how these aspects come together in the South African context, which bring a local flavour to successful school leadership.

The study contributes practical advice to aspiring school principals. For example, due to the increased business-like approach to schooling, principals place considerably more effort on the financial side of a school. However, this study has shown that successful school principals prioritise the utilitarian aspects of schooling, particularly the wellbeing of their students, over any financial concerns, or narrow interpretations of success, such as solely viewing academic achievement. Furthermore, the perceptions, professional and personal characteristics and practices of successful principals can serve as a guiding light for prospective school leaders.

In conclusion, successful school leadership cannot be categorised into a single style, outlined by certain adjectives or defined by a list of simplistic practices. There is no silver bullet, or best approach. Rather, successful school leadership is flexible, adaptive and evolves to suit the context. Successful principals fundamentally understand the social, cultural, economic and political environment around them, the capabilities of their staff, the demands of their community, their public responsibility and their own professional and personal strengths and weaknesses. Successful principals incorporate these aspects with an amalgamation of leadership styles, the core practices of setting direction, developing people and redesigning the organisation, and a desire to make a difference in the lives of others.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: CUREC approval

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
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Dear Michael

Title: South African high school principals' perceptions of effective school leadership: A mixed methods study. ED-CIA-20-133

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application you should submit details to research.office@education.ox.ac.uk for consideration.

Good luck with your research study.

Best wishes
Nicola

Dr Nicola Warren-Lee
Geography PGCE Curriculum Tutor

Appendix 2: WCED approval

Western Cape Government
Education

Directorate: Research

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ENQUIRIES: Dr A T Wyngaard

Mr Michael Kramer
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Dear Mr Michael Kramer

RESEARCH PROPOSAL: SOUTH AFRICAN HIGH SCHOOLS PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

Your application to conduct the above-mentioned research in schools in the Western Cape has been approved subject to the following conditions:

1. Principals, educators and learners are under no obligation to assist you in your investigation.
2. Principals, educators, learners and schools should not be identifiable in any way from the results of the investigation.
3. You make all the arrangements concerning your investigation.
4. Educators' programmes are not to be interrupted.
5. The Study is to be conducted from **30 March 2020 till 18 September 2020**
6. No research can be conducted during the fourth term as schools are preparing and finalizing syllabi for examinations (October to December).
7. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey, please contact Dr A.T Wyngaard at the contact numbers above quoting the reference number?
8. A photocopy of this letter is submitted to the principal where the intended research is to be conducted.
9. Your research will be limited to the list of schools as forwarded to the Western Cape Education Department.
10. A brief summary of the content, findings and recommendations is provided to the Director: Research Services.
11. The Department receives a copy of the completed report/dissertation/thesis addressed to:

    The Director: Research Services
    Western Cape Education Department
    Private Bag X9114
    CAPE TOWN
    8000

We wish you success in your research.

Kind regards.
Signed: Dr Audrey T Wyngaard
Directorate: Research
DATE: 24 March 2020

Appendix 3: Letter of introduction

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY

Tel: +44(0)1865 274024 Fax: +44(0)1865 274027

general.enquiries@education.ox.ac.uk www.education.ox.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Diane Mayer

Researcher: Michael Kramer

Letter of Introduction for Research Participants

Dear [insert principal name]:

My name is Michael Kramer and I am a student in the Education Department at the University of Oxford. To complete my master's degree, I am writing my dissertation on school leadership. Specifically, what are South African high school principals' perceptions of effective school leadership. My supervisor at the University of Oxford is Dr Diane Mayer.

School leadership is a prominent topic in education. However, the majority of what is published on school leadership comes from Western perspectives. I am interested in determining what a uniquely South African perspective on school leadership looks like and if this is consistent with or challenges the literature.

You have been selected to participate as your school fits the high achieving category within the study's methodology: performing in the top third of your respective quintile in the 2019 NSC examinations. I am very interested in learning from you, as your experience as a principal gives you tremendous insight into the dynamics of school leadership. Your thoughts and opinions would be welcomed as I hope to shine a light on effective practices.

Participation would involve, firstly, completely an online questionnaire which is expected to take less than 10 minutes to complete. Thereafter, you may, if you would like to, participate in an online semi-structured interview with myself, covering a range of topics relating to school leadership. The interview is expected to last between 30 minutes and an hour.

All information collected will be anonymous, confidential and stored securely for the use of this research project alone. I will use audio recording equipment to generate a transcript of our interview. I am the sole researcher in this project, thus no one else will be able to identify you. The interview transcript will be made available to you for fact checking, as well as the

final paper. Additionally, the Western Cape Education Department has endorsed this study (see attached).

Once again, I would really value your participation in this research and would appreciate if you could confirm your interest in participating by [insert date]. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. E-mail (michael.kramer@wadham.ox.ac.uk) would be the preferred method, however I am also available on WhatsApp (+44 7716 085 501).

Yours sincerely,

Michael Kramer

Oxford University, Department of Education, MSc Education Candidate

Appendix 4: Information for participants

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY

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general.enquiries@education.ox.ac.uk www.education.ox.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Diane Mayer

Researcher: Michael Kramer

South African high school principals' perceptions of effective school leadership: A mixed methods study.

Information for Participants

Invitation

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate, it is important to understand why the research is being conducted and what your participation entails. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please ask if there are any aspects of the project that are unclear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you would like to take part in this research.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study explores South African high school principals' perceptions of school leadership. It attempts to understand principals' perceptions of the dynamics and factors which contribute to effective school leadership. While a lot of literature on school leadership exists, the majority is based in Western contexts. This study aims to determine what a uniquely South African perspective of school leadership looks like and if this is consistent with or challenges previous literature.

Why have I been chosen?

This study seeks perceptions of principals of high achieving high schools. You have been selected to participate as your school fits the high achieving category within the study's methodology: schools that performed in the top third of their respective quintiles in the 2019 NSC results. The study is very interested in learning from you as your experience as a principal gives you tremendous insight into the dynamics of school leadership. Your thoughts and opinions would be welcomed as the study hopes to shine a light on effective practices.

Do I have to take part? What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

It is your decision to take part in this study. You can decide to stop participating at any time. You do not need to answer questions that you do not wish to. Every effort will be made to preserve confidentiality but, as this cannot be fully guaranteed by the nature of this research,

it is possible that you may be able to be identified in the final report. Other than this, there are no known risks to taking part. The benefits include helping create a picture of effective school leadership in South African. Your participation, as part of this study, will benefit future aspiring school leaders in South Africa and those interested in understanding the complexity of school leadership.

What will I be expected to do?

The research is designed in two phases. In the first phase, online questionnaires will be sent to all school principals which match the study's criteria. You are expected to complete the questionnaire at your earliest convenience. The second phase involves an online semi-structured interview with the researcher at a time and platform (Skype, WhatsApp etc) of your convenience. If you are interested in participating in phase two of the study, please notify the researcher.

What will happen to the results of this research?

The results of this research will form the basis of an Oxford master's dissertation. All participants will remain anonymous and will be unidentifiable in the study. Some results may be published in academic journals concerned with school leadership. If you wish to obtain a copy of the published results, the researcher will gladly share them with you. The study will take place over the next four months after which time the published results will be publicly available. A report of the research will be sent to the Western Cape Education Department.

Who is funding and organizing the research?

The research is funded and organized as an independent MSc research project in conjunction with the Department of Education, University of Oxford.

Contact for Further Information or Follow-up

Should you have any further questions about this research, please feel free to contact Michael Kramer via email on michael.kramer@wadham.ox.ac.uk or WhatsApp on +44 7716 085 501. Your inquiries are most welcome.

Appendix 5: Questionnaire

Research Consent Form

Project Title: South African high school principals' perceptions of effective school leadership: A mixed methods study.

Researcher: Michael Kramer

Declaration of Consent: I have read the participant information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and receive satisfactory answers to questions.

I understand that I may withdraw from the study without penalty at any time by advising the researchers, and any data already recorded will be discarded.

I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee.

I understand that my personal data will be treated in total confidence, kept securely in a password-controlled server; and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand that I will have the opportunity to review and comment on any analysis before publication.

I understand how to raise a concern and make a complaint, and agree to participate in this study.

I agree to voluntarily take part in this interview.

I confirm that I have read the associated information sheet and understand the intent and purpose of this research.

I agree that data captured by this research can be shared among the research team on this project.

- ○ Yes, I agree
- ○ No, I do not agree

Section A: Background Information

1. What is your age?

- ○ Less than 30
- ○ 30-39
- ○ 40-49
- ○ 50-59
- ○ 60 or older

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2. What is your gender?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Prefer not to answer

---

3. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

- ○ High school
- ○ Bachelor's degree
- ○ Honours degree, postgraduate diploma and professional qualifications
- ○ Master's degree
- ○ PhD or higher

---

4. How many students are enrolled at your school?

- ○ Less than 300
- ○ 300-499
- ○ 500-749
- ○ 749-999
- ○ 1000-1499
- ○ 1500 or more

---

5. What is your school quintile (according to the Department of Basic Education)?

- ○ 1
- ○ 2
- ○ 3
- ○ 4
- ○ 5

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6. How would the school's location be classified?

- ○ Urban
- ○ Semi-urban
- ○ Rural

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7. What are your school's fees?

- ○ No fee school
- ○ Less than R10 000 per year
- ○ R10 000 - R19 999 per year
- ○ R20 000 - R29 999 per year
- ○ R30 000 - R39 999 per year
- ○ R40 000 or more per year

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8. How long have you been principal of this school?

- ○ Less than 1 year
- ○ 1-2 years
- ○ 3-4 years
- ○ 5-7 years
- ○ 8-10 years
- ○ More than 10 years

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9. What is the total length that you have been a school principal (including time at other schools)?

- ○ Less than 1 year
- ○ 1-2 years
- ○ 3-4 years
- ○ 5-7 years
- ○ 8-10 years
- ○ 11-19 years
- ○ More than 20 years

Section B: Principal Leadership

To what extent do you agree, or disagree, with the following statements on a six-point scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I have high expectations for the staff's work with students	○	○	○	○	○	○
2. I have high expectations for student behaviour	○	○	○	○	○	○
3. I have high expectations for student achievement	○	○	○	○	○	○
4. I work collaboratively with the governing body	○	○	○	○	○	○
5. I encourage staff to consider new ideas for their teaching	○	○	○	○	○	○
6. I promote professional development among teachers	○	○	○	○	○	○
7. I promote a range of professional development experiences among all staff	○	○	○	○	○	○

8. I encourage staff to think of learning beyond the academic curriculum	○	○	○	○	○	○
9. I encourage collaborative work among staff	○	○	○	○	○	○
10. I have improved internal review procedures	○	○	○	○	○	○
11. I allocate resources strategically based on student needs	○	○	○	○	○	○
12. I structure the organization to facilitate work	○	○	○	○	○	○
13. I encourage staff to use data in their work	○	○	○	○	○	○
14. I encourage all staff to use data in planning for individual student needs	○	○	○	○	○	○
15. I regularly observe classroom activities	○	○	○	○	○	○
16. After observing classroom activities, I work	○	○	○	○	○	○

with teachers to improve their teaching						
17. I coach and mentor staff to improve the quality of teaching	○	○	○	○	○	○
18. I feel quite confident that my teachers will always treat me fairly	○	○	○	○	○	○
19. My teachers would not try to gain an advantage by deceiving me	○	○	○	○	○	○
20. I feel a strong loyalty to my teachers	○	○	○	○	○	○

Section C: Leadership Distribution and School Processes

To what extent do you agree, or disagree, with the following statements on a six-point scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
21. Most leadership tasks in this school are carried out by the principal and Senior Leadership Team (SLT)	○	○	○	○	○	○
22. Many others take on leadership tasks within the school	○	○	○	○	○	○
23. The SLT have a similar set of values, beliefs, and attitudes related to teaching and learning	○	○	○	○	○	○
24. The SLT participate in ongoing collaborative work	○	○	○	○	○	○
25. The SLT have a role in schoolwide decision making	○	○	○	○	○	○
26. The SLT has a positive impact on standards of teaching	○	○	○	○	○	○

27. The SLT has a positive impact on raising levels of student attainment	○	○	○	○	○	○
28. The SLT have a role in determining the allocation of resources to students	○	○	○	○	○	○
29. Most teachers in our school share a similar set of values, beliefs, and attitudes related to teaching and learning	○	○	○	○	○	○
30. Teachers in our school mostly work together to improve their practice	○	○	○	○	○	○
31. There is ongoing collaborative planning of classroom work among teachers in our school	○	○	○	○	○	○
32. Teachers in this school have a sense of collective responsibility for student learning	○	○	○	○	○	○
33. The performance of department/ subject areas is regularly monitored, and	○	○	○	○	○	○

targets for improvement are regularly set						
34. Students are regularly involved in assessment for learning	○	○	○	○	○	○
35. Class teachers regularly use student data to set individual student achievement targets	○	○	○	○	○	○
36. Since I've been principal, the school has experienced enhanced commitment and enthusiasm from the staff	○	○	○	○	○	○
37. I promote an orderly and secure working environment	○	○	○	○	○	○
38. Since I've been principal, there has been improved student behaviour and discipline as a result of a whole school approach	○	○	○	○	○	○
39. Parents often visit the school	○	○	○	○	○	○
40. The school is actively involved in work with other	○	○	○	○	○	○

schools or organizations within the community	
41. There are more opportunities for students to take responsibility for their own learning in the school than before I started as principal	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Section D: Outcomes

To what extent do you agree, or disagree, with the following statements on a six-point scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
42. Students in this school can achieve the goals that have been set for them	○	○	○	○	○	○
43. Most students do achieve the goals that have been set for them	○	○	○	○	○	○
44. This school sets high standards for academic performance	○	○	○	○	○	○
45. Students respect others who get good marks	○	○	○	○	○	○
46. There has been a positive change in students' motivation in learning since I became principal of this school	○	○	○	○	○	○
47. Students feel safe in our school	○	○	○	○	○	○

48. There has been a positive change in students' lateness to lessons since I've been principal	○	○	○	○	○	○
49. Students are often late to school	○	○	○	○	○	○
50. Students often miss class	○	○	○	○	○	○

Section E: Follow-up Interview

All the responses to the above questions are anonymous and confidential. The researcher, nor anyone else, will be able to identify your responses. However, would you like the researcher to contact you for a follow-up in-depth online interview to further discuss school leadership?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

---

1. Name

_____

---

2. Mobile contact number

_____

---

3. Email address

_____

---

4. Name of school

_____

Appendix 6: Semi-structured interview guide

Introduction

Thank you so much for taking the time out to chat to me today. I really do appreciate it. Especially considering the challenging circumstances we are currently facing.

As you know, I am very interested in learning from you, as your experience as a principal gives you tremendous insight into the dynamics of school leadership. Your thoughts and opinions are welcomed as I hope to shine a light on effective practices.

This interview is semi-structured, in that it consists of a few core questions but is also flexible in that I am happy to discuss whatever you think is important. The interview is expected to last between half an hour to an hour. Is that ok with you?

Additionally, the interview is going to be recorded so that I can type up a transcript of the interview afterwards. I hope that is ok. All information collected will be anonymous and confidential, therefore no one will be able to identify you in the research project. If you would like, I can send you a copy of the interview transcript, for fact checking, as well as the final paper.

Great, let's get started.

Questions

Open

1. Please can you tell me about your journey of becoming a high school principal?
    - Prompt: Motivation – why did you want to be principal of this school?
2. How would you define school leadership?
    - Prompt: what elements do you believe are important aspects of school leadership?
3. What is the role of the principal?
4. What is a typical day at school like for you?

Core

5. When you first arrived at this school, as a principal, what were some of the first things you had to do?
6. What leads schools, such as yours, to be successful?
7. What are some of the major challenges this school faces?
    - How have you addressed these challenges?
    - What strategies have been successful in addressing these challenges?

Conclusion

8. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you would like to talk about?
9. Do you have any questions for me?

Extras questions (if not mentioned or potential prompts):

1. How does school culture contribute to a successful school?
2. Can you explain your relationship with the school community?
3. How have others contributed to the school's success?

Appendix 7: Nature of the quantitative sample: self-reported school characteristics

Self-reported school characteristics	Participating schools	
Quintile	**Number of schools**	**Percentage of sample**
1	1	3
2	0	0
3	5	13
4	8	21
5	24	63
Location	**Number of schools**	**Percentage of sample**
Urban	20	53
Semi urban	7	18
Rural	11	29
Number of students	**Number of schools**	**Percentage of sample**
299 or less	0	0
300-499	6	16
500-749	9	24
749-999	6	16
1000-1499	14	37
1500 or more	3	8
School fees	**Number of schools**	**Percentage of sample**
No fee school	8	21
Less than R10 000 per year	5	13
R10 000 - R19 999 per year	5	13
R20 000 - R29 999 per year	9	24
R30 000 - R39 999 per year	5	13
R40 000 or more per year	6	16

Appendix 8: Nature of the quantitative sample: self-reported principal characteristics

Self-reported principal characteristics	Participating principals	
Age	**Number of principals**	**Percentage of sample**
40-49	7	18
50-59	23	61
60 or older	8	21
Gender	**Number of principals**	**Percentage of sample**
Male	29	76
Female	9	24
Highest level of education	**Number of principals**	**Percentage of sample**
Bachelor's degree	3	8
Honours degree, postgraduate diploma and professional qualifications	30	79
Master's degree	5	13
PhD or higher	0	0
Years of experience as a principal	**Number of principals**	**Percentage of sample**
Less than 1 year	2	5
1-2 years	3	8
3-4 years	4	11
5-7 years	4	11
8-10 years	8	21
11-19 years	14	37
More than 20 years	3	8

Appendix 9: Nature of the qualitative sample: self-reported school characteristics

Self-reported school characteristics	Participating principals	
Quintile	**Number of principals**	**Percentage of sample**
1	1	7
2	0	0
3	2	14
4	0	0
5	11	79
School fees	**Number of principals**	**Percentage of sample**
No fee school	3	21
R10 000 - R19 999 per year	1	7
R20 000 - R29 999 per year	3	21
R30 000 - R39 999 per year	3	21
R40 000 or more per year	4	29
Location	**Number of principals**	**Percentage of sample**
Urban	9	64
Semi urban	4	29
Rural	1	7
Number of students	**Number of principals**	**Percentage of sample**
299 or less	0	0
300-499	1	7
500-749	3	21
749-999	5	36
1000-1499	3	21
1500 or more	2	14

Appendix 10: Nature of the qualitative sample: self-reported principal characteristics

Self-reported principal characteristics	Participating principals	
Age	**Number of principals**	**Percentage of sample**
39 or younger	0	0
40-49	2	14
50-59	9	64
60 or older	3	21
Gender	**Number of principals**	**Percentage of sample**
Male	11	79
Female	3	21
Highest level of education	**Number of principals**	**Percentage of sample**
Bachelor's degree	0	0
Honours degree, postgraduate diploma and professional qualifications	9	64
Master's degree	5	36
PhD or higher	0	0
Years of experience as a principal	**Number of principals**	**Percentage of sample**
Less than 1 year	1	7
1-2 years	1	7
3-4 years	1	7
5-7 years	1	7
8-10 years	3	21
11-19 years	4	29
More than 20 years	3	21

Appendix 11: Rotated CFA factor matrix

	Factor			
Item	1	2	3	4
5. I encourage staff to consider new ideas for their teaching	0,108	**0,743**	0,195	0,039
6. I promote professional development among teachers	0,003	**0,802**	-0,069	0,062
7. I promote a range of professional development experiences among all staff	0,055	**0,832**	-0,076	-0,069
8. I encourage staff to think of learning beyond the academic curriculum	-0,061	**0,815**	-0,033	-0,077
10. I have improved internal review procedures	-0,057	**0,469**	0,157	0,190
18. I feel quite confident that my teachers will always treat me fairly	**0,884**	-0,081	-0,124	0,023
19. My teachers would not try to gain an advantage by deceiving me	**0,723**	0,252	-0,028	0,086
20. I feel a strong loyalty to my teachers	**0,705**	0,259	0,031	-0,050
29. Most teachers in our school share a similar set of values, beliefs, and attitudes related to teaching and learning	**0,872**	-0,166	-0,088	-0,071
30. Teachers in our school mostly work together to improve their practice	**0,647**	-0,202	0,127	0,083
31. There is ongoing collaborative planning of classroom work among teachers in our school	**0,735**	-0,213	0,179	0,142
42. Students in this school can achieve the goals that have been set for them	**0,568**	0,038	0,039	-0,175
47. Students feel safe in our school	**0,605**	0,247	0,083	0,109
48. There has been a positive change in students' lateness to lessons	**0,520**	0,149	0,122	0,099
21. Most leadership tasks in this schools are not carried out by the principal and SLT	-0,112	-0,241	**0,625**	0,165
22. Many others take on leadership tasks within the school	0,011	0,066	**0,576**	-0,157
24. The SLT participate in ongoing collaborative work	0,227	0,132	**0,649**	-0,262
25. The SLT have a role in schoolwide decision making	0,097	-0,114	**0,853**	0,061
26. The SLT has a positive impact on standards of teaching	-0,070	0,195	**0,786**	0,157
28. The SLT have a role in determining the allocation of resources to students	0,026	0,118	**0,740**	-0,256
33. The performance of department/ subject areas is regularly monitored, and targets for improvement are regularly set	0,213	0,188	**0,551**	0,063
45. Students respect others who get good marks	0,279	-0,092	**0,458**	0,221
39. Parents often visit the school	0,012	0,055	-0,048	**0,775**
40. The school is actively involved in work with other schools or organizations within the community	-0,037	0,058	-0,114	**0,792**
46. There has been a positive change in pupils' motivation in learning	0,233	-0,017	0,164	**0,404**