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## **Leadership Approaches of principals heading National Strategy Attainment schools in South Africa**

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# **Leadership approaches of principals heading National Strategy Learner Attainment schools in South Africa**

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## **Abstract**

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This study examines the leadership approaches associated with sustained improved academic performance of principals heading National Strategy for Learner Attainment (NSLA) schools. This article reports on a qualitative multiple-case study focused on five successful NSLA secondary schools in Cape Town, South Africa. Data was collected from principals, teachers and selected School Management Team (SMT) members via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to understand the leadership practices and personality traits that characterised the leadership approaches of principals to facilitate teaching and learning for improving academic performance of learners. The findings indicated that an integrated leadership principal leadership framework would be most effective because it would cultivate community between teachers and learners and result into improved academic performance. This approach encapsulates the various leadership approaches and the leadership personality traits or characteristics of the principals as well as taking into consideration the situational context for effective leadership and decision-making.

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**Keywords:** school principals, National Strategy for Learner Attainment (NSLA), leadership approaches, multiple-case study

# **Enfoques de liderazgo de los directores que dirigen las escuelas de logro del aprendizaje de la estrategia nacional en Sudáfrica**

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## **Resumen**

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Este estudio examina los enfoques de liderazgo asociados con un rendimiento académico mejorado sostenido de los directores que dirigen las escuelas de la Estrategia Nacional para el Logro del Aprendizaje (NSLA). Este artículo informa sobre un estudio cualitativo de casos múltiples centrado en cinco escuelas secundarias exitosas de NSLA en Ciudad del Cabo, Sudáfrica. Se recopilaban datos de directores, maestros y miembros seleccionados del Equipo de Gestión Escolar a través de cuestionarios y entrevistas semiestructuradas para comprender las prácticas de liderazgo y los rasgos de personalidad que caracterizaron los enfoques de liderazgo de los directores para facilitar la enseñanza y el aprendizaje para mejorar el rendimiento académico de los alumnos. Los hallazgos indicaron que un marco de liderazgo integrado de liderazgo de directores sería más efectivo porque cultivaría la comunidad entre maestros y estudiantes y resultaría en un mejor desempeño académico. Este enfoque encapsula los diversos enfoques de liderazgo y los rasgos o características de la personalidad del liderazgo de los directores, además de tener en cuenta el contexto situacional para un liderazgo y una toma de decisiones eficaces.

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**Palabras clave:** directores de escuela, Estrategia Nacional para el Logro del Aprendizaje (NSLA), enfoques de liderazgo, estudio de casos múltiples

**S**ustained improved academic performance of learners demands leadership approaches of principals that reflect a strong correlation between their leadership styles and leadership effectiveness which is dependent on the contextual realities. Based on the contingency theory it is assumed that for leadership to be effective it has to diagnose the situation and/or context before adopting the most appropriate leadership response that would meaningfully contribute to advance pedagogy (teaching and learning) and improve learner performance. Traditional leadership approaches, however, can restrict the competence of the principal to understand and to deal with the critical variables of the school situation and context to sustain improved learner performance.

Academic performance in several high schools continue to be poor despite numerous interventions aimed at addressing this situation. Such interventions include the National Strategy for Learner Attainment (NSLA) introduced by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in 2004. This strategy helped to improve the academic performance across schools that have scored an overall pass rate of below 60% in Grade 12. The NSLA consisted of a series of associated operations, projects, activities, strategies, and interventions with short-term and long-term objectives aimed at guaranteeing improved learner attainment in schools ([DOE, 2007](#)).

The NSLA intervention appeared not to be having the desired effect as academic performances in a few of the targeted schools did not improve. Improvements in some schools were short-lived because in one year, schools had a pass rate above 60% and the following year a pass rate below 60% ([DOE, 2007](#)) was achieved.

At the core of this study was a search for a leadership approach or approaches and characteristics of principals at high schools which promised to improve and sustain academic performance at thirty-three underperforming high schools participating in the NSLA intervention in the Western Cape of which eight were in the Metro Central Education District. The study presented here investigates the leadership approaches of five principals that were exposed to the NSLA intervention and that were successful to achieve long term academic improvements of learner performance. What leadership practices and personality traits characterised the leadership approaches of principals that achieved long-term academic improvements amongst the schools undergoing NSLA interventions was the focus of the study. One of

authors was a subject adviser at the time, and therefore the improvement in academic performance was of utmost importance so that more learners could make a success of their school career and contribute meaningfully as a citizen to the South African society. It became significant to the authors to develop a better understanding about how to assist principals undergoing the NSLA initiative to succeed in turning around academic performance at their schools.

The conceptual structure has been designed to illustrate that the study should afford the school principals the opportunity to employ a practical leadership approach as an enabling mechanism in guiding and leading their schools to sustain improved academic performance (see Figure 1 below).

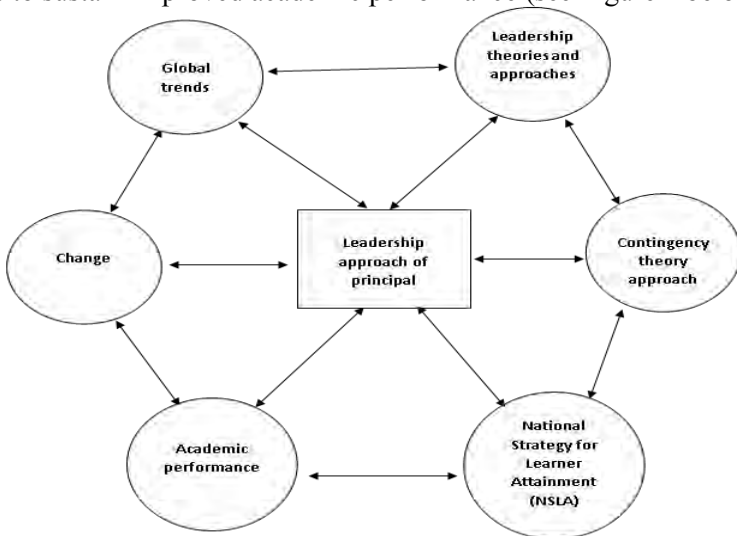


Figure 1. *Conceptual framework*

Each component in the conceptual framework in Figure 1 has an influence on and is influenced by the components around it.

This research is relevant and timely because principals were provided the opportunity to reflect on their leadership approaches for successfully heading the NSLA schools. In addition, the complex nature of leadership, management and pedagogical practices in association with contextual realities, limited resources and departmental policies governing the work of principals, demonstrates the need for principals to explore innovative practices to promote learner achievement ([DOE, 2007](#)).

## **Background to the study**

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation ([UNESCO, 1990](#)), the achievement of universal school access and the improvement in quality education, better management expertise and skilled teacher educators, curriculum developers and principals are needed in schools. In-service training for key personnel should therefore be initiated or strengthened where it does exist and be aimed at administrative reforms and innovative management and supervisory techniques to improve the management abilities of principals and the senior management teams at schools.

The challenges related to the apartheid legacy left South Africa with an education system that was characterised by disintegration, unfairness in provision, and the absence of a teaching and learning culture. In many instances there was opposition to changing the way things had been done historically. Since 1996 many changes have been introduced in our education system with the purpose of achieving transformation in education. Amongst others, the changes related to the curriculum, diverse learner enrolments, Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS), unionised teaching corps and whole-school-evaluation, which placed a challenge on principals to ensure effective and efficient running of schools. The South African school principal's role has changed in the new articulation of principalship to keep in touch with contemporary research, regarding leadership and knowledge on learning and teaching and the need to generate the circumstances for their schools to be successful ([Botha, 2004](#)).

In 2004, the then Minister of Education, Ms Naledi Pandor launched the NSLA strategy. The purpose of this intervention was to assist schools that have attained an overall pass rate of less than 60% in matriculation examinations (National Senior Certificate (NSC) Examinations) to improve their performances. These schools were classified as underperforming schools so that they could get special assistance from the education districts in order to ensure that they are successful in improving their through-put rates ([DOE, 2007](#)). For NSLA high schools to be effectual, principals should not only be suitable leaders, but leaders who can inspire and motivate their staff.

This intervention consisted of an organised and persistent series and set of connected operations, projects, activities, strategies, interventions with short and long-term objectives to improve learner accomplishment and ensured

quality learner performance in all schools. The intervention included developmental requirements of teachers, enhancing the task of school management teams (SMTs) through intensive management and leadership training to improve learner achievement. After the necessary training programmes and mentoring had taken place, with no improvement at the school, the principal could be redeployed or even dismissed by the DBE through a legitimised disciplinary process. Therefore, leadership and strategy are important for high school principals who face challenges in creating excellent and transformatory schools.

### **Global trends in leadership research for learner academic performance**

The link between leadership and academic improvement is arduous to investigate due to the problems in establishing a specific definition of leadership and the presence of various forms of leadership and their effect on a school's efficiency ([Choi & Gil, 2017](#)). The researcher decided on Europe, North America, Africa and Asia, because these continents have similar issues like South Africa in terms of improved academic improvement through principal leadership. The reason for focusing on these continents was to compare what their issues were thus enhancing the understanding of the problem statement. Consequently, the issue of a leadership approach that is most suitable for improved learner academic performance is a major concern for all organisations and institutions all over the world. Different countries have been endeavouring to emphasise and stress the importance of an efficient leadership approach to improve performance.

The studies on the various continents advocated different types of leadership approaches to improve learner academic performance. The European studies supported a democratic and transformational leadership style. The American studies supported an integrated principal leadership style to generate and inspire teamwork and cooperation amongst teachers so that learners' performance would improve. The African studies promoted a democratic and a participatory leadership style. To a certain degree, there were African school principals also supported an autocratic leadership style, but this was in the event where teachers and learners were forced to comply. The Asian studies advocated a people-centred and transformational style of leadership.

Although the outcome of all the studies were similar – improved academic performance - the leadership approaches were different. No identical or a similar leadership style was advocated by any of the above studies because

they intimated that the situation and context had to be taken into account for a leadership style to be successful [Choi & Gil, (2017); Harris & Chapman, (2002); Quin, Deris, Bischoff & Johnson, (2015); Al-Safran, Brown & Wiseman, (2014); Adeyemi & Bolarinwa, (2013); Norman, Hasim & Shaik-Abdullah, (2017); Ziduli, Buka, Molepo & Jadezwi, (2018) and Suraya & Yunus, (2012)]. This would strengthen the rationale that there is no ‘best’ leadership approach for sustained improved academic performance.

### **Leadership research for learner academic performance in South Africa**

Since the start of democracy in 1994 there has been a movement to dismantle and reform the apartheid education system with its nineteen diverse racially based departments. New organograms and staffing arrangements were developed which proved to be a huge task to deliver educational restructuring at the classroom level. Education policy and provisioning was one among many sections that needed instant attention to break the racial biases and traditions of apartheid. These changes drew on what was judged as best international practice (Christie, 2006) and rested on the assumption that participation of teachers, learners and parents could enhance achievement. No longer was there a ‘top down’ structure but a ‘participatory’ form of leadership. Principals had to lead rather than instruct, responsibility had to be shared; leadership was about empowering participants and principals had to develop skills instead of delivering expertise (Steyn, 2002).

Botha (2004) stated that in meeting the new challenges of improved academic learner performance, principals should accept the truths of these deviations and demands, but more notably, should act in a way that took into consideration the nature of the world that was emerging around them. He goes further by asserting that principals should be more than instructional leaders, should keep abreast with different leadership approaches on learning and teaching, and establish conditions for their schools to excel. Principals needed to be responsive to local circumstances, which required them to develop new skills and ways of working and leading. Improving learning outcomes, therefore, could not rely on a specific approach to leadership.

South Africa also has one of the most diverse education systems. It ranges from well-resourced schools to under-resourced schools without admittance to the most rudimentary facilities, namely, water, power, sanitation. Given



these disparities, it would be unwise to suggest one common approach to school leadership ([Bush, 2007](#)).

Due to the continued changes taking place in education and its complexities, the potential of leadership to influence learners and improve school performance has become a priority. It has been consistently argued by Harris, Day, Hopkins, Hadfield, Hargreaves, and Chapman ([2005](#)) that the attributes of the principal matter in defining the inspiration of teachers and the excellence of teaching to improve learner academic performance.

School principals can be viewed as holding the key to resolve a few problems currently effecting schools; however, researchers could not identify what exactly is needed by principals to be effective leaders. Harris ([2004, p. 10](#)) suggests that school leadership is complex because it is collaborative, not static or have 'one' best approach or model, and principals often have to be rule breakers and be willing to change their leadership responses due to the contextual situation.

### **Leadership theories and leadership approaches trait approach**

Ferreria, Erasmus and Groenewald ([2003](#)) stated that the trait approach focusses on identifying personal character traits that facilitate effective leadership. Chance and Chance ([2002](#)) purported that there are certain traits associated with school leadership, such as high energy and stress tolerance, self-confidence, integrity, achievement orientation, and conceptual skills which make them more eligible for a position of principal. Other categories also include being helpful, friendly, a good listener, easy to work with, perceptive of others and being grateful, discreet and well dressed. These categories tend to make a principal a good leader according to the trait approach. Despite the many valid findings connecting individual traits to leadership effectiveness, this approach to understanding leadership, has little value because many traits cannot be learned. Consequently, the trait theory seems to be too simplistic except for providing explanatory variables. Traits do better at forecasting the emergence of leaders and the manifestation of leadership rather than deciding between effective and ineffective leaders ([Owings & Kaplan, 2012](#)).

## **Behavioural approach**

The behavioural approach underlines two leadership orientations, namely, task-orientated leadership and employee-orientated leadership. The task-orientated leader directs the staff actions towards the achievement of goals, while the employee-orientated leader is mindful to staff and respects their ideas and feelings ([Owings & Kaplan, 2012](#)). Ferreria et. al. ([2003](#)) state that the employee-orientated leader has a lower staff turnover, and the employees are generally more satisfied than those employees who work under a task-oriented leader. It became apparent that leaders who were high on either task or social aspects could be either successful or unsuccessful. However, leaders who demonstrate strength in both initiating structure (task) and consideration (people) obtain the best results and most satisfied staff ([Razik & Swanson, 2010](#)). Although the behavioural models have added to the understanding of leadership, no one set of leader behaviours that are appropriated in one situation are necessary appropriate in the next.

## **Transactional and transformational leadership**

Transactional leadership includes setting up and describing arrangements to achieve specific work goals, discovering individuals' abilities and detailing the rewards upon the successful completion of a task ([Shava, 2015](#)). Transactional leadership does not produce long-lasting commitment to the beliefs and vision being endorsed by school principals, which means that this process does not involve staff beyond the instant rewards arising from the contract ([Bush, 2003](#)). Consequently, transactional leadership can be seen as an exchange process or quid pro quo.

Smith, Montagno and Kuzmenko ([2004](#)), state that transformational leadership occurs when a leader motivates subordinates to share an idea, enabling them to achieve an idea, and provides the resources needed for developing their personal abilities. These leaders appeal to their followers' higher ideals such as liberty, peace and not to emotions such as fear, jealousy or hatred. They also imbue them with integrity, clarity of vision and clear goals. Transformational leaders have a strong ability to communicate with all school participants and are able to identify and provide recognition for the contribution made by each member ([English, 2015](#)).

Both leadership approaches exhibit a method in which leaders and subordinates inspire one another to higher planes of motivation. These leadership approaches could be effective across a variety of situations although contextual factors such as the structure of the organisation must be considered ([Masood, Dani, Burns & Backhouse, 2006](#)).

## **Leadership approaches to teaching and learning**

This study was in search of approach(es) that specifically relate to leadership influence as it relates to teaching and learning. Three approaches were identified in this respect to bring about continuous improvement in teaching and learning, namely, pedagogical leadership, instructional leadership and educative leadership.

### **Pedagogical Leadership**

Eziuzo ([2011, p. 150](#)) defined pedagogical leadership as direct or indirect leadership behaviours that drastically affect teacher instruction and as a result student learning. Similarly, Webb ([2005](#)) claimed that pedagogical leadership advances human capital by assisting schools to become caring, focused and questioning communities within which teachers work together as members of a society of practice and considers the improvement of teaching practices and learner learning as crucial aspects of school leadership. Pedagogic leaders also promote good staff relationships (people-centred with social and interpersonal skills) and encourages staff to take a lead in causing the school to move forward.

### **Instructional leadership**

Harris et. al. ([2005](#)) defines instructional leadership as a model that emphasises the influence of principals on the behaviours of teachers as they are involved in activities directly affecting the growth of learners. The focus of the principal is on the teachers' instruction. Consequently, it can be assumed that an instructional leader focuses on the behaviour of teachers as they participate in activities affecting the advancement of learners ([Webb, 2005](#)). According to Owings and Kaplan ([2012](#)), principals who are instructional leaders establish strong communication with and between teachers and learners, fostering a school culture and smoothly structured

environment that positively influences learner achievement. Through this positive influence an instructional leader plays a role in shaping their schools' environments and instructional climates. This in turn influence the quality of teaching and the learning of learners.

## **Educative leadership**

According to Duignan and Macpherson (1992) the educative leader is one who takes the lead to expedite varied conditions for executing change in teaching and learning. To achieve success, educative leadership should enable a quality relationship between learners and teachers, a quality support service and dedicated parents, community participants and administrators. The educative leader see him/herself as a person who emphasises the importance of their teaching devotion in the managing of the school and the need for learners, parents and teachers to have him/her fully involved.

Webb (2005, p. 74) also defines educative leadership as being directly involved in the teaching situation of the school; in working interaction with children and with class teachers and decision-making based upon educational principles and beliefs. The educative leader has to take the responsibility to create organisational environments that promote the growth and development of all concerned in teaching and learning. This means that the principal through his/her leadership creates a good teaching and learning ethos at school, encourages staff initiatives and acts as the leading learner through his/her actions.

The approaches to leadership discussed, provide valid and helpful insights into the various aspects of leadership. The different leadership approaches emphasise the process by which pressure is exerted while others emphasise one or more dimensions of leadership. However, none of these approaches provide a comprehensive model of school leadership. Due to the diverse education system in South Africa, it is difficult to identify a particular leadership approach for principals for sustained improved academic improvement. This is an issue that often confronts principals, particularly with regards to which leadership approach is the most effective or will likely contribute constructively to goal performance at school.

## **Methodology**

This article reports on the leadership approaches associated with sustained improved academic performance of five principals heading the NSLA schools in the Metro Central Education District, South Africa. The study was conducted as a multiple-case study, qualitative research design ([Yin, 2009](#); [Chetty, 2013](#)) with data collection over a period of three years from 2014 to 2016 from five high schools. Creswell (2013) posits that a multiple-case design explores a real-life multiple bounded system through a comprehensive, detailed data collection which involves multiple sources of information, which will be collected during the interviews with the research participant. For this research data was collected from the three sets of participants at the five schools, which represented the five case studies using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The major benefit according to Brink (2018) of using a multiple-case design was that multiple perspectives of the participants could be gained. The multiple-case study was the best qualitative research design for this study, as it allowed me to use the best responses from the different case studies to strengthen the research.

The population ([Hartas, 2010](#); [Creswell, 2012](#)) of the study comprised fifteen schools in the Metro Central Education District that underwent NSLA intervention from 2008 to 2016. Purposive sampling ([Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2001](#); [Briggs & Coleman, 2009](#); [Okeke and van Wyk, 2015](#)) of five schools were used in this research based on the number of schools that remained out of the NSLA programme who had a Grade 12 learner pass rate of 60% and above for more than three consecutive years. Initially six schools were sampled, however only five schools participated in the study. The sixth school showed disinterest because the school through its principal did not respond to the researcher after having been contacted on numerous occasions.

The data was collected via questionnaires ([Arthur, Waring, Coe and Hedges, 2012](#)) from the post level one teachers at the five schools, semi-structured interviews with five principals and selected SMT members. The questionnaire contained structured questions and was divided into three sections, namely: (a) biographical information; (b) how the respondents perceived their principal's leadership approaches and characteristics; and (c) how the respondents perceived their principal's leadership approaches associated with teaching and learning. Each section in the questionnaire was related to the achievement of the research objectives stated under b and c

above. The Likert scale was used, consisting of a declarative sentence, followed by response options that indicated varying degrees of achievement. The declarative sentences expressed a clear positive or negative opinion and was designed to solicit more definite responses from respondents ([Pearse, 2011](#)).

Semi-structured interviews with principals and selected SMT members took place over the course of the 2016 school year. Each interview took between 30 – 40 minutes. The principal interviews elicited responses about their leadership approaches, whereas the SMT members interview responses were about the leadership approaches of their principals. The purpose of the interviews contained eleven questions was: (a) to elicit responses from the participants to achieve the research objectives; (b) to explore the personality traits of the principals; and (c) how principals addressed the teaching and learning challenges at successful NSLA schools. The term SMT denotes school management team which comprises of the principal, the deputy principal(s), and head of departments. These interviews were analysed using content analysis where codes or categories were allocated to the data and as a result analysed and examined documented material to study human behaviour ([Ary, Jacobs and Sorensen, 2010](#)). It ensures the analysis and grouping of large amounts of data into categories or codes which can be text, themes, expressions, concepts or sentences ([Kulantunga, Amaratunga and Haigh, 2007](#)).

The National Senior Certificate Schools' Performance Reports which are issued at the start of each academic year summarising results of each school over a three-year period, from 2012-2017, was the primary source of information ([DBE, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017](#)). These reports as primary sources ([Mogalakwe, 2006](#)) were analysed particularly those schools which have attained a pass rate of below 60% in a specific year in the Metro Central Education District from 2008-2016 and thereafter successfully obtained a pass rate of above 60% for three consecutive years.

Finally, the researcher was ethically required to be authentic and precise in managing and depicting research results.

## **Results**

This research was to investigate what leadership practices and personality traits characterised the leadership approaches of principals heading schools that have achieved long-term academic improvement amongst schools undergoing the NSLA programme. Having collected, analysed and interpreted the data through a principal's questionnaire completed by post level one teachers, and semi-structured interviews of principals and members of the SMT, the research has developed an integrated principal leadership framework for sustained improved academic performance. This integrated leadership framework is discussed under the following headings; the NSLA school programme; the different leadership approaches; principals' leadership approaches promoting teaching and learning; the school context and situation; the integrated principal leadership approach; and the successful principal leader.

### **The NSLA school programme**

The NSLA programme consisted of a planned and sustained series of related operations, projects, activities, strategies, and interventions with the objective of raising learner performance and ensuring improved quality learner achievement in all schools (DOE, 2007). The principal, SMT members and teachers had to ensure that the school provides a conducive atmosphere for effective teaching and learning. For this effective leadership it was vital if schools are to be successful to provide good opportunities for learning. Emerging from the analysis it was evident that quality leadership in schools made a significant difference to school improvement and learning outcomes. Consequently, it was important for the principal and the leadership team to analyse each situation and its influence for the best answers to a complex situation.

The analysis suggested that there was no apparent approach which was most effective. The effective leadership approach was clearly dependent on its appropriateness in terms of the given situation. This was the basic contribution of contingency thinking; however, it did not provide ready-made answers, but provided new ways of analysing the interrelationships within the interacting parts of the organisation. In the contingency view the successful leaders were

able to balance the different leadership approaches with the possibilities of the circumstances to accomplish the behaviour amongst followers that would most likely achieve the objectives of the school ([Owens & Valesky, 2015](#)).

### **The different leadership approaches**

The analysis of the leadership questionnaire completed by teacher respondents did not highlight a specific leadership approach. Neither the trait, nor the behaviour or the leadership approach encouraging good relations was seen by teachers to mirror their principals' leadership approach. Under the trait leadership approach teachers rated highly in order of importance, that principals must be 'self-confident - believe in themselves and their abilities'; 'determined – take a firm stand and act with certainty'; and 'persistent – stay fixed on the goals despite interference in terms of their leadership ability for being successful'.

Under the principals' leadership behaviour, only two leadership behaviour characteristics were highly rated by their teacher respondents. They were 'the principal shows concern for the well-being of others' and 'acts friendly with members in their group. The other leadership behaviour characteristics were seen as not necessary for the principals' leadership make-up because having relationship/considerate-orientated leader behaviour brought about the changes needed in their schools. According to Chance and Chance ([2002](#)) relationship/considerate leader behaviour is indicative of friendship, trust, warmth, interest, and respect between leaders and subordinates.

In the interviews with principals, SMT members and the principal questionnaire, (completed by teachers) no specific leadership approach was identified. Principals said they were task-orientated, relationship-orientated, participatory, democratic, passionate leaders and a combination of each. They could not say that a specific leadership approach brought about success at their schools. Their SMT members and teachers had a similar view of the leadership approach of their principals. They could not distinguish nor specify a particular leadership approach.

Principals stated rather than being autocratic, they tried to be democratic, getting the 'buy in' of their teachers and developed a shared vision for their schools. The studies in Malaysia by Suraya and Yunus ([2012](#)) and Norman et al. ([2017](#)) confirmed the importance of people-centred leadership with a convincing focus on coalition forming with teachers, parents and community,



as a key factor which contributed to academic performance of learners. They also suggested that successful practices were not solely reliant upon one leadership approach. Likewise, principals indicated that they used various leadership approaches to influence teachers, parents and learners to attain the objectives of the school.

To increase the achievement of the organisation to sustain improved academic performance, it could not be seen or characterised by a fixed approach of leadership but through different leadership approaches tailored to the contingencies of the situation ([Chance & Chance, 2002](#)). Fiedler in Ferreira et. al. ([2003](#)) reasoned that the favourableness of the situation, together with the leadership approach, would determine the success of the manager within the school. In the contingency view, the successful leader was able to pair the leadership style with the contingency of the situation in order to attain the behaviour on the part of the followers who would contribute most to the reaching the objectives of the school ([Owens & Valesky, 2015](#)).

### **Principals' leadership approaches promoting teaching and learning**

Teacher respondents did not highly rate a leadership approach being completely successful but highlighted certain characteristics under each leadership approach for a principal to be successful.

In the pedagogical leadership approach teachers rated the encouragement of new ideas; praise, support and facilitation of teachers' work and their concerns by principals; and support of the practice of new skills, innovation and creativity very high.

The principal as an instructional leader was not highly rated by teacher respondents because the characteristics were indicative of a task-orientated approach. Teachers preferred principals having a supportive leadership approach. The principal making effective use of frequent feedback was rated highly by teacher respondents. Respondents saw task-orientated behaviour as autocratic and therefore did not rate this leadership behaviour highly. Chance and Chance ([2002](#)) stated that effective leaders were not single-mindedly focused on task behaviour. They also exhibit positive human relations with followers.

The educative leadership approach had the lowest rating amongst teacher respondents. None of the characteristics had a rating higher than 50%. The reason for the low rating was that teacher respondents did not experience these leadership behaviours in their principals. Teachers preferred principals having

a supportive leadership approach. Adeyemi and Bolarinwa (2013), Obama, Eunice & Orodho, (2015) and Ziduli et. al. (2018) in their studies in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa concurred that the supportive leadership approach is better because it allowed teachers to be part of the team and allowed them to participate in decision-making. It also provided a climate of unity in pursuit of set goals.

Principals wanted their schools to be successful. For this to occur the principal had to accept that he/she had an effect on the school climate; the teaching and learning environment; and the implementation of the educational programme. The principal played a key role in the school improvement, especially his leadership (Pourrajab & Ghani, 2016). Shava (2015) showed that, the influence of learner results was likely to be better where there was direct leadership participation in the oversight in curriculum planning and teacher learning and teacher professional training. In schools, the main purpose of the school principal was to offer leadership in all areas of the school to enable the establishment of and support for successful teaching and learning to promote learner attainment. Given the importance of school principals, the contingent approach provided an alternative, recognising the myriad of issues at school, such as the nature of the school context and the area in which the school resides and the advantage of adapting the leadership approaches to the particular situation, rather than adopting a one size fits all stance.

In the review of the literature, six leadership models illustrated different approaches to school leadership. However, there was no single approach to capture the reality of leadership in any specific school in this study. Rather, aspects of several leadership perspectives from the six leadership approaches were present within each school. The applicability of each leadership approach varied with the event, the situation and the school principal. Given the unpredictability of a single leadership approach, principals needed to read the situation and adopt the most appropriate leadership response. Therefore, according to Bush (2003), contingent leadership recognised the different school contexts (culture) and the benefits of introducing various leadership approaches to the specific context.

### **The school context and situation**

The school context and situation, according to Bascia (2014) is dynamic and operates in different ways for members of the school society. The school

context includes principal and teacher leadership, the individual and personnel material resources, classroom practices, professional teaching situations, the area in which the school is situated, the curriculum presented at school, and the teacher community. Bush (2007) continues and indicates that leadership realises the different school contexts and the rewards of modifying leadership approaches to a specific situation. Yukl (2002) noted that leadership needs to effectively diagnose problems, followed by embracing the most suitable response to the situation. Both school context and school situation refer to the area of influence the principal has or can exert over his/her staff members, school and the environment in which the school resides. With regards to the influence a principal can have on the school, a member of the SMT stated that:

The principal promoted the change in culture by focusing more on the human element than by enforcing policy. Principals have an open-door policy, giving educators the opportunity to be given tasks which help educators to develop their administrative skills. Furthermore, the principal decided to let the Grade 12 learners voluntarily commit to pass at the end of the year. This they did at the start of the year.

Both principals and SMT members indicated that the factor one can control least was teachers and learners. They indicated that teachers were, lazy and spent less time on lesson planning, they came late to school and often stayed absent and were non-compliant in meeting deadlines. Learners could not read, they did not know how to study, they stayed absent regularly, had no family support at home, an increasingly engaged in substance abuse and did not do homework. In their reply in solving or resolving these issues, SMT members and principals indicated that the principals' influence played a major role in turning back poor academic results. A principal stated that:

I communicate with my staff openly and honestly rather than secretly. I encourage participation in planning, problem solving and decision-making rather than operate autocratically. I give recognition and praise to both educators and learners for sterling work done.

In studies done by Quin et. al. (2015) and Al-Safran et. al. (2014) it was concluded that there was not a universal leadership approach for principals to

respond to indifferent schools and poor school cultures. Therefore, the appropriate principal leadership approach was dependent on the many personality traits principals have and how they were used by the principal in a stated context.

### **The integrated principal leadership approach**

Principals realised that the improving of teaching and learning could not depend on a specific leadership approach. Principals on numerous occasions stated in the interview that they were either, task-orientated, person-orientated, participatory, democratic or at time autocratic, but never indicated the use of a specific leadership approach. A principal stated:

... I am relationship-orientated. I am working with human beings and a pre-requisite for any person to deliver and do his best is if that person feels welcome at the workplace and all happy to be there (sic).

A SMT member of a school echoed, similar leadership behaviours:

Principals must have a participative/democratic leadership approach. They must have a friendly approach and act as a parent figure giving learners extra chances. Principals must imbue good relations which will lighten task completion.

They included the context and situation in which they find themselves as being important when leading their staff. Their approach finds its roots in the contingency model of leadership. Rice and Kastenbaum (1983) stated that the possibility of integration with other leadership theories was an important factor to consider when judging the future value of the contingency model. This integrated framework was regarded as effective because it considered personal characteristics of the leader and properties of the situation. This approach is an all-encompassing framework incorporating a variety of leadership approaches and personality traits to enable effective principal leadership.

## **The successful principal leader**

The successful principal leader encompassed the following leadership practices and personality traits:

- Democratic leadership;
- Participatory leadership;
- Moral and ethical leadership;
- Relationship-orientated leadership;
- Task-orientated leadership;
- A passionate leader;
- Encourages participation in decision-making;
- Self-confident, determined and persistent leadership traits; and
- Arouses hope, expectation, inspiration and innovation.

The effective principal leader embraces the above because it is incorporated into the integrated principal leadership approach. This integrated leadership approach is potentially strong because it considers both the various leadership approaches mentioned in literature review and the personal leadership characteristics highlighted by the teacher respondents, the members of the SMTs and the principals themselves, including the properties and context of the situation. Consequently, the integrated leadership approach gives the principal an appreciation of the various leadership approaches as a starting point for effective action.

The integrated principal leadership framework recommended that principals should demonstrate high moral and ethical leadership behaviours so that their leadership example could be followed by teachers and learners. Characteristics highlighted by respondents, principals and SMT members were, ‘the principal spends time arousing hope, expectation, aspiration and innovation’, ‘principals are supportive, friendly and consistent’, and they ‘create an atmosphere promoting teaching and learning’. The integrated leadership framework allowed the principal to choose a leadership approach that enabled the principal, teachers and learners to work together because the principal’s choice of leadership was contingent on the context and/or situation that existed at the time when the poor work ethic existed.

## **Discussion**

Leadership approach(es) associated with principals could not be clearly identified. Respondents identified various leadership characteristics or qualities displayed by principals within the trait, leadership behaviour and the promotion of learning and teaching approaches but were unable to identify a particular leadership approach. Characteristics and qualities identified of principals were: ‘self-confidence – where the principal believes in him/herself and his/her ability’; ‘shows concern for and the well-being of others’; ‘encourages new ideas’ and ‘praises, supports and facilitates teachers’ work’.

However, principals described their behaviour as incorporating both task and person orientated or consideration/relationship-orientated behaviour. Being democratic and participatory was also part of their leadership make-up. Principals found that a task orientation behaviour tends to be the behaviour best suited for accomplishing and reaching the objectives of their school. Person-orientated or consideration/ relationship-orientated was the approach used when affirming their staff, and learners, encouraging participation, decision-making and having a positive influence on them.

Members of the SMT stated that their principals displayed a relationship-orientated behaviour to enable the accomplishment tasks, but at the same time showing authoritative leadership. Other leadership approaches identified were participative, democratic and a team management approach. Global studies in the literature review supported the analysis where principals used diverse leadership approaches at their schools to bring about success.

Consequently, it was best to combine all these leadership characteristics of the different leadership approaches and develop an integrated principal leadership approach. The reason for this stance was that, although the leaders’ characteristics are important – indicated by all respondents, - it was contingent on the situation and the school context which was lacking and had to be included in the decision-making process. Therefore, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) should adopt an integrated principal leadership approach in school administration for NSLA schools and not a unidimensional approach. Principals should be made aware of the integrated leadership approaches through induction. Where schools have been in the NSLA programme for a few years it may be appropriate that for Education Districts to rotate principals. Through the rotation process, principals with a

strong integrated leadership approach, may be able to resolve that situation and hopefully change their behaviour and mindset enabling them to resolve the challenges of teaching and learning in their particular contexts. Principals could also be provided with knowledge, skills and insight to know which leadership approaches could be pragmatic in a specific circumstance ([Bush, 2007](#)).

Hallinger ([2003](#)) suggested that the search for a suitable framework of leadership should be to link the suitable type of leadership to the demands of the school circumstances. The recommendation was an application of an integrated leadership framework based on the contingent leadership approach which considered the realities of the successful principals at schools who had sustained improved academic perform.

### **Limitations and Implications**

Five schools from the Metro Central Education District (MCED) participated in this study. This meant that findings in this research would not be generalised to all schools in the Metro Central District because contexts may differ and could result in different academic performance of learners. Getting honest responses on principals' behaviour from teachers and SMT members was difficult. The questionnaire handed to the teachers had a limitation because they had to respond to predetermined questions with stated responses. Respondents could not write about how they felt, nor expand on their answers. The semi-structured interviews were subjected to a time constraint because principals and SMT members had other administrative duties to perform at school. The principals and teachers could have found the research intrusive and might not have been honest in their responses.

The integrated leadership approach with its framework for integrating different leadership characteristics and/or qualities displayed by the principal in a stated context has the potential to achieve long-term academic improvement in schools undergoing the NSLA intervention. It followed that this framework be implemented at a school in the NSLA intervention which was not successful in sustaining improved academic performance. Furthermore, it is suggested that a similar study be undertaken with a larger group of successful schools and principals in the Western Cape and not only in one district.

The different leadership approach(es) can affect student learning therefore school leaders are uniquely positioned to determine the best leadership approach(es) and strategies for different contexts which should be a key priority for future research ([Cruickshank, 2017](#)). In addition, research could also be undertaken to educate/train principals on how to incorporate these strategies inherent to the integrated leadership approach.

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