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Article: **Overview of the Holistic Role of Principals of Rural Secondary Schools in South Africa**

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Overview of the Holistic Role of Principals of Rural Secondary Schools in South Africa

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Abstract

The role of principals is crucial in ensuring overall success of schools. In most cases, the success or failure of students in terminal examination is attributed to the principals and teachers. Hence, this study explores the role of principals in secondary schools situated in rural communities via the review method. For this purpose, relevant literature was reviewed. The findings revealed that the role of principals in rural secondary schools in South Africa is as crucial as expected from school principals in other similar contexts. They are majorly saddled with eight (8) responsibilities which include to: lead teaching and learning, shape the direction and development of the school, manage quality and secure accountability, develop, and empower self as well as others, manage school as an organization, work with and for the community, manage staff members of the school, and manage and promote co-curricular activities. The findings also revealed that the principals of rural secondary schools in South Africa faced various challenges and find it difficult to discharge their duties as expected. Some of the challenges include lack of resources in schools, quality of teaching staff, and professional development opportunities for rural secondary school principals. The study recommends that rural secondary school principals in South Africa should be well trained through periodic workshops and seminars. Also, considering their location, they should be motivated and encouraged to acquire more knowledge by enrolling for courses that will give them the needed skills and qualifications.

Keywords: leadership, principal, rural secondary school, South Africa (SA)

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Introduction

The rate of failure in South African secondary schools remains quite high in different subjects, mathematics inclusive (Tachie & Chireshe, [2013](#); South African Market Insights, [2020](#)). Similarly, according to Weybright et al. ([2017](#)), the dropout rate in South African secondary schools is alarming. Meanwhile, this challenge seems to be more pronounced in rural based secondary schools. Different studies have been conducted on the causes of such failure rate. This has led to various findings such as: lack of infrastructure (Khumalo & Mji, [2014](#); Uleanya & Gamede, [2018a](#)), shortage of qualified teachers (Hogg, [2019](#)), poor classroom management of teachers (Sibiya et al., [2019](#)), learners socio-economic background (Iwaloye et al., [2019](#)), learners demography (Uleanya, [2018](#)), teacher-student ratio and teacher-student relationship Uleanya ([2019](#)), adopted teaching styles of teachers (Uleanya & Gamede, [2018a](#)), adopted language of instruction (Uleanya et al., [2019](#)), lack of human and material resources, laziness, poor teaching methods of teachers, lack of interest in learning, bad teacher behaviour, and absenteeism of teachers and learners (Tachieand Chireshe, [2013](#)), curriculum issues (Mouton et al., [2012](#); Smith et al., [2019](#)), amongst others. Meanwhile, annually, the education sector of the nation receives a huge chunk of the budget (UNICEF, [2019](#)). Sequel to this, it is envisaged that good success rate should be achieved, however, this seems not to be the case though there has been improvement in recent times. This has led to various trainings and retraining of teachers. Meanwhile, with all these happenings, the place of principals may be easily overlooked in the circle of considering the reason for high failure rate. This is because researches with regards to learners' academic performance i.e., failure or success seem to be centred majorly on teachers. The reason for this can be attributed to the notion that principals are also teachers. However, their role as principals is distinct and goes beyond teaching. For instance, according to the South African Department of Basic Education ([2020](#)), there are eight key areas identified as crucial for principals of secondary schools in South Africa to perform. This is regardless of where the schools are situated. The eight identified areas are stated and explained as to: lead teaching and learning, shape the direction and development of the school, manage quality and secure accountability, develop and empower self as well as others, manage school as an organisation, work with and for the community, manage staff

members in the school, manage, and advocate extra-mural activities. Following the identified points submitted by the Department of Basic Education (2020), this study attempts to explain each one after the other especially in the context of rural based secondary schools due to their peculiar nature. However, considering the context of the study, the need arises to state briefly about the term: rural and urban secondary schools.

Conceptualization of Terms: Rural and Urban Secondary Schools

Urban settlements are usually the areas that are characterised by good infrastructure, quality education, job opportunities, and good road network, amongst others. Seemingly, urban secondary schools are established in settlements where there are somewhat good facilities. Thus, they are usually considered to provide more quality education for learners following the availability and access to teaching and learning facilities which are capable of enhancing the learning abilities of the learners. This accounts for one of the reasons why learners in urban secondary schools are expected to perform better than their counterparts in schools situated in rural areas. Conversely, review of the works of Dani and Shah (2016) as well as Uleanya et al. (2020) suggest that rural secondary schools can be described as institutions of learning strategically and intentionally situated in certain less developed locations in order to enhance the development of such environment, its surrounding communities as well as the people. The works of Uleanya et al. (2020) as well as Bookin-Weiner (2015) show that rural communities are peculiar in their own ways and have various unique features, challenges, needs/demands, amongst others which make them distinct. Hence, rural institutions of learning such as secondary schools are established to take care of the peculiar needs of the people within and around the communities where they are situated while taking into cognizance the peculiar nature of the learners (Uleanya et al., 2020; Bookin-Weiner, 2015). In the context of this study, following the work of Opoku-Asare and Siaw (2015), urban secondary schools are those situated in areas with good facilities, good road networks, amongst others. On the other hand, sequel to the submission of Weeks (2021), rural secondary schools are those established in locations with high rate of unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, poor road network, amongst others.

Key Areas of Performance Expected of the Principals of South African Rural Based Secondary Schools

The key areas of performance expected of the principals of rural secondary schools as laid out by the Department of basic Education of South Africa are discussed under various headings below.

Leading Teaching and Learning in Schools

The Principals of secondary schools are considered as leaders of the school which are viewed in this instance as organisations. They are saddled with the responsibility of leading teaching and learning in the school where they are deployed. In other words, the principals are firstly teachers and are expected to teach where and when necessary in addition to their administrative duties (Uleanya et al., [2019](#)). In this regard, the principals are envisaged to be able to correct teachers with regards to teaching affairs, and organise workshops for teachers to train them on teaching strategies where necessary. The findings of the study conducted by Uleanya et al. ([2019](#)) show that the principals have roles to play in curbing high failure rates in their schools. Meanwhile, following the findings of the study of Uleanya et al. ([2019](#)), such is majorly dependent on the leadership style(s) adopted by the principals. Thus, by leading teaching and learning in schools, the principals are considered to have adopted leadership styles that enhance and promote the culture of teaching and learning (Shava & Tlou, [2018](#); Uleanya et al, [2019](#)). Additionally, Eboka ([2016](#)) conducted a study on whether the leadership styles of principals and their gender have laid impact on teachers, consequently, teaching and learning. The study adopted the ex-post facto research design. Data were collected from a total of two thousand, five hundred and six (2,506) teachers and seventy-two (72) principals from across 72 government owned schools. The sample of the study was randomly selected from three education zones in one of the states in Nigeria, West Africa. The group of seventy-two (72) principals was composed of forty-one (41) female and thirty-one (31) male. Two standardized research instruments were employed for the study. These are known as: The Purdue Teacher Opinionnaire and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. The identified instruments were used to collect information on whether the gender and adopted leadership styles of principals affect teachers, and consequently, teaching and learning. The collected data were analysed

using simple descriptive statistics of mean, standard deviation and percentage which were used to proffer answers to the research questions of the study. Eboka (2016) also employed t-test at the point of analysis in order to test the research hypothesis of their study. The findings of the study showed that besides adopted leadership styles of principals, their gender also had influence on teachers. This in turn influences the way the teachers comport themselves and how they go about the discharge of their duties, in this case, teaching. However, the study did not take cognizance of the environment whether rural or urban. Following the reviewed literatures on the roles of principals in leading teaching and learning in schools, it can be deduced that majority of the success or failure of principals in being able to lead teaching and learning in rural secondary schools is largely dependent on their adopted leadership styles, and in some instances their gender. Suffice to state that the adopted leadership styles of principals and in some cases their gender are crucial towards ensuring that they lead teaching and learning in schools.

Shaping the Direction and Development of the School

A review of the work of Uleanya et al. (2019) suggests that secondary school principals are synonymous to captains in ships. They are responsible for steering the school in the desired direction in order to ensure development. The study of Uleanya et al. (2019) focused on the role of principals in the reduction of the experienced high failure rates in selected rural based high schools in two African nations. The study adopted a qualitative research method which was targeted at collecting in-depth information on the transformation experienced in the results of learners. The schools were purposively selected considering their location and the previous pass and failure rates of the learners in terminal examinations. The participants of the study comprised 12 people, that is, two (2) principals, two (2) vice principals and eight (8) teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for all the participants to collect in-depth information. The findings of the study have shown that the position and roles of principals are pivotal to determining the direction and the extent to which development will be experienced in the school. For instance, the findings of the study of Uleanya et al. (2019) have shown that the high failure rate which was being experienced in one of the sampled schools was reduced and increase in

students' pass rate was experienced when a new principal was posted and new leadership styles were introduced. Sequel to the review of the study, consequently the findings, it can be deduced that shaping the direction and the development of rural secondary schools is hinged on the roles and performance of the principals.

Furthermore, considering that rural secondary schools are established to assist learners of certain specific communities, it is one of the responsibilities of the principals in such places to help learners from within and around the communities where the schools are situated to form and achieve their visions taking cognizance of their ignorance and need to succeed (Wallace, 2020). This can be done by ensuring that the needed resources, conducive environment(s), counsels, programmes, amongst others, are made available. However, findings from the work of Uleanya et al. (2020) show that the principals of the rural schools are likely to be limited in helping learners due to limited resources. Meanwhile, Bower (2010) suggests the need for improvisation where desired resources are limited or lacking. It is adequate to state that the principals are expected to use the resources in their capacity and improvise where necessary to ensure that the schools are well directed and developed regardless of their rural location.

Managing Quality and Securing Accountability

The provision of quality education to its citizenry is a function of the government of a nation, inclusive of South Africa (Du Plessis, 2013). He further opines that the government is committed to ensure that learners have access to a high-quality school education. According to Akoojee and Nkomo, (2007) Uleanya and Gamede, (2018a), quality education is hinged on the availability of infrastructure such as classrooms, libraries, laboratories where necessary, amongst others, recruitment of teachers, and other non-teaching staff members, prompt payment of staff salaries, provision and supplies of Learning Teaching Support Materials (LTSMs), amongst others. The presence or absence of the identified factors which facilitate teaching and learning, consequently, ensuring quality education determine the academic performances of the learners (Fook & Sidhu, 2015; Uleanya & Gamede, 2018a). However, making available the identified quality education aiding factors is not enough, there is need for such to be

well managed. Moreover, the management lies on the ability of the principals to monitor teachers and other staff members while overseeing activities which take place within and outside the school that have the potential of impacting on the quality of education provided. In this regard, the principals are liable to be held accountable for actions and inactions that hamper the desired quality of education. The principals are therefore considered to be accountable to the government. According to Hutt and Tang (2013), any form of negligence from the principals in the discharge of their duties which affects the desired quality is tantamount to academic malpractice. Thus, principals are desired to discharge their duties in order to ensure that quality education is ensured in their various secondary schools, knowing that they are accountable to the government and other education stakeholders. Suffice to state that managing quality and securing accountability is one of the duties saddled upon the principals who are employed and deployed to schools following guidance and directives from the government to help manage the provided quality and ensure accountability. This implies that quality education in rural South African secondary schools will be unattainable without the identified role of the principals.

Developing and Empowering Self and Others

Continuous staff development is crucial in any organisation. A review of the work of Uleanya and Gamede (2018b) indicates that the staff development is expected to be paramount in the running of school activities. In other words, staff members such as teachers of various subjects, Heads of Department (HoDs), vice principals and principals are to be developed periodically in order to ensure that they meet the ever increasing demands in improving the quality of education provided to learners, consequently their academic performances. Staff development helps to ensure that staff members are up to date in the discharge of their duties (Cruzeiro & Morgan, 2006). In the context of this study – rural secondary schools, staff members are to be trained to fit into the demands of the rural communities where the schools are situated. Thus, it is the responsibility of the principals to firstly develop themselves to be relevant both in the school and the rural community. Following this, the principals can then help develop the other

staff members: teaching and non-teaching inclusive. This can be done following various strategies, locations, firms, trainers, amongst others.

Managing the School as an Organisation

The school is an organization where trainings and development take place (Turkkahraman, [2015](#)). According to Eisold ([2009](#)), the school can be viewed as an organisation because it is composed of a set of overlapping systems. These systems include the students who are expected to be concerned with learning and development. Another system within the school is teachers: they are concerned with upholding and ensuring professional standards as well as effective teaching. Eisold ([2009](#)) further state that the parents and the administrative body of the school respectively form other systems. While the parent system focuses on the link that exists between the school and the child, the administrative body of the school system is concerned with ensuring the management of all the systems, inclusive of external relations and security. On the other hand, Kools and Stoll ([2016](#)) consider school as an organisation, however, a learning organisation. This is because it is a place where the values, beliefs and norms of employees are brought together in order to ensure that sustained learning is promoted. They further state that in an atmosphere of learning, learning culture or learning climate must be nurtured. Meanwhile, where learning climate is nurtured, learning to learn is essential for every person involved. Suffice to state that a system exists in such situation as all components are interdependently connected and related. However, Turkkahraman ([2015](#)) considers the school as an organisation because education is primarily a social phenomenon and activity. From the foregoing it comes out that the school is an organisation because it entails various components which function as a system ensuring the flow of functional activities. The systems within the school as an organisation need to be managed to ascertain the desired success. Thus, the role of the principal is inevitable. Thus, principals of rural secondary schools are saddled with the responsibilities of ensuring that all systems within the school as an organisation function. Hence, they are described as managers of the school as an organisation.

Working with and for the Community

Rural schools are situated within communities in strategic locations in order to contribute and enhance the desired development (Uleanya et al., [2020](#)). However, for the desired development to be attained and enjoyed, collaborative efforts between the school and the community where it is situated are expected. Meanwhile, the school needs a representative in functioning and dealing with the community. Moreover, while collaborating with the community to ensure the desired development, the principal directly works with members of the community in various ways (Hauseman et al., [2017](#)). Furthermore, it is crucial for the principals to work with the community. Working with the communities is to ensure that the community is harmonized with the school. This can be done in various ways such as: conducting concerts with local colleges and universities, businesses, churches, and a variety of other entities within and around the communities. This helps to foster peace and unity between the school and the host community. Meanwhile, a review of the study conducted by Uleanya ([2019](#)) indicates that misunderstanding and lack of unity between communities and schools is capable of causing unrest. This in turn affects teaching and learning activities in school, thereby, hampering the learning abilities and academic performances of learners. Conversely, the principal continues to indirectly work for the community as the training of the children from such community lies within the power of such a principal. Suffice to state that the role of the principal in working with and for the community may seem insignificant, however, it is immense and must be well handled.

Managing Human Resources (Staff) in the School

The principals are saddled with various responsibilities, amongst which include managing human resources that is staff members of the schools in which they are deployed. These staff members include teaching staff who are majorly the teachers, and non-teaching staff such as the Heads of Department (HoDs), vice principal(s), cleaning staff, amongst others. Thus, following a review of the work of Okaforcha and Okeke ([2019](#)), it can be deduced that human resource management practices for teachers' job involvement in secondary schools is important. Hence, principals should be able to go extra miles. Additionally, secondary school principals are considered human resource managers because of their involvement in the

planning, recruitment, selection, induction, training, development processes of staff members (Hoque & Kamaluddin, 2014). They further opine that as human resource managers, the principals are responsible for the safety of staff members, and ensuring smooth career path of personals working in the organization. Thus, principals get involved in ensuring that staff members are duly trained as and when due. Similarly, the finding of the work of Mutie et al. (2015) indicate that principals are regarded to as human resource managers to teachers because they are expected to make certain services available for them. These services include the following: orient them of what is expected of them in the school, place them where necessary, help in developing their job description, appraise them, motivate and develop them professionally. In corroboration of the finding of the works of (Hoque & Kamaluddin 2014; Mutie et al., 2015), a study was conducted by (Chemutai, 2015). The study aimed at exploring the role of school principals as managers of human resources. Following how management systems are capable of changing in response to demands of fast changing environment, Burns and Stalk use Contingency Theory to model the study. The study was premised on survey research design, with the target population being one hundred and forty (140) secondary school principals from a selected County in Kenya. Data were collected through the use of a questionnaire, and was later analysed descriptively using Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). The analysed data were presented in the form of frequency tables and charts. The findings of the study showed that the main identified roles of secondary school principals are to recruit needed staff in schools, encourage and promote team building and work amidst the members of staff, empower the staff and inspire and motivate them to develop their careers. He further opines that it is important for principals to possess knowledge of how to play the above identified roles in order to boost the performances and development of their schools. In this regard, they can be considered successful human managers, amongst others.

Managing and Advocating Extra-mural Activities

Extramural activities are usually targeted at helping young people, in this regard, rural secondary school learners to enhance their talents. Extramural activities are channelled to create platforms which are to develop the specialised skills of secondary school learners. This can be done

through the organisation of various competitions that are capable of creating modest environments which help learners to work towards the attainment of objectives for a better society. The Education Network (2016) explains that extramural activities have various benefits. For instance, they help learners to develop in different ways such as reasoning, social relations, team building, amongst others. Thus, extramural activities are considered to help learners in the following ways: learn about team work, make new friends, get some much needed exercise, as well as develop problem solving abilities (The Education Network, 2016). They further opine that hindering learners from participating in extramural activities is liable to hindering their acquisition of social skills, as well as physical and psychological development. The Education Network (2016) further states that extramural activities can be carried out through sporty activities such as: soccer, rugby, swimming hockey or something more academic like chess, and debating or art. Parents and teachers are considered to be responsible for ensuring learners' participation (The Education Network, 2016). In congruence to the identified benefits of extramural activities identified by The Education Network (2016), it helps learners to understand the importance of time management, hence, learn to manage time. He further adds that learners get to learn how to lose with dignity. Other extramural activities include: music, dance, cooking workshop, judo, tennis, gymnastic, amongst others. The Department of Basic Education (2014), saddled the responsibility of creating extramural activities on principals. Suffice to state that while teachers and parents ensure the participation of learners, principals help firstly to create the platform following one of their roles as leaders of schools.

Factors Hindering the Principals from Performing their Roles

From the review of the work of Huong (2020), it can be deduced that some of the factors capable of affecting principals in the discharge of the responsibilities saddled on them include: the level of autonomy given to the principals of schools for instructional and other activities, the training level of principals, conditions of school facilities and available finances for teaching and other activities, amongst others. Meanwhile, Uleanya et al. (2019) consider the issue of adopted leadership style as a major factor that can affect principals in accomplishing their roles. Meanwhile, Musee

(2017) had earlier stated that lack of cooperation from parental factors, shortage of teaching and non-teaching staff members, lack of infrastructures such as classrooms, laboratories, amongst others, lack of stationeries, textbooks, financial constraints, amongst others are major challenges hindering principals in the successful discharge of their duties. Conversely, Manullang (2014) considers the organizational knowledge of principals as the major factor hampering successful discharge of their responsibilities and attainment of the desired level of success. Similarly, Makoelle (2014) states that the challenges hindering secondary school principals from performing their roles include: poor managerial and leadership skills, non-effective school governing body, as well as lack of adequate support. On the contrary, Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019) hold the view that finance is not a cause of poor quality education. They, however, state in corroboration with (Mbiti, 2016; Wößmann, 2016) that lack of autonomy is the major challenge hindering principals from performing their roles as expected. Meanwhile, Van der Berg et al. (2011) state that the issue of training received by principals should be considered as the challenge hindering them from performing their roles. Van der Berg et al. (2011) further explain that principals are trained as teachers, and later appointed to perform administrative roles. Such is tantamount to failure. Hence, the training received by principals is to be reconsidered. Van der Berg and Hofmeyr (2017) however, state that the level of experience of principals in rural schools set them for failure. From the foregoing, it can be deduced that principals sometimes fail to perform their roles owing to varying factors ranging from personal to external, meanwhile, they receive training to be teachers, who eventually metamorphose to become principals via appointment.

Conclusion

This overview explored the roles of secondary school principals in South Africa with reference to the DBE (2020), while alluding to their rural context. The eight (8) roles of the principals as given by the South African Department of Basic Education were identified and discussed. These roles were identified to include: leading teaching and learning, helping to shape the direction and development of the school, managing quality and securing accountability, ensuring the development and

empowerment of self as well as others, managing school as an organisation, ensuring that they work with and for the community, managing staff members in the school, and managing and advocating extramural activities.

The findings showed that while secondary school principals in rural South African communities strive to discharge their duties by performing the identified roles, their duties could be hindered due to certain factors. Some of these factors are adopted leadership style, lack of cooperation from parents, lack of resources, limited knowledge and skills, limited or no experience, and financial constraints. As per the findings of this overview, the following recommendations are made:

- The principals of rural secondary school in South Africa should be well trained through periodic workshops and seminars. The trainings should be unique to their needs, taking cognizance of the nature of the locations of their schools.
- The principals of rural secondary schools in South Africa should be encouraged to acquire more knowledge and skills needed for the job. This can be done by improving their qualification by encouraging them to enrol for Masters and PhD programmes or enhancing their skills through short-term courses. This will improve the skills and qualifications needed as principals.
- The necessary facilities and infrastructures needed by the principals to discharge their duties should be made available.
- Most of the times, it is easy to overlook rural schools while the focus remains on urban centres. Hence, rural secondary school principals should be monitored to ensure that the set goals are being pursued and they are able to successfully discharge their duties. This will keep principals in rural schools in check.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study was limited to a review method where relevant literature was analysed to explore the roles of principals in rural secondary schools. Thus, it is suggested that this study be replicated using qualitative, quantitative, mix-method research design and the longitudinal method, where the experiences of a principal are captured following a cohort of students, their level of discipline, and academic performances.

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