



Personality and self-leadership of school principals as determinants of school performance

WK Delport

High School Melkbosstrand, Cape Town, South Africa
wkdelport@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6091-6622>

Leentjie van Jaarsveld

School of Professional Studies in Education, Faculty of Education, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
Leentjie.vanjaarsveld@nwu.ac.za (corresponding)
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9636-8023>

Branwen Challens

School of Professional Studies in Education, Faculty of Education, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
Branwen.Challens@nwu.ac.za
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1219-4116>

(Received: 15 October 2020; accepted: 14 September 2021)

Abstract

In this article, we argue that personality and self-leadership are determinants that play a role in the performance of a school. We consider aspects such as the leadership style of the principal, motivation, and support in this regard. We followed a qualitative phenomenological approach in the interpretivist paradigm. We conducted semi-structured interviews with eight principals in both performing and underperforming schools. We found that the principals of both kinds of schools had the same types of personality and concluded that the personality of a principal does not determine whether a school is performing or underperforming. Self-leadership occurs more naturally in the principals of performing schools than in those of underperforming schools. Furthermore, the self-leadership of principals in underperforming schools is suppressed because of their particular circumstances. It is recommended that principals practise and develop self-leadership.

Keywords: performance, personality, self-leadership self-management, underperforming schools

Introduction

It is well documented that leadership in schools is the most important factor in the achievement of improvement in school performance (Alazmi, 2015; Clark & O'Donoghue, 2016; Oc, 2018). The principal's leadership, in addition to classroom teachers' leadership, still has the most important influence on learners (Hou et al., 2019). When leadership is scrutinised, several arguments emerge. According to García-Tuñón et al. (2016), leadership maintains the critical balance between management tasks to conserve the existing culture of leadership initiatives to create new goals, policies, and procedures. For this reason, strong leadership is required. School leaders have to set direction, develop people, and redesign the organisation (Raihani, 2008). Leadership focuses not only on what people do but, more importantly, on how and why something is done (Spillane, 2006). Berkovich (2016) has argued that leadership establishes and maintains a sense of direction and purpose for a school. In yet another argument, Day et al. (2016) have added that leadership is significant when a conducive and caring school environment has to be established. Included in the area of leadership are studies on school effectiveness, leadership, and job satisfaction in schools (Botha, 2017; Iwuanyanwu-Biemkpa, 2017; Nganget al., 2015; Setwong & Prasertcharoensuk, 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2014), studies on schools in general (Marcella, 2017), and studies on effective, well-performing, good schools and on ineffective, underperforming, weak schools (Kent et al., 2016). However, the personality and self-leadership of school principals have not yet been much explored.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the United Nations Children's Fund both emphasise access to, equality in, and quality of learning in education, regardless of educational objectives (Wilson-Strydom & Okkolina, 2016). Although 543 schools in South Africa achieved a 100% pass rate in the 2018 National Senior Certificate Examination, 6,335 schools did not. From 2011 to 2015, only 111 of the 6,772 South African schools achieved a 100% pass rate. From 2012 to 2016, 111 schools did so, and from 2013 to 2017, of the 6,805 schools, 115 achieved this. In 2018, the number of schools achieving a 100% pass rate was greater, at 6,878, but the growth in a 100% pass rate has not been significant.

The preceding information about pass rates in schools raises the question of why a 100% pass rate, especially a continual 100% pass rate, is not maintained in all schools in South Africa. For the purposes of the investigation on which we report in this article, the assumption is that underperformance is difficult to measure. However, we can claim that schools that do not achieve a 100% pass rate do not perform as well as those schools that do. The purpose of our study was to determine how the personality and self-leadership of the school principal influence its performance. In other words, our aim was to investigate the link between self-leadership and personality. This link serves as the basis for the empirical investigation conducted in a number of schools. In the following section, we present a report on this empirical investigation, followed by a discussion of the findings and some recommendations.

As mentioned above, this study was based on the link between personality traits, self-leadership, and school performance. First, we explore the notion of personality, what scholars have said about it, and how it plays a role in school leadership. Second, we consider self-leadership as a concept and discuss how it plays a role in school leadership. Third, we discuss the empirical investigation to understand how personality and self-leadership are linked to school performance.

Conceptual framework

Personality

Several studies have been done on the concept of personality including Babyak (2014) and Carnes et al. (2015). Personality is comprised of those unique traits that individuals possess that distinguish them from other individuals (Carnes et al., 2015). These traits determine individuals' thinking, actions, norms, and values. Models, theories, and tests have been designed to gather more information about personality. The Big Five Personality Model (Carnes et al., 2015) emerged as an example; it has five trait dimensions that have been labelled as extraversion (being outgoing, positive and self-confident), agreeableness (being soft-hearted and caring), conscientiousness (being responsible and hardworking), neuroticism (displaying anxiety and nervousness) and openness to experience (being curious and experimental). Other personality tests have emerged over the years, including the DISC test (Alshehri et al., 2018) that is centred on the four different personality traits of dominance (D), influence (I), steadiness (S), and conscientiousness (C), and De Bono's six thinking hats and 360-degree feedback evaluation (Aithal & Kumar 2016).

It is evident that personality plays a role when it comes to making decisions regarding the appointment of leaders (Carnes et al., 2015). One's personality starts with a view or picture of oneself, i.e., one's self-concept. Asri (2014) conceptualised self-concept "as self-image and self-esteem, which includes all feelings and thoughts of all talents, capabilities, benefits, strengths and weaknesses, through interaction with others" (p. 230). In addition, Asri (2014) postulated that self-concept consists of three main components, all of which address the image of an individual regarding their physical appearance, ability or capability, attitude towards the future, self-esteem, and self-owned outlook. When an organisation is involved, it is inevitable that personality traits will emerge when the leader of the organisation has a relationship with their followers. Of course, followers have perceptions, expectations, and conceptual prototypes of leadership (Babyak, 2014). Consequently, the personality traits revealed by the leader will influence their followers. However, leaders and followers are interdependent. This means that although the leader has specific personality traits, these traits will emerge only when there is interaction between and among the leader and the followers.

As early as 1929, Lide identified specific personality traits of school principals in America. These traits included adaptability, breadth of interest, broadmindedness, considerateness, dependability, enthusiasm, leadership, and punctuality. Yet, when these traits were placed in order of importance, punctuality was placed at the top, followed by magnetism (having an

attractive personal appearance and a pleasing voice), industry (displaying perseverance and patience) and promptness (displaying efficient dispatch and alertness) (Lide, 1929 p. 143).

One of the most important tasks of effective and performing organisations is choosing an effective leader since leaders affect not only their own performance but also that of their followers. In this regard, Carnes et al. (2015) emphasised the importance of interviews in choosing leaders since “personality information is a desirable outcome of the interview process because it is likely to translate into actual performance” (p. 371). Running a school requires specific personality traits that contribute to the achievement of set goals that have to be achieved. According to Ali et al. (2011), there is a direct relationship between a principal’s personality traits and their performance. These researchers focused on extroverted and introverted principals. In their study, the principals who were extroverts performed better than those who were introverts. In a study conducted by Bakhsh et al. (2015), the results revealed that stress tolerance as a personality trait was a significant predictor of leadership effectiveness. In addition, they found that attractive looks, emotional stability, and self-confidence played a role in the effectiveness of school principals. Their study further revealed that principals who possess and display these personality traits are highly effective in their leadership and can get work done punctually by their followers. In yet another study by Balyer (2017) trust was found to be the most important personality trait a leader could have; there is a strong relationship between teachers’ trust in the school principal and better performance of the school. Furthermore, respect, reliability, and consideration were found to be the most important personality traits in a principal if school performance was to be achieved. Schools are human communities, so these personality traits are essential to good performance.

In a comprehensive study of personality traits and leadership styles, Hassan et al. (2016) found that leadership styles relate to personality traits so any investigation into the effectiveness of principals should include an examination of the principal’s leadership style and personality since effectiveness, personality, and the style of leadership followed are interrelated.

There are two schools of thought about personality traits. One has argued that personality traits differentiate leaders from followers, while the other claimed that personality traits differentiate leaders from effective leaders. Effective leadership, however, is not limited to personality traits; it is more complicated than this. There are specific personality traits that emerge when effective leadership is involved—intelligence, confidence, and initiative (Ibukun et al., 2011). Intelligence is related to how knowledgeable a leader is. When it comes to self-confidence, a leader can show self-confidence in one situation, but this may not necessarily be the case in another. Initiative and vision are connected; effective leaders have a vision and use their initiative to achieve it.

Self-leadership

For Bryant (2020), self-leadership is about the sense of who one is, what one can do, and where one is going. Self-leaders are self-motivated to take purposeful action and, therefore,

they make better leaders, entrepreneurs, and team members. In influencing oneself to achieve the self-direction and self-motivation necessary to behave and perform in desirable ways, three aspects come to the fore; these are self-awareness that implies one's intentions and values, self-confidence that refers to knowing one's strengths and abilities, and self-efficacy that focuses on one's ability to handle whatever comes one's way (Bryant, 2020). Bozyigit (2019) suggested that self-leadership consists of three different types of strategies: 1) Behaviour-focused strategies focus on providing specific approaches to identifying ineffective behaviours and replacing them with more effective ones; 2) natural reward strategies explain situations in which the fun aspects of the task or activity are motivated or rewarded by the individual; and 3) constructive thought pattern strategies specify ways of thinking about one's experiences and habitual ways of thinking. In yet another explanation of what self-leadership entails, Browning (2018 p. 16) proposed 12 guidelines:

set goals for your life; lead by example; be fearless; honour others; embrace new ideas and opportunities; question everything; do what is right, not what is easy, find goodness and beauty in everyone and everything; actively reject pessimism; be the change you want to see in the world; surround yourself with mentors and teachers; and care for and about people.

It is evident that self-leadership has positive effects on work-related outcomes, organisational effectiveness, team building, and group cohesion. Reddy and Jooste (2015) argued that strategies of self-leadership involve creating ways to make the task more pleasant to perform. For Sesen et al. (2017), the crux of self-leadership lies in the relationship between self-leadership and job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and innovation. About the relationship between job satisfaction and self-leadership, they argued that individuals with high self-leadership skills have greater job satisfaction when they have a great deal of autonomy in working places where they can use their self-leadership skills. However, when education departments are involved, the rules and regulations are clearly set out and principals are forced to comply; this means that self-leadership is often not possible. Still, the principal can use self-leadership if the situation calls for it. By doing so, they experience a sense of greater freedom and job satisfaction. Furthermore, individuals with strong self-leadership skills see themselves as innovative and creative. In today's educational environment and with the rapid development of technology, it is imperative that principals think innovatively and creatively. In this regard, self-leadership becomes evident. Waiting for something to happen is not an option; actual action is essential in the 21st century (Sesen et al., 2017).

Tat and Zeitel-Bank (2013) have expressed the opinion that self-leadership consists of specific competencies. They note that training the mind to listen increases the ability to concentrate under stressful dynamic circumstances. In addition, active listening is one of the most important skills of a leader (Van de Mieroop et al., 2020). Self-awareness means listening to one's inner self. Van de Mieroop et al. (2020) have noted that increased sensitivity to trust oneself may help one to trust in one's own decisions. Also, according to Houghton et al., (2003), one needs to overcome one's inner resistance and engage in positive

thought. By doing so, one may be open to new ways of thinking that might help one to be better prepared for new challenges. To conclude, Tat and Zeitel-Bank (2013) stated that individuals are able to develop selected self-leadership competencies through physical experience and awareness along with intellectual reflection.

It is well-documented that there is a link between school leadership and learner achievement (Badenhorst & Koalepe, 2014; Carmon, 2009; Kythreotis et al., 2010; Sun & Ni, 2016). The modern school principal can no longer function simply as a building manager tasked with adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations, and avoiding mistakes. According to the Wallace Foundation (2013), modern school principals have to be leaders of learning who can develop a team by delivering effective instruction. Individuals who have self-leadership qualities of managing themselves can better lead and manage their organisations. The link between self-leadership and principalship is clear since leading a school is an entrepreneurial endeavour as well. For this reason, on the one hand, self-leadership is applicable when school turnaround is in question (Wallace Foundation, 2013). On the other hand, as McConnell (2017) has argued, although the self-leadership of principals correlates to learner achievement in a small way, it is outweighed by other factors when all others are considered. However, given the multitude of factors that have an impact on learner achievement, even finding a weak significant correlation is important (McConnell, 2017). Following the same line of thought, it can be said that self-leadership is valuable when teamwork is involved since self-leadership has an impact on the team and this influences its overall performance.

Personality, self-leadership, and school performance

According to Ali et al. (2011), school principals who are emotionally stable perform better at managerial aspects while neurotic school principals lack managerial skills. Other contributions to the study of personality and self-leadership are those of Furtner and Rauthman (2010) and Bailey et al. (2016). For the former, self-leadership correlates with the full set of the big five personality dimensions.

People scoring higher on self-leadership could be characterized as open-minded, intellectual, creative, energetic, dynamic, and controlled. They also pursue plans and goals in the long run with perseverance, while not neglecting to self-motivate and self-reward themselves. Self-leadership holds potential for explaining motivated and goal oriented behaviors and is also important in more applied fields (e.g., management) (Furtner & Rauthman, 2010, p. 350).

Daud (2021 p. 2) postulated that self-leadership is “an approach to self-focus and be[ing] proactive and reactive for the achievement of goals.” Self-leaders possess the personality to distinguish themselves from others and thus become superior.

Long et al. (2017 p. 18) claimed that self-leadership, with a focus on behaviour-focused, natural reward and constructive thought pattern strategies and personality, as well as “openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism or emotional stability”, has an influence on job satisfaction. In another study, Mutalib (2017)

postulated that the extraversion personality trait provides a unique prediction of self-leadership. A study of the interaction between extraversion and stressful environments revealed that individuals who are in high-stress situations are not influenced much by their personality traits to engage in self-leadership. Individuals who are most likely to practise self-leadership are those who are highly extroverted in low-stress situations.

Studies have also focused on the link between personality traits and performance. These include the studies of Hakimi et al. (2011) and Ali et al. (2011). A few studies have also focused on the link between self-leadership and performance. Sarmawa et al. (2017) revealed that work culture is a partially mediating influence of self-leadership on employee performance. Consequently, self-leadership has a direct influence on the culture of leadership that has an influence on employee performance, while work culture has a significant influence on employee performance (Sarmawa et al., 2017). However, we could find no evidence of a link between the personality traits and self-leadership of school principals and school performance in the literature.

Research design and methodology

We used an interpretivist approach in our investigation. The basic point of departure for interpretivism is to explain human behaviour using a subjective interpretation of that (social) behaviour (Creswell, 2012; Maree, 2013; McMillan & Schumacker, 2010). Qualitative approaches are characterised by intensive studies, descriptions of events, and interpretations of meaning (Schunk, 2012). For this reason, the qualitative approach was the preferred approach for this study, and we used this in the form of a phenomenological investigation.

Sample

The school performance report of the 2017 National Senior Certificate Examination (Department of Basic Education, 2018) was used to identify the schools. We selected a purposeful sample of four high-achieving schools (with a sustained 100% pass rate for five or more years) and four underperforming schools (with less than 50% pass rate in the Grade 12 examination) in the North-West Province. Eight principals (six male and two female) were approached to take part in the investigation.

Table 1

Biographical information

School principal	Performance	Urban or township	Sex
A	Performing	Urban	Male
B	Performing	Urban	Male
C	Performing	Urban	Male
D	Performing	Urban	Male
E	Underperforming	Township	Male

School principal	Performance	Urban or township	Sex
F	Underperforming	Township	Male
G	Underperforming	Township	Female
H	Underperforming	Township	Female

The necessary ethical consent was obtained from the ethics committee of the university and the North-West education department. The necessary documentation regarding disclaimer, anonymity, and volunteerism was sent to the principals to assure them of the confidentiality and anonymity of the research.

Semi-structured interviews of an hour's duration were used to gain more insight into how the school principals saw themselves (personality) and the self-leadership they practised. The data was analysed through an inductive data analysis process, as explained by Creswell (2012). Then we coded the data and identified themes.

There was a huge difference in terms of the neatness of the school grounds of the two types of school. The grounds of the performing schools were well looked after while the underperforming township schools were untidy. In the case of the latter, accessibility was extremely difficult given the location of the schools and the lack of reliable resources, such as the internet and landlines that were out of order. In South Africa, many schools located in townships are not well-equipped, lack running water, and have poor infrastructure and building facilities. With this background in mind, we offer a discussion of the results that include the words of the participants that are the basic source of the raw data and serve as evidence for the qualitative data analysis. The rich data affords a direct understanding of the participants' views, experiences, and perceptions.

Discussion and findings

Here we discuss the personality and self-leadership of school principals as determinants influencing school performance, and we offer our findings. Three main themes emerged during the data analysis: the personality of the school principals; the managerial leadership of the principals; and their perceptions of their self-leadership.

Personality of school principals

Although there was a huge difference in the appearance of the schools as already pointed out, all eight principals revealed similar personalities. We discuss only four of these following Lide's (1929) list. All the principals, especially those of the underperforming schools, revealed adaptability. However, the principals of the underperforming schools had adapted to different things than had the principals of the performing schools. Participant B from a performing school said,

I think you have to stay on top of new things that happen with new developments. We are currently in the process of technological adaptations that will keep us going. We are not going into anything. We consider the factors against each other and see what works, what doesn't.

Participant E of an underperforming school, focusing more on change, said,

One has to be very aware of times that are changing, and [something] that [is] working today does not necessarily work tomorrow. My biggest role in school is thinking ahead, making new decisions, pushing old policies under the table that no longer work. As a leader, you must have a visionary role. Where is my school now and where is [it] going? And when I'm no longer here, what will my school look like when a new principal takes over? A leader must have vision.

While the performing school principals adapt according to changes in technology, the principals of underperforming schools focus on the future. For them, surviving is more important than adopting futuristic methods of teaching. This personality trait of these principals correlates with Asri's (2014) statement that one's ability or capability and one's attitude towards the future are essential to survival.

All the principals revealed broadmindedness in their personality. They believed that by developing themselves, reading about the newest trends in education, and attending workshops they could be better school principals. Participant D (of a performing school) said,

As a principal, you have to read a lot about all the developments around leadership, especially keeping up with all the changes that are taking place in education. A principal must remain proactive and informed.

Participant H (of an underperforming school) recognised the necessity of knowledge in saying,

Principals must research the latest developments in schools and keep abreast of what's going on within the school environment, especially the latest challenges faced by learners and teachers.

Carnes et al. (2015) argued that the most important aspects of effective and performing organisations lie in an effective leader. However, being only a leader is not enough; a leader must be knowledgeable and well informed.

Respect, transparency, trust, and motivation were some of the most important qualities related to being an effective principal that emerged in our findings. All the participants agreed that trust was of the utmost importance. First, teachers must trust their principals when decision making is involved. Once the teachers see that the decision made by the principal is to their advantage as teachers and not to the benefit of the principal, trust is enhanced. This was especially noticeable at the underperforming schools. In addition, principals must trust their own judgement; in this way, their own self-confidence is enhanced.

Another personality trait that emerged was insight. Yet again, the circumstances of the performing and underperforming schools differed a great deal. However, the insight of the school principals was noteworthy. Participant A (of a performing school) stated,

In order to make a better place for any institution, you have to be able to mobilise your staff, and how to make those heads move, you have to be able to pull together and transform your staff into something that will benefit everyone affected.

Participant E (of an underperforming school) explained,

Schools are different; we are in a school community that serves poor children. You can't really compare our school to a more affluent school because we are more of a community centre for poor children. That is why our challenges will differ from [those of] other schools. That is why the environment is a big challenge for us, such as where our children live, their background and how they get to school.

It was clear that the principals understood the human dynamics of the community. On the one hand, principals of performing schools must constantly encourage their staff members to handle change. On the other, principals of underperforming schools need to keep in mind not only the staff members but the entire community as well. To have insight into the dynamics of being human in totally different circumstances requires being an open-minded leader. This personality trait corresponds with Babyak's (2014) argument that when an organisation is involved, it is inevitable that personality traits will emerge when the leader of the organisation is in a relationship with his or her followers.

The fourth personality trait that emerged strongly was motivation. Regardless of the circumstances in which the school was located, the principals all agreed that motivation and inspiration were of the utmost importance. However, motivation is not limited to the staff members but also applies to the learners and the principals themselves as Participant A (of a performing school) explained,

For me, one of the biggest roles of a principal is that you have to be able to motivate. The moment you motivate a child, it means that child wants so much more out of life, with better confidence and self-management skills. In South Africa, for example, we have the problem of service delivery. Therefore, it is the school's duty to send the child motivated out here [to] make a difference in other people's lives out there.

Participant H (of an underperforming school) argued,

As a principal, it is your duty to motivate staff to fill the gap between staff inability and the task at hand . . . the principal must be motivated in performing his or her duties to be a lifelong learner. Principals must also have mentors who can motivate them where and when needed.

From the above discussion, it is clear that leaders have specific personality traits that distinguish them from followers. What is important, however, is how leaders' personality

traits are expressed or suppressed in specific circumstances. Favourable circumstances lead to personality traits being clearly evident (Babyak, 2014). A principal can have very strong personality traits, but the circumstances may lead to these traits being suppressed. Also, unfavourable circumstances can reveal personality traits the principal may not even be aware of possessing (Babyak, 2014).

In this research, we cannot with definitive certainty that the personality traits of the principals influence the performance of the schools. All the principals had the same personality traits yet some of the schools performed well and others poorly. The problem of underperformance should then be investigated elsewhere.

Managerial leadership of principals

It was clear that the participants definitely linked their personality, or inner traits, to their managerial leadership role. Strikingly, there was a misconception that prevailed among the participants from the underperforming schools regarding participatory management. The principals of the underperforming schools were under the impression that they were taking part in participatory management with the teachers but hinted that they would rather place their own dependence in the hands of other schools in search of ideas to improve their own schools. A lack of self-initiative, creativity, and responsibility, and a lack of decision-making skills was evident. However, the participants from the performing schools made it clear that the leadership of one school cannot be compared to that of another. A distinction emerged between the performing and underperforming schools with regard to management leadership. The optimal use of human resources, staff development, and the inclusion of all stakeholders in participatory decision making and management were strongly evident in the performing schools. In this regard, Participant A (of a performing school) stated,

For me, it is about what the teacher can get out of the process . . . [They] must grow and involve development, because that is the type of person that the principal should focus on as a long-term investment.

The goal of participative management is to create a dynamic environment for the principal, teachers, and the community to gather resources so that the learning outcomes for the learners can be of high quality. For this reason, it is important for principals to clearly understand the concept of management. Participant I (of an underperforming school) confirmed this in saying,

We therefore try to create an environment where everyone can be themselves, can say if something bothers him. The big decisions we make together, as part of a management team.

No school will ever be able to escape crisis management. It was clear that crisis management occurred in all the schools, regardless of whether they were performing or underperforming. However, the question was how effectively the different schools handled crisis management. Participant A said,

In order to make a better place for any institution, you have to be able to mobilise your staff and . . . to make those head moves, you have to pull your staff together and transform it into something that benefits everyone involved.

Teacher mobilisation facilitates crisis management. In addition, as Participant B emphasised,

As a leader of the school, I believe I should exercise more control and take a better position.

Furthermore, Participant J (of an underperforming school) explained,

As a principal, you must have management and leadership skills. Such a school needs a strong principal with the necessary values and knowledge to take the lead, to deal with these challenges.

Regardless of whether the principal was from a performing or an underperforming school, they all agreed that leadership and management played an important role in schools. However, the participants from the underperforming schools were vague about crisis management. They appear to distance themselves from crises and assume an attitude of not being at fault. But, since crisis management is closely linked to inner attributes and participative management, it seems that the principal must take the initiative, with the support of the management team and school staff, to use a purposeful approach to better planning, organising, guiding, and controlling to deal with crisis management in particular.

The discussion on management has shown that the principals of the performing schools manage and handle crisis management better than do the principals of the underperforming schools. This factor could possibly be linked to a cultural group or to gender because, as already indicated, the principals have the same personality traits so the lack of management cannot be linked to the personality of the principal. However, when Asri's (2014) point of view is kept in mind, one could argue that self-image and self-esteem play a role in interaction with people, and for this reason, the principals of the performing schools handle management better than their peers at underperforming schools. It would have been useful to have been able demonstrate their handling or mishandling of crisis through an example.

Principals' perceptions of their self-leadership

It is evident that management and leadership cannot be separated. For this reason, the results regarding self-leadership are linked to management. Looking back at Bryant's (2020) statement about self-leadership, we see that the leadership competencies of self-observation and self-management are connected to the management of relationships. Although the participants all seem to practise self-leadership, there is a difference between the principals of the performing and the underperforming schools. For the principals of the former, self-leadership comes naturally, while the principals of the latter *try* to apply self-leadership. However, circumstances suppress their self-leadership. The great difference in the self-leadership of principals of performing and underperforming schools lies in their actions. For the principals of the performing schools, immediate action is obvious, while the principals of

the underperforming schools tend to delegate actions or blame others for some actions they have already taken. They tend to practise self-leadership, but then someone else must take over the leadership of the school. Participant G (underperforming school) defended his actions when he said,

I applied to the Department of Basic Education to teach in this school in the learners' home language, which could also improve the marks and performance of learners, but nothing came of it . . . If we chase away a learner here, the learner runs to the Department and then the Education Department requires us to re-register the learner . . . The Department of Education must implement transactional leadership.

Participant H (of an underperforming school) explained,

Unsynchronised activities often occur that throw your daily planning around. These are obligations that come up unexpectedly on my table from the Education Department. The Education Department is forcing us to quit our jobs and pay attention to their requirements. They do not plan these events in advance.

One could argue that if one has self-leadership, one will consistently follow up, be pro-active, and plan and act with confidence in all circumstances. However, the school principals in the underperforming schools lack continual self-leadership while the school principals of the performing schools act with confidence as can be seen in Participant A's statement that

in schools, the situation becomes much more complex. Next, a school leader must think much more out of the box and show a lot more creativity. For me, a leader is a person who needs to be able to think out of the box; it's not just someone who counts in an autocratic way, it's how things are going to happen. The principal must be able to make paradigm shifts with teachers. If teachers do not make paradigm shifts, teaching and learning will not be promoted.

In addition, Participant D (of a performing school) argued,

You have to be able to specifically implement the developments for your school; you cannot go and implement another school's strategies in your school. You, as a principal, can delegate, but you can never delegate the responsibility. Therefore, the principal remains responsible for everything. I believe a principal doesn't sit in his office all the time. A principal is always outside to see what's going on, because as a principal, you must always be able to account for what's going on. You must make sure that when people are appointed, it is people who can do the job.

Some reasons for not being a self-leader came to the fore. Participant F (of an underperforming school) explained that the nature of the school was determined by the type of learner who represented the school as well as the culture of the school. The culture originates from the area where the learners live. If learners do not do their work, this reflects a lack of drive on the part of the teacher. The teacher must set an example for the learners. For example, if the teacher arrives late for school, the learners will also arrive late.

What is striking about the underperforming schools is that the principals seek support from other sources, such as the community and teachers, to run the school. Participant E (of an underperforming school) explained,

We all need to be more than willing to learn from other principals. Principals must therefore talk to each other and find their way together. Talk to each other like businesspeople; talk about [the] way of thinking. The modern principal needs to get as much information from the outdoors as he or she can to gain new perspective. It is important that I add a voice to the community regarding difficult economic conditions. More in an advisory role, we're all in the same boat. The school is not just a school for learners but also for the surrounding community to come and ask for help.

In schools, accountability is observed, especially among learners and parents. Parents have a responsibility to their children to ensure that they are at school on time, do their homework, and meet other obligations to the school. However, especially at underperforming schools, learners do not seem to be adhering to the rules of arriving on time. In addition to being late frequently, many learners neglect their duty to pay attention to their academic work. Leaders must lead by example (Browning, 2018) and should provide specific approaches to identify ineffective behaviours and replace them with more effective ones (Bozyigit, 2019).

Some principals strive to strike a balance between the human- and task-oriented leadership style in not being too task-oriented or too democratic without focusing on the task at hand. However, it is not easy to satisfy everyone and complete the task at the same time. Here, skills are important. Principals who do not have the skills to work with people fail in their attempt to get everyone on board. As a result, in most cases, the task is not completed; this is experienced often in the underperforming schools. Some of the participants, especially those from the performing schools, stand by what is important to them with regard to cognitive thinking patterns to make the school a better place. The principals of the performing schools are at the forefront, active in the community, and leading the way. It was also noticeable that the principals of the performing schools think innovatively and, in a way, apply self-leadership. Participant A (of a performing school) explained,

With technology improving over the years, it is very important for a principal to be able to think innovatively. Children do not all learn the same way. We can look, for example, at self-directed learning, intertwined learning. This is where I as a principal need to be innovative, have the willingness to be a lifelong learner and be able to think outside the box and be willing to be more creative because nowadays we also have a greater demand for inclusive education in schools.

In the discussion above, aspects of personality and self-leadership were supported by verbatim quotations and references to the literature. However, research on personality traits, self-leadership, and the performance of schools as a combined concept is limited. The research of Furtner and Rauthman (2010) is just one example in which the notions of

personality traits and self-leadership are linked. In addition, Hakimi et al., (2011) link personality traits and performance along with self-leadership and performance.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored personality traits and self-leadership. We found that principals have different personalities traits. Some school principals were introverts while others were extroverts. In both cases, the kind of personality was not necessarily positive or negative with regard to leadership and management in the schools. Circumstances in the school context cause specific personality traits to emerge more strongly. When people are being considered for the position of principal, for example, or when crisis management comes to the fore, personalities play a very big role.

We also investigated the influence of personality traits and self-leadership on performance in schools. We found that principals who are self-confident often apply self-leadership tactics. Since leadership is of the utmost importance in schools, continual research on such leadership is important for sustainable effective education. We recommend that principals undergo personality tests since it might be useful to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Through standardized personality tests in which principals' personality types are identified, principals are likely to apply their personality traits in such a way that it benefits school achievement. We also recommend that principals familiarise themselves with what self-leadership entails. By gaining more knowledge of self-leadership, they can achieve and improve school-related goals as well as personal ones.

References

- Aithal, P. S., & Kumar, P. M. S. (2016). Using six thinking hats as a tool for lateral thinking in organizational problem solving. *International Journal of Engineering Research and Modern Education, 1*(2), 225–234.
- Alazmi, T. N. (2015). Leadership in context. An examination of contextual dimensions and leadership behaviour in Kuwaiti private sector. *International Journal of Islamic and Middle Eastern Finance and Management, 9*(4), 474–491.
- Ali, S. S., Azizollah, A., Zaman, A., Zahra, A., & Mohtaram, A. (2011). Relationship between personality traits and performance. *Higher Education Studies, 1*(1), 38–45.
- Alshehri, K. A., Alshamrani, H. M., Alharbi, A. A., Alshehri, H. Z., Enani, M. Z., Alghamdi, M. T., Alqulyti, W. M., & Hassanien, M.A. (2018). *International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health, 5*(8), 3205–3211.
- Asri, M. (2014). The influence of principals self personality values towards their work culture. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education, 3*(4), 228–235.

- Babyak, A. T. (2014). An examination of the impact of personality on implicit leadership theory. *International Journal of Business, Humanities and Technology*, 4(4), 24–38.
- Badenhorst, J. W., & Koalepe, L. J. (2014). How do we manage? Determinants of effective leadership in high-poverty schools. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 39(3), 243–256.
- Bailey, S. F., Barber, L. K., & Justice, L. M. (2016). Is self-leadership just self-regulation? Exploring construct validity with HEXACO and self-regulatory traits. *Current Psychology*, 37, 149–169. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-016-9498-z>
- Bakhsh, K., Hussain, S., & Mohsin, M. N. (2015). Personality and leadership effectiveness. *Journal of Education and Human Development*, 2(1), 139–142.
- Balyer, A. (2017). Trust in school principals: Teachers' opinions. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 6(2), 317–325.
- Berkovich, I. (2016). School leadership and transformational leadership theory: Time to part ways? *Journal of Educational Administration*, 54(5), 609–622.
- Botha, R. J. (2017). The key attributes of inquiry-based learning: Towards effectiveness in South Africa. *GAI International Academic Conferences Proceedings*, Prague, CZ.
- Bozyigit, E. (2019). The importance of leadership education in university: Self-leadership example. *International Education Studies*, 12(4), 1–8.
- Browning, M. (2018). Self-leadership: Why it matters. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 9(2), 14–18.
- Bryant, A. (2020). What is self leadership? <https://www.selfleadership.com/what-is-self-leadership/>
- Carmon, W. R. (2009). *High school principals in beating the odds schools: Using successful leadership practices to increase student achievement* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.
- Carnes, A., Houghton, D., & Ellison, C. N. (2015). What matters most in leader selection? The role of personality and implicit leadership theories. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 36(4), 360–379.
- Clark, S., & T. O'Donoghue. (2016). Educational leadership in context: A rendering of an inseparable relationship. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 65(2), 167–182.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.

- Day, C., Gu, Q., & Sammons, P. (2016). The impact of leadership on student outcome: How successful school leaders use transformational and instructional strategies to make a difference. *Educational Administrative Quarterly*, 52(2), 221–258.
- Department of Basic Education. (2018). *National Senior Certificate Report*. Department of Basic Education. <https://www.education.gov.za/Resources/Reports.aspx>
- Furtner M. R., & Rauthman, J. F. (2010). Relations between self-leadership and scores on the big five. *Psychological Reports*, 107(2), 339–353.
- García-Tuñón, G. M., Cistone, P. J., & Reio, T. G. (2016). Successful and sustained leadership: A case study of a Jesuit high school president. *Education and Urban Society*, 48(6), 611–623.
- Hakimi, S., Hejazi, E., & Lavasani, M. G. (2011). The relationship between personality traits and students' academic achievement. *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 29, 836–845.
- Hassan, H., Asad, S., & Hoshino, Y. (2016). Determinants of leadership style in big five personality dimensions. *Universal Journal of Management*, 4(4), 161–179.
- Hou, Y., Cui, Y., & Zang, D. (2019). Impact of instructional leadership on high school student academic achievement in China. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 20, 543–558.
- Houghton, J. D., Neck, C. P., & Manz, C. C. (2003). Self-leadership and superleadership. In C. E. Pearce & J. A. Conger (Eds.), *Shared leadership: Reframing the hows and whys of leadership* (pp. 123–140). Sage.
- Ibukun, W. O., Oyewole, B. K., & Abe, T. O. (2011). Personality characteristics and principal leadership effectiveness in Ekiti state, Nigeria. *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, 6(2), 247–262.
- Iwuanyanwu-Biemkpa, C. C. (2017). *Examining the relationship between congruency of perceived principal leadership style and leadership effectiveness* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Northcentral University, Prescott Valley, AZ.
- Kent, G., Kruger, H. A., & Du Toit, J. V. (2016). Class ranking of secondary schools in the North-West province of South Africa. *ORiON*, 32(2), 123–146.
- Kythreotis, A., Pashiardis, P., & Kyriakides, L. (2010). The influence of school leadership styles and culture on students' achievement in Cyprus primary schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 48(2), 218–240.
- Lide, E. S. (1929). Personality traits of school administrators. *Educational Research Bulletin*, 8(7), 141–143.

- Long, C. S., Alifiah, M. N., Kowang, T. O., & Ching, C. W. (2017). The relationship between self-leadership, personality and job satisfaction: A review. *Journal of Sustainable Development*, 8(1), 16–23.
- Marcella, M. (2017). Effective leadership for turbulent situations in educational institutions in Africa for the 21st century and beyond. *International Journal of Current Research*, 9(8), 56709–56720.
- Maree, K. (2013). *First steps in research*. Van Schaik.
- McConnell, A. W. (2017). *The perceived self-leadership capacity of K-5 principals in Illinois and its correlation to student achievement* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Western Illinois University, Macomb, IL.
- McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. (2010). *Research in education: Evidence-based inquiry* (7th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Mutalib, S. K. M. S. A. (2017). *Towards a theory of self-leadership and individual characteristics: Understanding the impact of situational factors* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Western Australia, Crawley, AU.
- Ngang, T. K., Mohamed, S. H., & Kanokorn, S. (2015). Soft skills of leaders and school improvement in high performing schools. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 191, 2127–2131.
- Oc, B. (2018). Contextual leadership: a systematic review of how contextual factors shape leadership and its outcomes. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 29, 218–235.
- Raihani, R. (2008). An Indonesian model of successful school leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 46(4), 481–496.
- Reddy, C. P., & Jooste, K. (2015). Self-leadership behaviour of clinical research nurses in the southern suburbs of Cape Town, South Arica. *African Journal of Physical Health Education, Recreation and Dance (Supplement 1:2)*, 473–484.
- Sarmawa, W. G., Suparta, Y., Riana, G., & Dewi, A. M. (2017). Influence of self-leadership on employee performance with work culture as mediator: Study at Tenun Ikat industries in Klungkung-Bali, Indonesia. *International Journal of Economics, Commerce and Management*, 12, 264–276.
- Schunk, D. H. (2012). *Learning theories: An educational perspective* (6th ed.). Pearson.
- Sesen, H., Tabak, A., & Arli, O. (2017). Consequences of self-leadership: A study on primary school teachers. *Educational Sciences, Theory & Practice*, 17(3), 945–968.

- Setwong, R., & Prasertcharoensuk, T. (2013). The influence of instructional leadership of school administrators on school effectiveness. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences, 106*, 2859–2865.
- Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Sun, M., & Ni, Y. (2016). Work environments and labor markets: Explaining principal turnover gap between charter schools and traditional public schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 52*(1), 144–183.
- Tat, U., & Zeitel-Bank, N. (2013, June). *Self-leadership development: The link between body, mind, and reflection*. Paper presented at the Management, Knowledge and Learning International Conference, Zadar, HR.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Gareis, C. R. (2014). Faculty trust in the principal: An essential ingredient in high-performing schools. *Journal of Educational Administration, 58*(1), 66–92.
- Van de Mierop, D., Clifton, J., & Verhelst, A. (2020). Investigating the interplay between formal and informal leaders in a shared leadership configuration: A multimodal conversation analytical study. *Human Relations, 73*(4), 490–515.
- Wallace Foundation. (2013). *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning*. Wallace Foundation.
- Wilson-Strydom, M., & Okkolina, M. (2016). Enabling environments for equity, access and quality education post-2015: Lessons from South Africa and Tanzania. *International Journal of Education Development, 49*, 225–233.