

School Principals' Perceptions of Their Roles as Agents of Change in Eswatini Schools

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10623026>

Published Date: 06-February-2024

Abstract: This study investigated the role of school principals as agents of change within the context of Eswatini's high schools, with a specific focus on transformational leadership. The research aimed to understand how principals perceived their roles as change agents, the leadership strategies and behaviors they employed to initiate, implement, and sustain positive change, as well as the challenges they faced in these efforts. This qualitative case study conducted in-depth interviews with five school principals from selected high schools in Eswatini, gathering qualitative data on their experiences and leadership approaches as agents of change. Through thematic analysis, the findings revealed that school principals recognised their roles in driving meaningful change within their schools. Principals perceived themselves as visionary leaders who should inspire and motivate both staff and students toward continuous improvement. Transformational leadership emerged as the predominant leadership style employed by principals as agents of change. The findings revealed that principals employed strategies such as clear communication, stakeholder engagement, and prioritized teacher well-being, to create a positive school culture conducive to change. However, the study also identified challenges, including resistance to change, resource constraints, and the need to maintain teacher morale. The findings further indicated that school principals in Eswatini played a critical role as change agents and revealed the importance of transformational leadership in educational institutions. To support principals' efforts as change agents the study recommends leadership development programs and increased resource allocation by the Ministry of Education and Training.

Keywords: change leadership, stakeholder engagement, change, transformational leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Agenda 2063 recognizes quality education as a cornerstone for Africa's development and transformation. The agenda aligns with various aspects of education, including access, relevance, skills development, innovation, and cultural identity, to empower African citizens and drive the continent's growth and prosperity. This agenda emphasises expanding access to quality education, particularly for marginalised and vulnerable groups. It acknowledges that quality education should be inclusive and reach all citizens, regardless of gender, location, or socioeconomic status. Moreover, Eswatini's National Development Framework (2009) emphasises the importance of education in achieving sustainable development which requires aligning with contemporary society and responding to change. Ensuring that the leadership provided by principals aligns with national goals for quality education is critical for the nation's progress. UNICEF (2020) reports that education plays a pivotal role in the social, economic, and intellectual development of any nation. In Eswatini, as in many other countries, schools are central institutions responsible for shaping the future of the nation by nurturing the potential of the

youth. Importantly, school principals serve as key drivers of change and ensure improvement within schools. Principals' leadership styles, strategies, and behaviors have a profound impact on the overall school environment and, consequently, on the quality of education provided (Myende and Bhengu, 2016). It may be important to highlight here that Eswatini, as a developing country has made significant progress in its education system since gaining independence in 1968 and is continuously trying to respond to educational reforms and treaties in which the country is a signatory. However, like many nations, the country faces a continuous need for educational reform and improvement to meet the evolving demands of the 21st century. The recent reform that the education sector has experienced in Eswatini is Competency-Based Education (CBE). The role of school principals in leading this educational reform is of paramount importance and boils down to their leadership roles.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

School principals play a critical role in shaping the educational environment and driving positive change. To effectively drive change, principals must understand their role as both educational leaders and change agents.

The principal as an agent of change and an educational leader

Change cannot happen on its own, especially in complex organisations like schools. It requires individuals to drive it forward, and one such vital figure in the school is the principal. Owens (2021) defines a change agent as a consultant or specialist hired to design and implement programs and the concept broadens when applied to schools. Oldroyd (2016) paints a wider picture of the change agent and views it as encompassing not just external consultants but any individual, internal or external, who actively plays a role in planned change within an organization. Unlike a detached consultant, the principal shoulders the full responsibility for navigating change within the school. He becomes the orchestrator of transformation, leading, guiding, and empowering the entire school community toward a shared vision. In essence, effective school change thrives on collaborative efforts led by dedicated change agents, with the principal acting as the central conductor of this intricate movement.

Numerous studies (Armstrong, 2014, Leithwood, 2016; Patterson, McAuley, Fleet, 2013) highlight the importance of school principals as leaders in education. These scholars believe that principals perform five key practices that include shaping a vision of academic success for all students, creating a climate hospitable to education, cultivating leadership in others, improving instruction, and managing people, and processes to foster school improvement. As such school principals are critical educational leaders who play a vital role in shaping the school environment and student outcomes. Armstrong (2014) emphasise that principals are responsible for setting the school's vision, mission, and goals, as well as ensuring that teaching and learning align with the set vision. In executing the leadership roles principals play a crucial role in initiating and implementing changes to improve educational quality.

Kars and Inandi (2018) indicate that principals who understand their roles as education leaders are able to build a strong team of teachers and staff, create a supportive learning environment for students, manage resources effectively, communicate effectively with all stakeholders, and build partnerships with the community. These are considered effective principals who can create a shared vision for change, build buy-in from stakeholders, develop and implement a plan for change that is achievable and sustainable, and manage the challenges and setbacks of change. By understanding their roles as educational leaders, principals can make a difference in the lives of their students and the communities in which their schools are located. The role of the school principal as an education leader is essential for creating schools where all students can succeed by responding to the ever-changing educational need

Change management and leadership

Change is inevitable in any organisation, and schools are no exception. For a school to move to where it needs to be, change has to happen. The principal's major role is as a leader and manager of the change process. Change in the context of schools and education means that principals are exposed to new controls and regulations, growth-increasing competition, technological developments and changes in the work force. Characteristics of change can be that the principals lead, rather than instruct. The decision-making hierarchy becomes flatter and the roles played in schools become more flexible. School principals need certain skills to implement change. Pettinger (2017) describes effective principals who can serve as agents of change to be the ones who can transcend beyond mere competence and transform into multifaceted educational leaders.

While professionalism, commitment, and dedication remain vital, they form the foundation upon which a symphony of skills orchestrates impactful leadership (Patterson, McAuley, Fleet, 2013). For meaningful change to take place in schools, principals must be strategic visionaries, crafting and implementing long-term plans that drive innovation and cater for diverse learners. Principals must foster collaborative environments where teachers, students, and communities share ownership, leveraging data-driven insights to inform decisions and navigate challenges with resilience. Beyond rigid structures, principals cultivate agile schools that adapt to changing educational landscapes and capitalise on unforeseen opportunities. This complicated tapestry of expertise, leadership, innovation, and collaboration assists principals in driving meaningful change and creating thriving learning environments where every student can flourish. Paletta (2019) observes that even when change is the desired state, it can still be difficult and it must be carefully considered and supported. Within the school context school principals play a critical role as change agents, responsible for envisioning, planning, and implementing changes that improve student learning and outcomes (Gundy & Berger, 2016; Armstrong, 2014). It may be highlighted here that school principals are key change agents in their schools. They are tasked with various changes, such as curriculum revisions, teaching methodologies, and staff development programs.

It may be important to highlight here that the path of educational change is rarely smooth, and often littered with obstacles. One of the most formidable hurdles experienced by principals as agents of change is educator resistance. Some teachers adamantly reject any reform, viewing it as an unwelcome intrusion into their established routines (Evans, 2019). Others, while comprehending the need for change, hesitate to embrace it due to fear of the unknown and a desire for stability (Evans, 2019).

Principals, entrusted with leading their schools through transformation, must recognize resistance as a normal human response, not a personal failing. Evans (2019) reminds us that change itself, by disrupting familiar patterns and routines, naturally triggers apprehension and uncertainty. Dismissing resistant educators as "stubborn" or "rigid" ignores the complex emotional and practical considerations driving their reluctance. Instead of generalizations and labels, Molekoa (2001) urges us to acknowledge the inherent disruptiveness of change. It can be messy, unpredictable, and emotionally charged. It can generate unforeseen consequences and strain even the most resilient individuals. In such a context, resistance becomes a natural, even predictable, reaction.

Therefore, the principal's role shifts from forceful implementation to patient navigation. It becomes vital to emphasize open communication and dialogue, create a safe space for educators to voice their concerns, understand their apprehensions, and address them with honesty and empathy.

By approaching resistance with understanding, empathy, and proactive support, principals can transform it from a roadblock into a catalyst for meaningful growth and successful change.

However, to implement change principals may employ the transformational leadership style (Yang, 2014). Transformational leadership is a style of leadership that inspires and motivates others to achieve shared goals (Kars & Inandi, 2018). Transformational leaders can create a positive vision for the future and get others to work towards it. This type of leadership is particularly important in school improvement, where principals need to be able to lead their staff and students through change. Research (Paletta, 2019; Meyer & Slater-Brown, 2020) has shown that principals' transformational leadership is positively associated with change and school improvement. For example, a study by Bass and Avolio (2020) found that transformational leadership was associated with higher student achievement, teacher morale, and parent satisfaction. Patterson, McAuley, and Fleet (2013) emphasize that principals are not only administrative leaders but also educational visionaries who drive improvements in teaching, learning, and school culture. Their success in bringing about change is contingent on their leadership skills, strategies for overcoming challenges, and their ability to create a supportive environment that fosters growth and innovation. Transformational leaders are quick to try innovative new technologies, teaching methods, or processes and they are the change makers that ensure the adoption and success of these innovations within their schools (Meyer & Slater-Brown, 2020).

Additionally, studies (Blossing, 2016) indicate that principals may encounter challenges and barriers when trying to instigate change. Common challenges include resistance from staff and the need to balance administrative tasks with desired reforms. Myende and Maifala (2020) note that principals spend a lot of time focusing on administrative tasks rather than implementing change in their schools.

Theoretical framework

Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) has been used as a lens in guiding this study. TLT was developed by James MacGregor Burns and later expanded upon by Bernard Bass (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This theory focuses on how leaders inspire and motivate followers to achieve exceptional outcomes and personal growth. Wiley (1998) observes that TLT is characterized by four dimensions which are; inspirational motivation, idealised influence, individualised consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Applied in this study through inspirational motivation school principals, as change agents need to inspire and motivate their teachers and staff to embrace and drive change within the school. This aspect of transformational leadership involves setting a compelling vision and fostering a sense of purpose and enthusiasm among educators. Additionally, through idealized influence, transformational leaders are expected to be role models for their followers. Thus effective school principals act as role models who embody the changes they seek to implement. Principals gain the trust and respect of their staff through their actions, their commitment to change, and integrity. Through individualised consideration, transformational leaders pay individual attention to their followers' needs, aspirations, and development. Transformational leaders provide support to their followers as individuals and not as a group. Within intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders encourage creativity, innovation, and critical thinking among their followers.

This study investigates how school principals promote a culture of innovation and continuous improvement within their schools, which is essential for successful change initiatives. By grounding the study in the TLT, I was in a position to use a framework that helped me to analyse leadership behaviors and strategies employed by school principals as they navigate the complexities of driving change in educational institutions. This framework also allowed for an exploration of the influence of these leadership behaviors on school culture, teacher morale, and student outcomes. In this study I explored how school principals tailor their change strategies to address the specific needs and concerns of teachers, recognising that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be effective.

Problem Statement

In the field of education, school principals play an essential role in shaping the learning environment, influencing teacher practices, and ultimately impacting student outcomes. As educational institutions face evolving challenges and demands, the role of school principals has expanded to encompass that of change agents, responsible for driving meaningful transformations within their schools. However, the effectiveness of principals in this role, as well as the factors that facilitate or hinder their success, remains a topic of considerable interest and concern. It remains unknown how school principals understand their roles as agents of change and how they go about executing their roles in this regard. It is therefore essential to investigate how school principals function as agents of change and understand the various challenges and opportunities they encounter in this capacity.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for many stakeholders within the education sector. Firstly, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge by shedding light on the roles and responsibilities of school principals as change agents. It explores the leadership strategies, behaviors, and contextual factors that influence principals' effectiveness in initiating and sustaining positive changes in schools. Additionally, the study provides valuable insights for various education stakeholders as it helps identify areas where support and resources can be allocated to enhance principal capacity in leading change initiatives. Furthermore, teachers and school staff stand to benefit from this research as it may uncover practices that positively impact school culture, teacher morale, and eventually, the quality of education provided to students through school principals executing their roles as change agents. Finally, students themselves are indirect beneficiaries, as effective principal-led changes can lead to improved learning experiences and outcomes. Thus, understanding the role of school principals as change agents has far-reaching implications for the entire educational system.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of school principals as agents of change in educational institutions which are the schools that they are leading.

Objectives of the study

Specifically, the study aimed at:

- Examining how school principals perceive their roles as change agents within their respective schools.
- Identifying the leadership strategies and behaviors employed by school principals to initiate, implement, and sustain positive changes.
- Investigating the challenges and obstacles faced by school principals in their efforts to drive meaningful change and the strategies they employ to address these challenges.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study followed a qualitative case study research approach. A qualitative research method focuses on the phenomenon that occurs in natural settings and data are analysed without the use of statistics (Maree, 2020). Qualitative research was deemed suitable for this study because I wanted to gather rich and thick data on school principals' perceptions of their roles as agents of change in selected Eswatini high schools. The interpretivism paradigm was used in this study. Interpretivism reveals reality through the participant's expressions and experiences (Creswell & Clark 2015). It allows researchers to view the world through the experiences of participants. In answering research questions, the researcher who uses the interpretivism paradigm uses the experiences of participants to interpret his/her understanding of collected data.

A purposive and convenient sampling strategy was used to select participants for this study. Mushoriwa (2016) posits that purposive sampling is used to decide on information-rich respondents about a specific phenomenon. Using these sampling strategies I hand-picked the participants based on my judgment of their suitability for the study and my accessibility to the research sites. Five principals from five high schools in the Hhohho region of Eswatini were selected as participants in the study. These principals had different teaching experiences and qualifications and they have been in principals' positions for different periods ranging between five and ten years. Additionally, these principals were easily accessible to the researcher to allow for as many visits as possible during the data collection process. Data were generated using semi-structured interviews. The narratives were audio-recorded, transcribed, and confirmed by the participants for credibility and trustworthiness. Data were analysed thematically. The analysed data were presented and supported with direct quotations from the participants.

Ethical issues were taken into consideration throughout the undertaking of this study (Smith, 2016), and as such permission was sought from all relevant parties and informed consent forms were signed by all participants, before their participation. All the processes that were to unfold in the study were clearly and comprehensively explained to participants including the purpose of the study. The anticipated duration of the study was revealed before participation began, and participants were informed of their rights to refuse participation or withdraw at any time without any penalty. Having received all explanations about the study and being satisfied with the purpose of the study participants voluntarily participated in the study by availing themselves for interviews which were held at a time convenient to them in their duty stations. In presenting data, I used the following pseudonyms to refer to the participants to protect their identities: Principal A, Principal B, Principal C, Principal D, and Principal E respectively.

Findings and discussions

Principals as agents of change

It was in the interest of the study to establish how participants view their roles as agents of change in their schools. The responses below as provided by principals reflect diverse perceptions of their roles as agents of change. In providing responses principals as agents of change drawn from different aspects of their leadership based on their schools' unique needs and contexts and the possible activities they execute as they implement change. The responses below are informative in this regard;

"I consider myself the driving force behind our school's vision and mission, responsible for setting a clear path and ensuring that our educational goals are not just words on paper but a tangible reality. I actively engage with stakeholders to ensure

that our school community shares in and works collectively to achieve our mission. My role as a change agent involves inspiring and motivating our staff, students, and parents to embrace change and work towards continuous improvement." Principal D. In addition, Principal B had this to say; *"My primary focus revolves around enhancing teaching and learning within our institution. I collaborate closely with our dedicated teachers to explore innovative instructional strategies and to develop a curriculum that aligns with modern educational standards. By championing professional development and encouraging a growth mindset among our educators, I aim to empower them to excel in their roles and provide our students with the best possible learning experience."*

On the contrary Principal C said, *"Creating and sustaining a positive school culture is my top priority as a change agent. This entails fostering an environment of inclusivity that considers the well-being of all our students and staff. We have implemented various programs and initiatives that address issues such as bullying and mental health. I firmly believe that a nurturing school culture lays the foundation for success in both academic and personal development of learners."*

Principal E had this to say, *"Facilitating collaboration among our teachers, parents, and the broader community is fundamental to my role as a change agent. Building strong partnerships and actively involving stakeholders is key to the success of our school. By encouraging open communication and involvement, we harness the collective wisdom and resources of our community to address challenges and seize growth opportunities."* Principal A said; *"Identifying areas that require improvement and spearheading change initiatives is a significant aspect of my role as a change agent. In response to the evolving educational landscape, we have recently introduced technology upgrades aimed at enhancing learning experiences. These changes reflect our commitment to staying at the forefront of educational innovation and ensuring that our students are well-prepared for the future."*

The pronouncements by the participants clearly indicate that school principals understand their roles in schools as agents of change. The responses demonstrate that principals play a critical role as school change agents. Principals influence their leadership roles to set a vision, inspire staff and students, promote collaboration, and spearhead change initiatives that improve teaching and learning, create a positive school culture, and prepare students for success in the future. The findings are in line with Gundy and Berger (2016) and Armstrong (2014) who highlighted that principals as agents of change in their schools are responsible for envisioning, planning, and implementing changes that improve student learning and outcomes.

Leadership strategies and behaviors

The findings revealed a variety of leadership strategies and behaviors employed by principals in schools as agents of change. The pronouncements below are informative in this regard;

Principal B said, *"I firmly believe that involving all stakeholders in decision-making is crucial for successful change initiatives. I regularly conduct collaborative meetings with teachers, staff, students, and parents to gather input and ideas. This participatory approach not only generates diverse perspectives but also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to the changes we introduce."* Principal E added and said, *"One of the key strategies I employ is setting a clear and inspiring vision for our school's future. I ensure that our entire school community understands this vision and its alignment with our mission. This helps create a shared sense of purpose and direction, motivating everyone to work towards common goals."*

Interestingly, Principal D was confident to say, *"I consider myself a transformational leader who empowers and motivates our teachers and staff. I encourage them to think creatively, take calculated risks, and embrace innovation. By fostering a culture of continuous learning and improvement, I aim to create a dynamic and adaptable school environment."* While principal A said; *"Open and transparent communication is vital during times of change. I prioritize keeping everyone informed about the reasons for change, its benefits, and the steps involved. Moreover, I actively listen to concerns and feedback, addressing them constructively. This two-way communication builds trust and minimizes resistance to change."*

Principal C had this to say; *"Investing in the professional growth of our educators is a priority. I provide opportunities for continuous professional development and support teachers in acquiring new skills and knowledge. Empowered and skilled teachers are better equipped to implement changes effectively in their classrooms."*

The findings reveal that principals as change agents employ a variety of leadership strategies and behaviors, including involving all stakeholders in decision-making, setting a clear and inspiring vision for the school's future, empowering and

motivating teachers and staff, communicating openly and transparently and investing in the professional growth of educators. These strategies and behaviors are essential for creating a school culture that is supportive of change and innovation, and for enabling teachers and students to achieve their full potential (Armstrong, 2014). Importantly, these strategies and behaviors as indicated by (Blossing, 2016) can collectively create a leadership approach that fosters positive changes, engages stakeholders, and ensures the sustainability of those changes over time the pronouncements of the participants as change agents demonstrate their commitment to effective leadership.

The strategies that principals use to overcome obstacles when implementing change.

It was in the interest of the study to establish strategies that principals employ to overcome obstacles when implementing change. Participants indicated several challenges they encountered in the process of driving change in schools as change agents including resistance to change, resource constraints, staff buy-in, meeting community expectations, and maintaining teacher morale. The comments below made by participants are informative in this regard;

Principal B commented; *"One of the primary challenges is the resistance to change, which is often rooted in the fear of the unknown. To address this, I emphasize the 'why' behind the change, share success stories from other schools, and involve teachers in the planning process to make them feel more invested."* On a different note Principal E said; *"Resource limitations, such as budget constraints and insufficient staffing, can hinder change efforts. To overcome this, I explore alternative funding sources, prioritise school needs, and seek donor support."* Principal C added and said *"Getting all staff members on board with a new initiative can be challenging. To build buy-in, I provide professional development opportunities, offer training and coaching, and create a culture of collaboration and shared ownership in the change process."* Holding a different view Principal D commented; *"Time is often a limited resource, especially with the demands of daily school operations. To manage this challenge, I allocate time for planning and implementation, and delegate responsibilities."*

Principal A noted teacher exhaustion and parents' expectations as some of the challenges and said; *"Meeting the expectations of parents and the community while implementing change can be tricky. I maintain open lines of communication, share the rationale for changes, and involve parents and community members in decision-making through advisory groups or town hall meetings. Moreover, change can sometimes lead to teacher burnout or low morale. To address this, I prioritize staff well-being, acknowledge their efforts, and provide emotional support whenever a need arises."*

It is important to note from the participants' pronouncements that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to overcoming obstacles when implementing change. The specific strategies that principals employ will vary depending on the nature of the change, the school context, and the specific challenges they are facing (Myende & Bhengu, 2016). However, the findings suggest that principals can increase their chances of success in the face of resistance by communicating effectively with all stakeholders, building buy-in and collaboration, managing resources effectively, and prioritizing staff well-being. It is also crucial to note from the findings that helping people understand the purpose of change can help to reduce resistance. Principals can do this by clearly articulating the benefits of the change and how it will align with the school's mission and vision.

4. CONCLUSION

This study discussed the roles of school principals as agents of change, specifically exploring transformational leadership within selected high schools in Eswatini. The findings have shed light on the critical role that principals play in driving change and fostering a culture of continuous improvement within their schools. Transformational leadership, characterized by visionary thinking, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, has been identified as a prominent leadership style adopted by principals in these high schools. It was evident that principals who embraced transformational leadership were more effective in initiating, implementing, and sustaining meaningful changes that enhanced the overall quality of education. The study also highlighted several key challenges faced by school principals in their leadership roles as change agents including resistance to change, resource constraints, and the need to maintain teacher morale. However, principals were able to resolve these challenges through strategies such as clear communication, stakeholder engagement, and a data-driven approach to decision-making.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Educational authorities in Eswatini should invest in leadership development programs tailored to enhance transformational leadership skills among school principals. These programs should focus on equipping principals with the tools and knowledge needed to initiate, implement, and sustain change.
- Efforts should be made to address resource constraints faced by schools as these hamper principals' efforts to implement change.
- The government through the Ministry of Education and Training should consider increasing budget allocations to schools, especially schools in deprived contexts to ensure that they have the necessary resources for implementing educational reforms.
- During change principals should prioritize teacher well-being and morale. Providing opportunities for professional growth, and offering emotional support can contribute to a positive school culture and sustained motivation amongst teachers.

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International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

Vol. 11, Issue 1, pp: (36-44), Month: January - February 2024, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

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