

Research Article

Cite this article: Ntamane, N. L., & Letuma, M. C. (2026). Voices from Frontline: Principals' Perceptions on Boosting Learner Performance in Primary Schools. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 23, e2026057. <https://doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2026.23.57>

Received August 14, 2025
Accepted November 21, 2025

Keywords: Instructional Leadership, leadership strategies, primary education, underperformance in schools

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Voices from Frontline: Principals' Perceptions on Boosting Learner Performance in Primary Schools

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Primary education lays the foundation for future academic and socio-economic success. Scholars emphasise that learner performance depends on both classroom teaching and school leadership. However, in South Africa, the primary education level continues to grapple with persistent challenges. This study explored the challenges faced by primary school principals in enhancing learners' academic performance and their perceptions of leadership strategies that may address these barriers.

Materials/methods. Guided by Baldanza's Model of 21st Century Instructional Leadership, the study adopted an interpretive paradigm, a qualitative approach, and a multiple case study design. Using purposive sampling, three primary school principals were selected. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews, school documents and analysed thematically.

Results. Principals operate in constrained environments shaped by learner and teacher absenteeism, limited resources, policy pressures, and ongoing behavioural issues. While some schools exhibited evidence of leadership practice implementation, others demonstrated limited documentation and operational capacity. Strategies such as curriculum oversight, resource management, collaborative leadership, and data-informed decision-making have emerged as essential to improving performance. However, many of these strategies remain aspirational rather than enacted.

Conclusion. Although principals express a firm conceptual grasp of instructional leadership aligned with Baldanza's Model of 21st Century Instructional Leadership, systemic and contextual barriers prevent full realisation of these strategies. More targeted support is required to translate leadership perceptions into sustainable practices. The study contributes to the discourse on underperformance in South African primary schools by offering valuable insights into the contextual challenges faced by principals. It highlights the gap between leadership intent and actual implementation.



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1. Introduction

Education is universally acknowledged as a foundational pillar for individual development and societal advancement (Firdaus & Suwendi, 2025). Within this broader context, primary education is especially pivotal, laying the groundwork for future academic success and socio-economic mobility (Ghosh, 2024). However, in South Africa, the primary education level faces persistent challenges. National and provincial assessments reveal alarmingly low levels of literacy and numeracy among primary school learners. For instance, the Department of Basic Education reports show that only 35% of Grade learners demonstrated arithmetic proficiency, while only 39% exhibited adequate literacy skills (Qvist, 2023). More recently, Rasila (2024) highlighted a critical concern that many Grade 4 learners struggle to read for meaning, an indicator of deep-rooted systemic issues.

These outcomes have prompted growing concern over the effectiveness of school leadership in driving learner achievement. Scholars have increasingly emphasised that learner performance is not only influenced by classroom instruction but also shaped by the broader leadership context of the school (Özdemir et al., 2024; Memela & Ramathan, 2022). Principals are seen as central agents in steering school improvement, fostering a supportive climate for teaching and learning, and ensuring that resources are mobilised toward educational priorities (Jhonshon et al., 2024). Indeed, leadership has been widely recognised as the second most influential school-based factor affecting learner outcomes, after classroom teaching (Özdemir et al., 2024).

With the growing demands like curriculum changes, inclusive education, and technology integration, the role of school principals has evolved (Ari et al., 2022). The broader evidence base on organisational change supports this move, with leadership being identified as the key lever for improvement across sectors and contexts (Harris & Jones, 2023). In education, the school-turnaround literature confirms that strong leadership is still critical to achieving and maintaining teaching and learning improvements, and poor leadership is often cited as a cause of organisational stagnation or decline (Leithwood et al., 2020). Although different leadership approaches have been implemented in provinces such as Gauteng (Zuma, 2024), the Eastern Cape (Felix & Otilia, 2021; Siyoyo, 2022), and KwaZulu-Natal (Mokgwathi, 2025), improvements in learner academic performance remain inconsistent and minimal. Even where slight improvements have been noted, such as a 4% increase in some areas of the Eastern Cape (Siyoyo, 2022) and a 5% improvement in Mathematics in KwaZulu-Natal (Mokgwathi, 2025), these successes have not translated into widespread, consistent national improvements. International research also highlights that school leaders directly and indirectly affect learning outcomes, primarily by shaping school conditions, supporting instructional quality, and promoting collaborative professional cultures (Hallinger, Gümüş, & Bellibaş, 2020; Nguyen, Harris, & Ng, 2020).

The performance of primary schools in under-resourced environments remains a challenge, particularly in the Free State Province, where the Xhariep Education District has not been the subject of continuous empirical investigation. While research has been conducted on school leadership in other provinces (Zuma, 2024; Felix & Otilia, 2021; Siyoyo, 2022; Mokgwathi, 2025), little is known about how primary school principals in Xhariep address leadership challenges to impact academic outcomes. This is a gap because it is well established that school leaders are responsible for creating conditions that foster learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). Hence, this study aims to contribute to this gap by exploring the challenges faced by primary school principals in enhancing learner academic performance and their views on leadership practices that can improve achievement. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What challenges do primary school principals in Xhariep District encounter in their efforts to influence learners' academic performance?

2. What are principals' perceptions of the leadership strategies that can address these challenges and enhance academic achievement?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Leadership in School Context

Leadership within schools is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can be understood through the interrelated dimensions of leadership theories, styles, and strategies. Theories offer the conceptual foundation that shapes how leadership is understood and enacted, influencing the styles leaders adopt, the characteristic patterns in how they lead, communicate, and make decisions. Within each style are leadership strategies: leaders' concrete actions to realise their vision and objectives. In this regard, theory informs style, and style is operationalised through strategy. For instance, a principal operating within a social constructivist paradigm may demonstrate a distributed leadership style by implementing shared decision-making and a collaborative goal-setting strategy. In contrast, a leader influenced by bureaucratic or exchange-based theories might adopt a more autocratic or transactional style, relying on directive control, monitoring, and rewards for compliance.

Nonetheless, leadership effectiveness is context-dependent. No single theory, style, or strategy is suitable for all situations. Each school operates within its sociocultural, political, and institutional context that influences leadership practice. As Ghamrawi et al. (2024) argue, effective leadership is not about applying isolated strategies but combining approaches to build a favourable school climate, support teaching and learning, and foster external engagement. In South Africa, contextual challenges such as resource limitations and socio-economic inequalities continue to affect school performance, despite post-apartheid reforms (Köhler, 2022; Saka, 2024). As a result, the role of the principal has expanded beyond traditional administration to that of visionary leader, instructional expert, and adaptive strategist navigating multiple pressures to create enabling learning environments (Bauer, 2024).

Although many leadership approaches are discussed in the literature, including servant, transformational, ethical, and strategic leadership, this review focuses on five styles: distributed, instructional, collaborative, transactional, and autocratic leadership. These styles were selected because they are closely aligned with the aims of this study. The exclusion of other leadership styles is not a dismissal of their relevance but a necessary focus to ensure depth and alignment with the study's objectives.

Distributed leadership, rooted in social constructivist theory, challenges the traditional leadership style as an individual pursuit and instead promotes shared decision-making and collective responsibility (Harris et al., 2013, cited in Nadeem, 2024). It is particularly suited for schools managing curriculum reform, diverse learners, and community engagement, as it draws on the insights of multiple stakeholders (Nadeem, 2024). However, its success depends on a shared vision and strong collaboration (Elwyn et al., 2015), and it often encounters resistance in hierarchically structured school cultures (Leithwood et al., 2010). Establishing trust and role clarity remains challenging, as does maintaining it (Spillane, 2010; Hallam et al., 2015).

Instructional leadership, on the other hand, emphasises the improvement of teaching and learning through clear academic goals, teacher support, and monitoring of instructional practices (Kilag & Susan, 2023). Leaders who execute this style act as pedagogical leaders, offering feedback, promoting professional development, and ensuring accountability (Arifin et al., 2024). It has been strongly associated with learner success, particularly when leadership includes active classroom engagement (Yusof, 2019, cited in Kilag & Susan, 2023). Nevertheless, instructional leadership is sometimes misunderstood as an individual responsibility, leading to inconsistent application and limited stakeholder ownership (Robinson et al., 2011, cited in Kilag & Susan, 2023).

Collaborative leadership aligns closely with the principles of inclusion, participation, and relational responsiveness. It is defined by the ability to inspire shared vision and foster meaningful collaboration (Chrislip & Larson, 1994, cited in Bhutto et al., 2024). Such leaders listen actively, provide constructive feedback, and enable collective decision-making processes (Wepner & Hopkins, 2010). While this style builds trust and empowers stakeholders, it may hinder efficiency in urgent situations due to its dependence on consensus.

Transactional leadership, in contrast, operates on the principle of exchange; leaders motivate through rewards and sanctions in response to performance (Purwanto & Sulaiman, 2023). It helps maintain order, enforce rules, and ensure compliance. However, in dynamic and innovation-driven environments, it may stifle teacher autonomy and creativity. Finally, autocratic leadership is characterised by centralised authority and top-down decision-making (Harms et al., 2018). While this style may be effective in emergencies or highly structured contexts, it often discourages participation and can negatively affect staff morale and learner-centred practices.

Considering the literature, each leadership style presents unique strengths and limitations, suggesting that its influence on learner performance may depend on the contextual realities of the school, the principal's ability to adapt, and the strategic combinations employed.

2.2. Barriers to Effective Leadership in Primary Schools

In examining the challenges faced by primary school principals, the literature highlights several interconnected barriers. These include staff resistance (Nwisagbo et al., 2025), socio-economic disparities (Romanowski, 2022), resource limitations (Herath et al., 2023), and policy constraints (Marienfeldt et al., 2025), each posing significant obstacles to effective leadership and academic achievement. This section critically reviews these factors to situate the current study within existing scholarship and to deepen understanding of the contextual realities confronting school leaders.

Staff resistance is often cited as a significant impediment to effective school leadership. Principals frequently encounter opposition from teachers and support staff, particularly when introducing change or promoting a new vision. Nwisagbo et al. (2025) explain that such resistance can undermine principals' efforts to drive school improvement, especially when innovation is needed. Similarly, Gkrimpizi et al. (2023) note that entrenched cultural attitudes within school environments can lead to resistance that obstructs educational reform and disrupts school progress.

In addition to resistance from within the school, socio-economic disparities exacerbate the leadership challenges that principals face. In resource-constrained communities, the lack of financial and material support severely hampers efforts to promote learner achievement. Romanowski (2022) notes that school leaders in disadvantaged contexts frequently face challenges in accessing essential teaching materials, co-curricular opportunities, and mechanisms for parental involvement. Gkrimpizi et al. (2023) further emphasise that such inequalities have a significant impact on the quality of education. Moreover, other scholars have noted that schools in such contexts frequently contend with high teacher turnover and burnout, further destabilising leadership continuity and effectiveness (Osten, 2024; Martin & Benedetti, 2025). A related challenge involves the limited availability of resources. Principals operating in poorly resourced schools are compelled to manage with inadequate budgets, insufficient staffing, and substandard infrastructure. Herath et al. (2023) argue that these limitations often force leaders to prioritise immediate operational needs over strategic academic goals. As a result, long-term initiatives such as staff development, which is vital for sustained instructional improvement, are frequently neglected (Klusmann et al., 2022).

Compounding these structural and contextual barriers are policy constraints that restrict the autonomy of school principals. Many operate within rigid policy frameworks that do not allow sufficient flexibility to respond to local needs. Marienfeldt et al. (2025) highlight that centralised, top-

down mandates often focus on compliance rather than enabling innovation at the school level. Westerbroek (2025) also emphasises that such policies limit the capacity for creativity and discourage school leaders from tailoring leadership practices to their unique contexts. Amghar (2022) supports this view, arguing that national policies frequently overlook the individual realities of schools, leaving principals without the authority to act in contextually appropriate ways. As Constantinides (2022) concludes, this tension between policy compliance and the demand for responsive leadership often places school leaders in a difficult position, limiting their effectiveness.

2.3. Leadership strategies that enhance academic performance

Leadership strategies are deliberate practices that principals implement to enhance teaching, learning, and overall school performance. In the context of primary schools, these strategies are especially critical in shaping the conditions that support academic achievement. Drawing on recent scholarship, this discussion highlights key leadership strategies that have demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing learner outcomes, including vision and goal setting, curriculum oversight, professional development, data-informed decision-making, and creating positive learning environments.

Despite numerous challenges, several leadership strategies have proven effective in promoting learner achievement when applied intentionally and consistently. Vision and goal setting form the foundation of strategic school leadership. Culduz (2024) argues that a clear and shared vision enables principals to set measurable goals that guide the efforts of all stakeholders. Thus, when the school leaders articulate compelling visions aligned with academic priorities, they inspire educators and learners to pursue high standards (Jhonshon et al., 2024). In the Free State, Matsepe (2022) found that well-communicated goals enhanced teacher motivation and performance, improving learner outcomes. Similarly, Cumar et al. (2025) demonstrated that goal-oriented leadership in Kenyan schools cultivated a results-driven culture focused on academic success.

Curriculum and instructional oversight is another crucial leadership strategy. Ghamrawi et al. (2024) note that effective principals closely monitor teaching and learning to ensure curriculum coverage and alignment with standards. The implication is that the primary school principals who observe classrooms, provide constructive feedback, and support evidence-based teaching practices may strengthen the quality of instruction (Meng, 2023). In a study conducted in Limpopo, Ntuli and Mahlangu (2023) found that principals who actively supported curriculum implementation and mentorship significantly enhanced learner performance.

Professional development is also central to instructional leadership. Ghamrawi et al. (2024) argue that school leaders must create opportunities for teachers to refine their skills and remain current with emerging educational practices. In the South African context, Cilliers et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of sustained professional development in enhancing teaching efficacy and improving learner outcomes. Fairman, Smith et al. (2022) confirm that teachers with up-to-date pedagogical strategies are better positioned to address learner diversity and academic challenges. Soriano and Bautista (2025) further indicate that leadership-driven professional development fosters a more productive and effective teaching environment. Notably, principals who incorporate behaviour management training into their professional development support structures stand a better chance of realising the core purpose of schooling, as learner behaviour remains a key barrier to effective teaching (Letuma, 2024).

The use of data to inform decision-making has become a hallmark of effective school leadership. Goffin et al. (2022) emphasise that data-driven decisions allow targeted interventions that address identified learning gaps. Rather than relying on intuition, principals who analyse performance trends and assessment data can tailor strategies to improve student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Nadeem (2024) found that involving teachers in data discussions boosts their engagement and strengthens collective responsibility for academic performance. Bhutto et al. (2024) demonstrated

that such collaborative, evidence-based practices significantly enhance learner achievement and school climate.

Lastly, creating a positive learning environment is foundational to academic success. Debasu and Yitayew (2024) define this as a space that promotes safety, inclusivity, and intellectual stimulation. Ramzan et al. (2023) observe that when learners feel valued and respected, they are more likely to engage in the learning process. Principals who invest in building relationships (Letuma, 2025), encouraging open communication, and fostering mutual respect help cultivate an atmosphere that supports both academic and personal growth (Abbaspour et al., 2024). Abbaspour et al. (2024) corroborate that respectful and emotionally supportive environments contribute directly to improved learner outcomes and long-term school success.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Baldanza's Model of 21st Century Instructional Leadership, which offers a contemporary lens for understanding how school principals can effectively drive academic performance through instructional leadership. Developed by Marcia Baldanza, the model responds to the evolving demands of education in the 21st century, highlighting the need for school leaders to adopt more flexible, collaborative, and innovation-oriented approaches to improve teaching and learning outcomes (Baldanza, 2018). At its core, the model moves beyond traditional, hierarchical leadership practices. It adopts a more participatory and strategic approach that incorporates global perspectives, technological integration, and differentiated learning to meet the diverse needs of learners (Baldanza, 2018).

Baldanza's model is based on four interrelated principles that align with the overarching goal of enhancing learner achievement. The first principle, Strong Advocacy and Leadership, emphasises that school principals who articulate a clear educational vision and actively champion quality teaching can inspire educators and drive collective action. When school leaders serve as vocal advocates for student success, they help create a school culture where teachers feel motivated and supported in their instructional roles (Baldanza, 2018).

The second principle, Adult Professional Culture, foregrounds the importance of nurturing a respectful and empowering professional environment for educators. Baldanza (2018) argues that when principals cultivate a culture where teachers are valued as key agents of change, it fosters sustained improvements in teaching practice. Such a culture encourages trust, collaboration, and a shared commitment to continuous improvement, all of which are vital to enhancing learner outcomes.

The third principle, Continuous Improvement of Teaching Expertise, reinforces the significance of sustained professional development. According to Baldanza (2018), principals who invest in teacher learning through mentoring, coaching, and training provide the foundation for high-quality instruction. Equipping educators with updated pedagogical tools and reflective practices enables them to better respond to the evolving educational landscape and address the diverse academic needs of learners.

The fourth and final principle, Results-Oriented Teams, calls for structured collaboration among teachers, guided by shared goals and informed by data. Baldanza (2018) advocates using learner performance data to drive instructional planning and team-based problem-solving. Principals facilitate targeted interventions and instructional strategies that directly enhance academic performance by engaging teachers in data analysis and collective reflection.

This model aligns closely with the aims of the current study, which seeks to explore both the challenges principals face and the leadership strategies they perceive as effective for improving learner performance in primary schools. In the Xhariep Education District context, Baldanza's

framework provides a practical and theoretical foundation for understanding how instructional leadership, when grounded in advocacy, collaboration, professional growth, and data use, can be leveraged to address persistent academic underperformance. It also allows the study to critically examine how these leadership tenets are constrained or supported within primary schools.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Paradigm

This study is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning within their social and professional environments (Solari & Martín, 2022). Interpretivism prioritises participants' subjective experiences, beliefs, and interpretations, making it an appropriate lens through which to explore the perceptions and lived realities of school principals. Given that this study investigates how principals in the Xhariep Education District perceive and navigate leadership challenges about learner academic performance, the interpretive paradigm enabled a deeper understanding of the meanings principals assign to their leadership practices and the contextual factors that shape them.

3.2. Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted to facilitate an in-depth exploration of principals' perspectives and leadership experiences. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research enables the examination of complex phenomena through participants' lived experiences, reflections, and contextual interpretations. This approach was particularly suitable for this study, as it enabled the researcher to gain rich, detailed insights into the unique and context-specific strategies school principals employ to influence learner performance. The qualitative approach also enabled the exploration of the nuanced challenges faced by principals and how the realities of their school environments influence their leadership choices.

3.3. Design

This study employed a multiple-case study design to explore principals' leadership strategies across varied school contexts. This approach enabled a comparative analysis of patterns, similarities, and differences between cases, enhancing the richness of the data (Quintão et al., 2020). According to Halkias et al. (2022), multiple case studies offer an in-depth examination of real-life situations, providing a deeper understanding of complex phenomena. Furthermore, Halkias et al. (2022) note that this method enables both within-case and cross-case analysis. The design was well-suited for this study, as it facilitated the investigation of how different principals respond to leadership challenges. It also helped capture the contextual influences shaping their strategies.

3.4. Data collection

The participants and research sites were purposively selected to ensure relevance to the study's focus. Three primary school principals from different schools participated in semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a flexible and in-depth exploration of their experiences and views (Karatsareas, 2022). These interviews enabled the researcher to gain insight into principals' challenges and perceptions of leadership strategies that could influence learner academic performance. In addition to interviews, data were collected through document analysis, which involves categorising and interpreting information from various sources to identify recurring themes (Dalgish et al., 2020, as cited in Letuma, 2023). This method was appropriate for the study, providing additional context into the leadership values, priorities, and practices that principals associate with improved academic outcomes.

Table 1. Details of research sites

Name of school	Number of principals	Number of deputy principals	Number of Departmental Heads	Number of teachers	Number of learners
School A	1	2	2	31	1139
School B	1	1	4	21	952
School C	1	0	2	14	450

Table 2. Participants' profile

School	Pseudonym	Position	Gender	Teaching experience	Highest qualification
School A	Jeff	Principal	Male	34 years	B.Ed Honours
School B	Hike	Principal	Male	27 years	BTEC in HR
School C	Mimi	Principal	Male	20 years	SPTD

Keys: B.Ed. Hons. -Bachelor of Education, BTEC-Bachelor of Technology, SPTD-Senior Primary Teachers Diploma

3.5. Data Analysis

Data in this study was analysed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for deriving meaningful insights from qualitative data (Christou, 2022). This approach enabled the researcher to interpret transcribed interviews and documents, refining them into coherent themes that reflect principals' perceived leadership strategies to influence learner academic performance. Thematic analysis enabled a systematic and in-depth exploration of recurring patterns across cases, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings (Christou, 2022). The process involved several stages, beginning with familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts (Christou, 2022), followed by coding significant features linked to the research questions. Codes were then examined to generate and refine overarching themes. These themes were reviewed for coherence and relevance, clearly defined, and supported with illustrative data extracts to present a comprehensive narrative aligned with the study's objectives.

Table 3. Thematic Analysis of Principals' Challenges and Perceptions of Leadership Strategies

Research Question	Main Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative Participant Quotes	Emerging Pattern
<i>What challenges do primary school principals in Xhariep District encounter in their efforts to influence learners' academic performance?</i>	Challenges hindering effective leadership	Absenteeism	"Regular absences cause learners to fall behind." – Luke, School B"Even teachers' absenteeism disrupts learning." – Mike, School C.	Absenteeism from both learners and educators impedes instructional consistency.
		Resource shortages	"Learners sharing textbooks slows down learning." – John, School	Inadequate resources and infrastructure limit the quality of

			A"Overcrowded classes limit teacher-learner interaction." – Mike, School C.	teaching and learner engagement.
		Progression policy	"Progression without performance lowers accountability." – John, School A"Some learners are emotionally affected by being progressed." – Mike, School C	Automatic progression can demotivate learners and complicate teaching in academically diverse classrooms.
<i>What are principals' perceptions of the leadership strategies that can address these challenges and enhance academic achievement?</i>	Perceived leadership strategies to influence performance	Curriculum and resource management	"Curriculum oversight involves supporting educators to improve instruction." – Luke, School B"Access to technology and resources aids retention." – School A	Monitoring curriculum and managing resources strategically enhances teaching and learning outcomes.
		Collaborative learning culture	"I promote teamwork and shared values among staff." – John, School A"A supportive school culture improves learner motivation." – Luke, School B	Creating an inclusive and respectful environment motivates educators and learners and supports academic performance.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Formal permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Xhariep District of the Free State Department of Education to ensure ethical compliance. Ethical clearance was granted by the University of the Free State Research Ethics Committee under clearance number UFS-HSD2024/1445. The three purposively selected primary schools secured approval to conduct and record interviews. Informed consent was obtained from all participating principals prior to data collection, with each participant fully briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and all data were handled with strict adherence to ethical research standards.

4. Results

4.1. The challenges that primary school principals in Xhariep District encounter in their efforts to influence learners' academic performance.

Three sub-themes emerged in response to the first research question: What challenges do primary school principals in Xhariep District encounter in their efforts to influence learners' academic performance? Participants reported facing a range of obstacles that hinder the effectiveness of their leadership strategies. These include persistent learner absenteeism, shortages of essential resources, the constraints posed by the progression policy, and various barriers to learning. Each challenge impacts their ability to create and sustain an environment conducive to academic improvement.

4.1.1. Absenteeism

The data revealed that one of the biggest challenges principals face when implementing leadership strategies to influence learners' academic performance in primary schools is absenteeism. Jeff (School A) highlighted:

Regular learner absences can disrupt the learning process and create gaps in knowledge acquisition. Some parents fail to prioritise education, leading learners to stay home instead of attending school.

Hike (School B) explained:

Regular absences from school cause many learners to fall behind their classmates, which results in poor academic performance. In my school, household duties, lack of parental support and financial difficulties are the main reasons why learners miss school.

Mimi (School C) also noted that the absenteeism is not only on the learners' side, but also on the teachers' side. He stated:

Educators' frequent absenteeism from classes for professional or personal reasons hurts learners' academic performance.

Hike (School B) added:

Both learners' and educators' absenteeism disrupts overall school operations and affects individual performance.

4.1.2. Resource shortages

The data revealed that another challenge principals face when implementing leadership strategies to influence learners' academic performance in primary schools is resource shortages. Jeff (School A) narrated:

Insufficient teaching and learning resources, such as exercise books, writing materials, and textbooks, make it more challenging to deliver effective teaching. When textbooks are scarce, many learners are compelled to share, which hinders their ability to do tasks quickly or study alone. Ho ya ka nna (according to me), resource shortages slow down the teaching process and have an impact on learners' retention and comprehension of knowledge.

Hike (School B) highlighted:

The shortage of basic infrastructure and classrooms is a critical issue that affects both learners and educators. Insufficient tables and chairs for learners, a lack of proper airing and overcrowded classrooms create an uncondusive learning atmosphere, making it hard for educators to implement effective teaching strategies.

Mimi (School C) noted:

Overcrowded classrooms limit opportunities for individualised learning and feedback by limiting interaction for teachers and learners.

4.1.3. Progression policy

The data revealed progression policy as another challenge that principals encounter when implementing their leadership strategies to influence learners' academic performance in primary schools. Jeff (School A) expressed concerns as follows:

Automatic progression, in which learners go to the next grade irrespective of their academic performance, reduces teachers, learners and parental accountability. Specific learners grow comfortable because they know they will reach the grade even if they do not work hard enough. This causes learners to lack desire and perform poorly academically because they are not under any pressure to fulfil basic proficiency criteria.

Hike (School B) stated:

The following are the challenges the progression policy poses for educators working with learners of varying academic skill levels. I have observed that when learners progress without grasping basic concepts, educators often find it difficult to successfully instruct, as specific learners lack the necessary understanding for higher-level content.

Mimi (School C) shared:

Learners being progressed and retained affects them emotionally and psychologically because specific learners endure low self-esteem and dissatisfaction as they proceed to higher grades without the essential academic skills.

The extract above suggests that absenteeism in schools is a multifaceted issue. It implies that school leadership, though mandated to implement policy, may not be doing so effectively. The shortage of textbooks raises critical questions about the management of funds allocated for their procurement, as well as the systems in place to ensure that learners return the books issued to them each year for the benefit of future cohorts. While a shortage of classrooms hampers teaching and learning, an issue that may partly be attributed to the provincial education department, the application of the progression policy also highlights concerns about the learning culture, an aspect that school leadership must monitor.

4.2. The principals' perceptions of the leadership strategies that can be implemented to address the challenges and enhance academic achievement.

Four sub-themes emerged in response to the second research question: What are principals' perceptions of the leadership strategies that can address these challenges and enhance academic achievement? Participants shared a range of techniques they believe could effectively respond to the challenges faced in their school contexts. These included effective curriculum and resource management, prioritising continuous professional development for teachers, using data to guide decision-making, and empowering educators through shared leadership. Collectively, these perceived strategies reflect principals' views on how to strengthen their leadership practices to positively influence learner academic performance in primary schools.

4.2.1. Curriculum and resource management

The data revealed that curriculum and resource management are two leadership strategies that principals can employ to overcome challenges and improve learners' academic performance in primary schools. Hike (School B) argued:

Curriculum oversight not only includes monitoring but also involves encouraging educators to work together to ensure standardisation in how lessons are taught and evaluated. Educators feel

encouraged and supported to improve their teaching strategies when principals encourage ongoing discussion on curriculum implementation and shared accountability to benefit learners. As a principal, I should ensure that resources are utilised efficiently to reduce wastage and maximise impact.

Jeff (School A) stated:

Learners' ability to understand and retain information is greatly influenced by their access to technology-enhanced learning tools, well-equipped classrooms and libraries.

Mimi (School C) stated:

Effective resource management for academic growth leadership strategy is a transformative leadership style instrument that, when appropriately executed, addresses challenges such as factors that hinder academic performance, including a lack of learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, and teacher burnout.

4.2.2. Collaborative learning culture

The data revealed that a collaborative learning culture is a leadership strategy principals can employ to overcome challenges, improve learners' academic performance in primary schools, and foster a positive school culture. Jeff (School A) alluded:

Learners and educators are greatly impacted by my capacity, as the school principal, to create a school culture based on teamwork, shared goals, and respect for one another. Therefore, educators are more motivated and engaged when principals prioritise creating a friendly and encouraging environment, which improves instruction delivery and also improves learners' academic results.

Hike (School B) stated:

An inclusive school culture enhances learners' participation and discipline by making them feel supported, safe, and respected. Learners develop a stronger sense of belonging when they experience a nurturing school environment, which improves their motivation to learn and improve their academic performance.

Mimi (School C) explained:

Learners' and educators' attitudes are influenced by school culture. By fostering a learning environment where both learners and educators flourish a positive school culture creates the cornerstone of academic success.

4.2.3. Data-driven decision making

Data-Driven Decision-Making (DDDM) emerged as a leadership strategy that principals can employ to overcome challenges and influence learners' academic performance in primary schools. Jeff (School A) shared:

It is essential to collect and analyse learners' performance data to identify learning gaps and address them proactively. Effective principals use attendance registers, behavioural data, and assessment results to implement tailored interventions, ensuring that every learner receives the necessary support.

Hike (School B) stated:

By using DDDM, principals can more effectively adjust their leadership strategies, provide educators with professional development, and allocate funds, all of which help create an environment that supports academic success.

Mimi (School C) further added:

Including parents in data communications encourages good academic achievement by motivating them to assist their children with schoolwork at home. Data monitoring prevents minor problems from escalating into major issues by enabling school principals to track progress and make timely adjustments to curriculum delivery and policies.

4.2.4. Empowering educators

Empowering teachers to grow emerged as a leadership strategy that principals can employ to overcome challenges and influence learners' academic performance in primary schools. Hike (School B) emphasised:

Educators feel more secure and prepared to use effective teaching methods in the classroom when principals offer opportunities for ongoing professional development, such as peer learning sessions, workshops, and mentorship programs, that enhance learners' academic performance.

Mimi (School C) stated that:

Offering educators the opportunity to be part of decision-making processes and giving them the authority to make decisions about their own curricula and classroom management, they become more committed to their jobs and feel a sense of ownership. In addition to fostering teamwork and accountability, this strategy enhances teachers' morale, ultimately leading to a higher quality education and improved learner outcomes.

Jeff (School A) alluded:

Teacher empowerment includes acknowledging and rewarding educators' work with rewards and chances of professional development, saying when a particular educator did well this will lead to them going above and beyond to help learners, attend their specific needs, and foster a welcoming and stimulating learning environment.

4.3. Document Analysis

For this study, we requested the minutes of staff meetings specifically for Term 3 to identify the typical discussion items and determine whether these reflected any deliberate efforts to improve learner performance. Of the three participating schools, only School A was able to provide the requested meeting minutes. At the time of the request, Schools B and C indicated that they could not produce such records.

Table 4. Details of documents analysed per school and their availability

School	Minutes of Staff Meeting Availability
A	Available
B	Unavailable
C	Unavailable

Table 4 shows that none of the sampled schools provided the minutes of the staff meeting for Term three, except for School A.

4.3.1. Findings from the Minutes

The Minutes of the Staff Meeting at School A revealed several key administrative and instructional matters. One of the agenda items focused on the job descriptions of educators, with particular emphasis on time management and mutual respect among staff. Clear guidelines were provided on how to report learner late-coming from Grade R to Grade 7 without compromising teaching time. Each teacher received a copy of the updated job descriptions.

The assessment plan was also addressed. Educators were encouraged to submit formal assessments at least three days before the scheduled examination dates. The importance of accurately completing and monitoring attendance records was underscored. Teachers were reminded to monitor both period and class registers every week and to submit class registers to the office by 10:00 a.m. every Friday.

Another key item was the identification and support of learners at risk. Those performing at levels 1, 2, or 3 were classified as at-risk learners. Teachers were advised to review assessments with these learners on a question-by-question basis and to provide them with additional time during assessments. The minutes also recorded that extra classes were scheduled for all phases on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays.

Lastly, learner behaviour was discussed. The minutes reflected ongoing disciplinary concerns, and staff were reminded to resume proactive supervision of learners during break times to help curb misbehaviour.

Table 5. Thematic analysis findings from Document analysis

Research Question	Theme	Data Extract from Minutes	Interpretation/Meaning
RQ1: Challenges principals face in influencing academic performance	Late-coming and time loss	"Clear guidelines were provided on how to report learner late-coming from Grade R to Grade 7 without compromising teaching time."	Late arrivals disrupt teaching and learning time. Managing punctuality remains a challenge.
RQ1	Assessment planning and adherence	"Educators were encouraged to submit formal assessments at least three days before the scheduled examination dates."	Ensuring timely submission of assessments may be difficult, highlighting issues with time management and planning.
RQ1	Learner underperformance	"Learners performing at levels 1, 2, or 3 were classified as at-risk learners."	Many learners struggle academically, creating a need for remedial intervention.
RQ1	Disciplinary challenges	"The minutes reflected ongoing disciplinary concerns."	Persistent misbehaviour among learners poses barriers to learning and teaching.
RQ2: Leadership strategies to enhance achievement	Proactive communication of job roles	"Each teacher received a copy of the updated job descriptions."	The principal promotes accountability by clearly communicating expectations.
RQ2	Structured academic support	"Teachers were advised to review assessments with these learners on a question-by-question	Leadership encourages differentiated support to improve learner outcomes.

		basis and provide additional time."	
RQ2	Monitoring and accountability systems	"Teachers were reminded to monitor both period and class registers... submit class registers by 10:00 a.m. every Friday."	Regular monitoring is used as a strategy to track learner attendance and engagement.
RQ2	Remedial and enrichment programs	"Extra classes were scheduled for all phases on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays."	The school leadership provides structured academic support through extra classes.
RQ2	Behavioural supervision	"Staff were reminded to resume proactive supervision of learners during break times."	Enhancing learner discipline through active teacher presence reflects a preventative leadership approach.

Document analysis reveals that only School A offered staff-meeting minutes, indicating a lack of organisational accountability in Schools B and C. The lack of documentation in these schools indicates poor record-keeping practices, non-compliance with administrative requirements, or a lack of transparency, which undermines principals' ability to lead with evidence, monitoring, and structured communication. School A's minutes, however, reflect both instructional problems (tardiness, delayed assessments, poor learner performance, discipline) and leadership responses in line with Baldanza's Model. Explicit job descriptions, assessment protocols, and support for at-risk students demonstrate Strong Advocacy, Adult Professional Culture, and Continuous Improvement of Teaching Expertise. Checking registers and conducting extra classes are examples of a Results-Oriented approach where data is used to inform teaching and learning. The findings in Table 5 suggest that School A exhibits some aspects of effective instructional leadership, but the absence of documentation in Schools B and C could reflect broader management deficiencies that limit principals' capacity to improve academic outcomes.

5. Discussion

This study explored the challenges that primary school principals in the Xhariep District encounter in enhancing learners' academic performance, as well as their perceptions of leadership strategies to address these challenges. The findings drawn from interviews and document analysis are interpreted through the lens of Baldanza's Model of 21st Century Instructional Leadership, emphasising Strong Advocacy and Leadership, Adult Professional Culture, Continuous Improvement of Teaching Expertise, and Results-Oriented Teams (Baldanza, 2018).

5.1. Challenges Encountered by Principals

Absenteeism as a Barrier to Leadership

One of the challenges identified across all participating schools was chronic absenteeism among both learners and educators. Participants noted that absenteeism disrupts learning continuity, weakens the implementation of leadership routines, and undermines planned instructional interventions. These observations support Kearney et al. (2022), who emphasise that absenteeism

hinders academic progress, particularly in disadvantaged contexts where instructional time is already limited. Similarly, Pyne et al. (2023) argue that teacher absenteeism erodes institutional accountability and reduces school-wide morale.

However, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how absenteeism also manifests in leadership documentation practices: while School A's staff minutes showed deliberate attempts to curb late arrivals, Schools B and C exhibited minimal evidence of structured accountability processes. This gap suggests that absenteeism not only affects teaching and learning, as documented by previous studies, but also impedes the enactment of the leadership strategies highlighted in the literature, particularly curriculum oversight (Ghamrawi et al., 2024) and consistent monitoring. The study, therefore, extends existing scholarship by illustrating how absenteeism weakens the operational foundation on which principals rely to implement effective leadership practices.

Resource Shortages and Their Implications for Leadership

A second challenge involved persistent resource shortages, including inadequate textbooks, overcrowded classrooms, and infrastructural constraints. Participants repeatedly connected these shortages to reduced learner engagement and heightened teacher frustration. These findings reinforce Herath et al. (2023), who argue that poor infrastructure diminishes both teacher morale and learner focus, and align with Feng et al. (2023), who assert that resource scarcity deepens inequalities and limits leaders' operational capacity.

This study contributes new insight into how resource shortages interact with leadership practices in primary schools: even where schools such as School A attempted to maintain administrative structure through assessment timelines and register submissions, the absence of material resources constrained the implementation of strategic leadership practices discussed in the literature, particularly vision-driven planning (Culduz, 2024) and long-term professional development (Cilliers et al., 2022). The data, therefore, demonstrate that resource constraints do not merely serve as background challenges but actively shape and sometimes restrict the leadership strategies that principals are theoretically expected to use.

Policy Constraints: The Progression Policy and Leadership Burden

The Progression Policy emerged as a significant leadership challenge. Principals perceived the policy as creating unrealistic expectations, promoting academically unprepared learners, and placing additional burdens on teachers. These perspectives resonate with Diwan (2022), who frames progression without mastery as "silent exclusion," and with Constantinides (2022), who argues that rigid policy frameworks often limit the capacity for responsive school-level decision-making.

This study deepens current scholarship by showing how the policy affects day-to-day leadership routines. Although School A's documents did not explicitly reference the Progression Policy, the identification of learners at Levels 1–3 and the requirement for differentiated support reveal the policy's hidden operational consequences. This finding illustrates the tension identified in the literature between compliance with national mandates (Marienfeldt et al., 2025) and the need to tailor leadership strategies to local realities. Thus, the study contributes a nuanced understanding of how policies designed to support equity may paradoxically stretch leadership capacity and complicate the pursuit of academic improvement.

Learner Discipline and the Leadership Environment

Document analysis also highlighted ongoing concerns about learner discipline. For instance, School A's minutes emphasised the need for sustained teacher supervision during breaks, reflecting persistent behavioural issues. Although discipline was less prominent in interviews, the documents reveal that behavioural management remains a core leadership priority. This finding aligns with

Letuma (2024), who argues that learner behaviour is a central barrier to instructional effectiveness and that principals must integrate behaviour management into professional development structures.

The study advances the literature by demonstrating how discipline issues impact leadership culture across the school. The emphasis on supervision highlights the need for a strong Adult Professional Culture and shared responsibility for learner behaviour—elements that are not always reflected in staff practice. This finding complements the literature on positive learning environments (Debasu & Yitayew, 2024; Abbaspour et al., 2024) by demonstrating that supportive environments require not only interpersonal relationships but also consistent adult modelling and presence. Thus, the study adds contextual evidence showing that leadership for discipline is not uniform across schools and depends heavily on how principals reinforce expectations through everyday routines.

5.2. Principals' Perceptions of Leadership Strategies that may influence academic performance

In response to these challenges, principals identified several leadership strategies they perceive as essential for improving academic performance, though not consistently implemented due to contextual constraints.

Curriculum and Resource Management as a Core Leadership Strategy

Principals identified curriculum monitoring and resource optimisation as essential strategies for improving academic performance. They emphasised the need to oversee curriculum delivery, support teachers, and ensure that scarce resources are used effectively. These perceptions align strongly with Ghamrawi et al. (2024), who argue that instructional leadership is fundamental to aligning classroom practice with school goals, and with Klusmann et al. (2022), who note that effective oversight of instructional programmes enhances teaching quality.

This study contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating that principals possess a clear understanding of these instructional leadership practices; however, contextual constraints, such as absenteeism, resource shortages, and progression pressures, hinder their consistent application. This nuance contributes to the literature by illustrating the implementation gap between what principals aspire to do and what their contexts allow, an insight that extends Baldanza's principles of Strong Advocacy and Instructional Oversight into the realities of under-resourced primary schools.

Collaboration and School Culture as Catalysts for Improvement

Principals also emphasised the importance of cultivating a collaborative school culture characterised by teamwork, mutual respect, and shared goals. This perception resonates with Debasu and Yitayew (2024), who assert that collegial school cultures enhance learner outcomes, and aligns with Thelma et al. (2024), who highlight how professional learning communities (PLCs) support teacher collaboration and collective problem-solving. Elwyn et al. (2015) similarly contend that collaboration builds instructional capacity and fosters innovation.

The contribution of this study lies in showing how principals recognise the value of collaboration but struggle to institutionalise collaborative cultures due to contextual barriers such as staff resistance and policy pressure. By linking these findings to Baldanza's Adult Professional Culture, the study provides empirical evidence that collaboration is not merely a value but a leadership requirement that becomes difficult to enact in environments marked by instability and resource constraints.

Data-Driven Decision-Making (DDDM) as an Emerging Leadership Practice

Data-driven decision-making was perceived as a powerful leadership tool. Principals noted that monitoring academic performance, attendance records, and learner progress could support targeted interventions and strengthen accountability. These insights align with Goffin et al. (2022), who argue

that DDDM equips school leaders to address learning needs systematically, and with Darling-Hammond et al. (2022), who emphasise its role in improving school accountability. Documentation from School A, including register monitoring and identification of at-risk learners, demonstrates a partial adoption of these practices, suggesting alignment with Results-Oriented Teams. Nadeem (2024) also emphasises the importance of sharing academic data with parents to facilitate school-home collaboration.

This study contributes to the understanding by demonstrating that while principals value DDDM, its effective implementation is uneven across schools, largely due to contextual challenges such as inconsistent documentation, leadership gaps, and limited professional capacity. These findings highlight the developmental nature of DDDM in primary schools and illustrate how contextual realities influence the extent to which data-informed leadership can be effectively enacted.

Teacher Empowerment and Professional Growth as Drivers of Improvement

Principals also identified teacher empowerment as crucial to enhancing teaching and learning. They emphasised recognising teachers' contributions, involving them in decision-making, and supporting professional development activities. These views are consistent with Cilliers et al. (2022), who argue that teacher empowerment enhances professional autonomy and commitment, and with Fairman et al. (2022), who note that inclusion in leadership decisions improves classroom outcomes.

The contribution of this study is its demonstration that principals see professional development and empowerment as ideal leadership strategies but face significant barriers, such as resource limitations and policy constraints, that hinder the consistent application of Continuous Improvement of Teaching Expertise. This reflects how empowerment is often valued conceptually but remains unevenly enacted in practice, reinforcing earlier literature on implementation gaps while also revealing context-specific constraints that limit empowerment efforts.

5.3. Limitation

This study was limited in several ways. First, it employed a qualitative design with a small sample of only three principals, which restricts the generalisability of the findings. Second, data were generated solely through semi-structured interviews, which may not have captured the full scope of participants' practices. Third, while document analysis was intended to complement interview data, only School A provided staff meeting minutes, limiting triangulation across sites. The absence of documentation from Schools B and C also hindered a fuller comparison of leadership practices. Lastly, the study reflects perceptions rather than actual implementation, which may differ in practice.

6. Conclusion

The study explored the challenges primary school principals in the Xhariep District face in enhancing learners' academic performance, as well as their perceptions of leadership strategies to address these challenges. Findings revealed that principals operate in highly constrained environments marked by learner and teacher absenteeism, resource shortages, policy-related pressures such as automatic progression, and ongoing disciplinary issues. These challenges undermine the consistent implementation of instructional goals and place significant demands on school leadership.

Through interviews and document analysis, the study found that while some leadership practices are being implemented, particularly in School A, principals in general largely perceive certain strategies as essential, even if they have not yet been fully implemented. These include curriculum and resource management, fostering a collaborative school culture, applying data-driven decision-making, and empowering teachers through professional recognition and development opportunities.

The interpretation of findings through Baldanza's Model of 21st Century Instructional Leadership provides a valuable theoretical lens. The study shows that the model's four principles: Strong Advocacy, Adult Professional Culture, Continuous Improvement, and Results-Oriented Teams, align closely with principals' perceptions of effective leadership. However, systemic and contextual barriers, such as a lack of documentation in Schools B and C and unequal resource distribution, limit the extent to which these principles can be fully realised in practice. While principals demonstrate a strong conceptual understanding of instructional leadership, there is a need for targeted support and systemic alignment to ensure that these leadership perceptions can be translated into sustained, school-wide practices that meaningfully enhance learner outcomes.

7. Suggestion

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen.

Instructional leadership in under-resourced primary schools:

- Strengthen attendance monitoring systems by involving parents, district officials, and school governing bodies to address both learner and teacher absenteeism, as it was found to severely disrupt learning continuity.
- Improve resource allocation and support by the Department of Education to address persistent shortages of teaching materials and overcrowded classrooms, which limit the effectiveness of leadership interventions.
- Review and support the implementation of the Progression Policy, ensuring that principals receive guidance and resources to assist academically unprepared learners without overburdening teachers.
- Promote a collaborative school culture by facilitating regular staff development sessions, peer support structures, and open communication to align with the principle of Adult Professional Culture.
- Institutionalise data-driven decision-making (DDDM) by training principals and staff in using academic and behavioural data to inform interventions and learner support strategies.
- Ensure compliance with administrative policy, including the mandatory documentation of staff meetings, as the absence of minutes in two schools undermined accountability and reflection.

Suggestion for future research

Future studies could explore instructional leadership using larger and more diverse samples to enhance representativeness across districts. Comparative studies between schools with and without effective documentation practices may offer deeper insights into leadership accountability. Mixed-methods approaches could enrich understanding by integrating observational or quantitative data. Further research could also examine how principals implement perceived strategies over time. Lastly, investigating the impact of the Progression Policy on leadership and learner performance across multiple provinces would be valuable.

Declarations

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process. While preparing this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT-4o vision and Grammarly to support text structuring, grammatical corrections, style, and language cohesion. QuillBot was also used for paraphrasing from the dissertation into this paper.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding. The study was not funded.

Ethical Approval. Ethical clearance was granted by the University of the Free State Research Ethics Committee under clearance number UFS-HSD2024/1445.

Data Availability Statement. The data for this study is available upon request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgements. This article is based on research originally conducted as part of Ntamane Nthabiseng's master's dissertation titled "Exploring Principals' Instructional Leadership Strategies and the Influence on Learners' Academic Performance in Selected South African Primary Schools," submitted in July 2025 to the Faculty of Education, Department of Management, Policy and Comparative Education, University of the Free State. Dr. Motsekiso Calvin Letuma supervised the study. The dissertation is unpublished and is not publicly accessible. This manuscript has been revised and adapted for journal publication. The author confirms that the content has not been previously published or disseminated and adheres to ethical standards for original publication.

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