

# The development of a behavioural competency framework for school principals



## Authors:

Jaco Janse van Vuuren<sup>1</sup>   
Francois van der Bank<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Industrial Psychology, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Francois van der Bank,  
fvdb@sun.ac.za

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**Orientation:** More than two and a half decades into South Africa's democracy, the majority of the country's learners receive low-quality school education, adversely affecting upward social mobility. Ensuring quality education for all South Africans requires a combined approach of equitable resource allocation and effective school leadership that transforms resources into educational outcomes.

**Research purpose:** The objective of the study was to develop a behavioural competency framework for school principals.

**Motivation for the study:** While past studies highlight school leadership and management to be pivotal in the establishment and maintenance of well-performing schools, less is known about the behavioural competencies required by school principals.

**Research approach and method:** Guided by a synthesis of literature on school management, critical incident interviews were conducted with a sample of 10 school principals with good track records. The salience of the literature-derived competencies was established, and the content supplemented by contextualising the competencies with specific behavioural denotations from the interviews.

**Main findings:** Eleven key competencies emerged from the data: creating a school vision and setting strategic direction, setting goals and expectations, developing school staff, influencing and communicating, resourcing strategically, leading with compassion, maintaining a student-centred learning environment, making decisions, managing self, managing teaching and learning, and leading across school boundaries.

**Managerial implications:** The competencies identified provide a blueprint to guide human resource management interventions aimed at establishing effective school leadership.

**Contribution:** The study provides a rich source of information about critical school principal behaviours, explored from an integrated perspective that acknowledges the school context.

**Keywords:** school principal competencies; educational leadership; quality education; school transformation; school performance.

## Introduction

An increasing amount of evidence from various study fields indicates that despite all efforts, the South African school system contributes far below its capacity in assisting the upward mobility of learners from disadvantaged schools in the labour market (De Vos, 2011; Shepherd, 2011; Van der Berg, 2007). Findings of various studies by Stellenbosch University's Research on Socio-Economic Policy (RESEP) team show that more than 25 years into South Africa's democracy, an education system that produces unequal learning opportunities continues to exist (Moses et al., 2017; Mthimunye-Kekana, 2017; Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). In this system, the small segment of elite in the wealthy part of the economy enjoys good quality school access, while predominantly black learners are exposed to low-quality schools, with adverse effects on cognitive attainments and learning outcomes in the formative years. Differences of this nature and magnitude have a profound effect on university access and success (Van Broekhuizen et al., 2016) as well as the capacity for higher income jobs required for upward social mobility (Moses et al., 2017; Spaull, 2013).

Analysis by Van Broekhuizen et al. (2016) of the educational progress of the 2008 matric cohort suggests that the problem originates early in learners' developmental and educational paths. Results from their analysis show that students' access to university, as well as their subsequent academic performance is strongly influenced by their matric school results, emphasising the importance of mastering educational outcomes during the schooling years. Moreover, the results show that there is a clear association between school background indicators (i.e.

schools' performance, school poverty quintile, and school wealth index) and university outcomes. And because lower performing schools in the lower quintiles with a poor standing on the wealth index are mostly attended by black students (because of South Africa's apartheid history and policies on the segregation of education), it is unsurprising that the results show significant inequalities in university outcomes between race groups. This finding supports the evidence-based stance that race is not correlated with inherent ability, and that where differences in malleable attainments do exist, it is because of inequitable access to developmental and learning opportunities (Theron, 2007). This calls for an urgent need for redress by improving the quality of primary and secondary schools in South Africa.

The malfunctioning of the school system appears to be largely a problem surrounding the inability of schools to convert resources into learner outcomes. The previously held belief that learner performance differentials are primarily because of variations in access to school resources or teacher-learner ratios have been found to be overemphasised. While these factors cannot be ignored, the force that ultimately drives school success is the quality of its leadership (Mthimunye-Kekana, 2017; Taylor, 2011; Van der Berg, 2008; Wills & Van der Berg, 2021). The focal importance of school leadership in the midst of external factors has especially been highlighted by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Different school principals responded in different ways and with varying impact on teaching and learning (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). The formula for success is clear: improving the school system and ensuring quality education for all South Africans requires a combined approach of equitable resource allocation together with improved leadership and management (Crouch & Mabogoane, 1998; Gustafsson, 2005; Van der Berg & Burger, 2002). Following an extensive literature review, Leithwood et al. (2004) concluded:

Indeed, there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader. Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst. (p. 7)

Furthermore, school leadership 'is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning' (p. 5). Also noteworthy is the observation by Mthimunye-Kekana's (2017) that the role of school leaders is even more important in the context of poorer, urban schools.

Given that school leadership is a core key differentiator of quality education in South African schools, it begs the question: What are the behaviours that characterise good leadership? In other words, what enables certain school principals to obtain positive results, even with the odds against them? These questions highlight the need to identify and understand the behaviours displayed by successful school principals. However, it is evident from current

selection, promotion and development practices that a detailed understanding of school leadership competencies is still lacking.

In her analysis of the South African school principal market, Wills (2015a) sheds light on an important problem that is keeping school leadership from improving the national school quality to the extent that it could. Wills's (2015a) findings show that an urgent need exists for a change in the way school principals are appointed and promoted, including the predictors used to identify school leadership potential. Her analysis found traditional predictors of school principal performance such as relative education qualification value (REQV) levels and years of experience to have little observable impact on key outcomes, such as academic results. She subsequently calls for a competency-based approach to the selection, development and succession management of South African school principals. This, in turn, would require the development of a contextually appropriate and practically viable competency-based framework for South African school leaders – starting with school principals. It is here that the Industrial-Organisational Psychology discipline is best suited to partner with educational specialists in both the academic and professional side of such an endeavour. This study aims to answer this call by developing a blueprint for such a competency framework.

## Research purpose and objectives

While the importance of school leadership is widely acknowledged, a comprehensive understanding of school leadership behaviour and how it relates to school performance outcomes appears to be lacking in research (Bush & Glover, 2016, 2021; Bush et al., 2006; Gustafsson, 2005; Mthimunye-Kekana, 2017; Van Staden & Howie, 2014), which may explain some of the problems that occur in school principal selection (Wills, 2015b).

Much of the research on school leadership focuses on job experience, qualifications or other attributes believed to be predictive of success, rather than on accurate, contextualised descriptions of the required behaviour or competencies (Robinson et al., 2008). Also, research on school leadership success does not sufficiently account for the complex relationships between leadership behaviour and the various intermediate and final school performance outcomes. This may explain why many previous studies have failed to demonstrate the significant impact of school leadership on school outcomes. It has been shown that the direct effects of school principal behaviour on more distal outcomes (such as pass rates) tend to be weak, but when accounting for intermediate variables (such as quality of instruction), the effects are statistically significant and large (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). From this it is concluded that school principal behaviours can only be understood within the broader context of interrelated school outcomes, with a core emphasis on intermediate

outcomes or mediators such as interaction with teachers and parents, and management of organisational features (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Kruger et al., 2007; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wills & Van der Berg, 2021).

To address the foregoing shortcomings, this study explored specific leadership behaviours instrumental to school quality and success. The focus was on identifying the behaviours evident in school principals who have succeeded against the odds and managed to turn around failing schools. Furthermore, this study aimed to explore the behaviours from an integrated perspective, acknowledging the school context and various intermediate and final school performance outcomes. The following two specific research objectives guided the study:

- To identify and synthesise literature on school leadership and generic leadership competencies with the aim of formulating school principal competencies, which, when demonstrated, will lead to school success across situations and levels of education.
- To use critical incident interview information to establish the salience of the literature-based competencies and to produce observable behavioural denotations of the competencies, useful as criteria for the development and validation of school principal competency-based instruments across the talent management cycle.

## Literature overview

### The school principal as focal point of school performance

South Africa's primary and secondary schools exist to achieve specific educational objectives. These objectives are expressed in terms of measurable distal and proximal outcomes that collectively comprise what it means for a school to perform. As the leader of an organisational unit, the school principal is ultimately accountable for the performance of their schools. This does not mean that the school principal is directly involved in every single school activity, but the school principal is mandated with the responsibility to strategically influence key drivers that determine whether the school meets its educational objectives. For this reason, contractually, school principals are on the so-called 'red carpet' if their schools underperform.

This begs the following questions: Firstly, what are the outcomes that need to be achieved for a school to be regarded as successful? Secondly, if the school principal is accountable for the achievement of these performance outcomes, which leadership behaviours would need to be demonstrated to achieve success? Questions such as these emphasise that the study of school leadership behaviours is inseparable from the performance of schools. Although the formulation and testing of causal relationships between specific behaviours and outcomes fall outside the scope of this particular study, the literature review is structured in a way that acknowledges this connection.

### School performance outcomes: The indicators of school success

As the study of school principal behaviour is inextricable from the school performance construct, the literature study set out to first identify the school performance outcomes representing school success. Results of longitudinal studies that started in 1990 by the Consortium on Chicago School Research culminated in a pioneering publication by Bryk et al. (2010), which revealed that school performance is comprised of a system of performance processes and underlying outcomes that are sequentially interrelated, mediate each other, and span across the internal workings and the external conditions of a school. The findings by Bryk et al. (2010) point to the importance of applying a systems approach in diagnosing and influencing school performance. These authors developed an essential support framework of school performance, which found that four essential support processes mediate the survival and growth of schools in the same way that elements of organisational performance affect each other in studies such as Nicholson and Brenner (1994) and Theron et al. (2004). The four processes include a coherent instructional guiding system, good professional capacity, a student-centred learning climate, and strong parent–community ties. As this study endorses a systems approach to organisational performance, Bryk et al.'s (2010) essential support framework was adopted as an overarching framework to guide the identification of universal school performance outcomes in the literature. The following main outcomes were derived from the literature study:

- *Professional capacity* acts as an overall indicator of the internal strength of the schools' human resource capacity and includes the quality of the school staff, their professional development, as well as their capacity to work together to improve learning (Bryk et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2019).
- *Quality of instruction* refers to the quality of a coherent instructional guidance system that outlines both the 'what' and 'how' of instruction in order to optimise the quality of interaction between learners and teachers, the learning support of teachers, the work atmosphere in the classroom, and the extent to which subjects and lessons are systematically organised during instruction (Bryk et al., 2010; Leithwood, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2019).
- *Parent–community ties* reflect the quality of ties between the school and the parent and the community in relation to the learner's school participation and learning motivation (Bryk et al., 2010; El Nokali et al., 2010; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Leithwood, 2021).
- *A student-centred climate* is defined as an atmosphere that enables learners to think of themselves as learners and includes a safe and orderly environment in which learners have an orientation of high academic expectations, believe in themselves, and want to persist to achieve (Bryk et al., 2010; Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Ripski & Gregory, 2009; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2019).

- *Learner engagement* refers to the extent to which a *learner* identifies with the school and demonstrates behaviour that indicates a belonging to the school and its learnings. It includes the learner's participation in school activities, both inside and outside of the classroom (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004).
- *Curricular achievement* represents the average final examination performance for all significant subjects. It includes the level of achievement as well as the mean pass rate in core subjects, which is an estimate of the probability that *learners* will pass or be promoted to the next grade. This measure can be computed by averaging the actual pass rates for each school year (Leithwood et al., 2004).
- *Learner readiness* refers to the attainment of the basic cognitive, emotional, physical, and social skills needed for successful transition to the next educational stage. This outcome shares similarities with Super's (1990) concept of career maturity and should not be confused with school readiness in the paediatric sense of the term. Any organisation's ultimate performance outcome is derived from its purpose. In the case of primary and secondary schools, the ultimate purpose is to send off school *learners* who are comprehensively ready for the next stage of their lives – in line with what their potential may be and in line with what that next stage may demand (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

### School principal competencies: What good school leadership looks like

Naidoo (2019) makes a strong argument that poor principalship is one of the reasons for a continuous decline in academic performance and low educational outcomes in public schools. This again highlights the importance of leadership development of school principals and thus why defining leadership capacity in terms of school principal behaviour is critical.

Although there is no shortage of articles on primary and secondary educational leadership in the international arena, much of the research seems to be characterised by leadership jargon and overlapping charismatic descriptions of the leadership construct (Anderson & Sun, 2017). Leadership terms such as 'distributed leadership', for example, overlap with other leadership styles such as 'shared', 'collaborative', and 'democratic' leadership. Such labels further entangle with broader leadership concepts such as 'servant leadership' and 'charismatic leadership'. Less, however, is known about measurable behaviours that are empirically proven to be related to key school effectiveness indicators (Bush & Glover, 2016, 2021; Bush et al., 2006; Leithwood et al., 2004). This study prioritised leadership literature that focused more on universal leadership behaviours that are measurable and demonstrated across industries, cultures, and organisational levels (Bartram & Inceoglu, 2011), with the aim of supplementing it with the context-specific details from the qualitative interviews.

In their comprehensive review of research on how educational leadership influences student learning, Leithwood et al. (2004) highlighted three core sets of successful school leadership behaviours to steer the field towards a more functional approach of school leadership. The three sets are: (1) setting directions, (2) developing people, and (3) redesigning the school as organisation. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that both the content and structure of Leithwood et al.'s (2004) primary leadership behaviours speak to well-validated frameworks such as the SHL Corporate Leadership Model by Bartram and Inceoglu (2011), and locally developed models such as Leadership Behaviour Inventory (LBI-2) (Spangenberg & Theron, 2011). It is noteworthy that all these leadership models follow the notion that successful leadership is a product of the demonstration of leadership behaviours that stem from three to four broad leadership roles that are sequentially linked and forms a process.

In line with this approach, premier leadership research studies from different disciplines were merged to produce three behavioural school leadership roles that formed the outline of the literature-framework from which this study identified more specific literature-based school leadership competencies as a basis for the quality analysis. The three leadership roles are as follows:

- Creating a school vision and setting strategic direction
- Preparing the school for the implementation of the school vision and strategy
- Implementing the school vision and strategy

It should be observed that the behavioural interpretation of the term 'competencies' is used in this study. Bartram (2005, p. 1187) describes competencies as: 'Sets of behaviours that are instrumental in the delivery of desired results or outcomes'. The definition of competencies in this study therefore allows for the term to be used synonymously with the phrase 'critical behaviours'.

Two important characteristics of this interpretation of competencies as outlined by Cooper et al. (1998) also apply in this study: firstly, that competencies must be observable and measurable, and secondly that they must be critical to successful individual or organisational performance. This is synthesised to define school principal competencies as: 'Clusters of behaviours that a school principal need to bring to a position in order to effectively lead and manage the school towards the achievement of key school performance outcomes'.

Finally, the best of both 'functional' and 'generic' competencies were combined in developing the framework. Functional competencies are more contextual in nature and describe broad job functions characterising the job in a behavioural nature (e.g. 'leading across school boundaries'). Generic competencies, on the other hand, are cross-validated sets of generic behaviours that could apply to all settings and are collectively necessary for performance in all jobs. 'Making decisions' would be an example of a generic competency in

this study. Capaldo et al. (2006) observed that generic competencies have the advantage that they can be applied universally, whereas functional competencies provide human resource (HR) managers with detailed and concrete implications for practice.

Table 1 provides a synthesis of the seven behavioural competencies derived from the literature study. The table also indicates the main sources that formed the basis of the literature review, with the inclusion criteria being that the publications had to be relatable to the three school leadership roles. Preference was given to studies focussing on the South African context.

## Methodology

### Research approach

The overarching research initiating question that the study aimed to address was: 'What differentiates school principals who are able to lead their schools to success amid the current challenges faced in education?' In pursuit of answering this overarching question, the following two more specific exploratory research questions were asked: (1) What are the most critical school performance outcomes that characterise school success? (2) What are the most critical school principal competencies that lead to superior performance on the school outcomes when demonstrated? The literature study revealed key school outcomes and behavioural competencies. The qualitative research objectives were to verify the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the findings from the literature synthesis and to provide more depth and context to the competencies (Creswell, 2009). More specifically, this study attempted to identify contextualised examples of behaviours, that when demonstrated, would lead to superior results on the school performance outcomes. Given this focus on

acquiring precise information on behaviours instrumental to success in a specific occupation, the critical incident technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954) was applied. The CIT was developed by Flanagan (1954) and more recently positioned by Viergever (2019) as a methodology (as opposed to only a technique) by showing that it meets the basic criteria for it to be counted as a methodology or method of enquiry in qualitative research.

Practically, the CIT also made it possible to understand and describe the competencies in relation to the outcomes that they affect by anchoring the critical incident interviews around the school outcomes (identified in the literature review) when questioning participants about leadership behaviours. It should be noticed that although the data collection included information about the school outcomes, the qualitative analysis in this study centred on the competency behaviours with the outcomes serving a secondary role in support of understanding the requisite competencies and the nature of its influence.

Although qualitative methods were applied in the study to understand how subject matter experts (SMEs) make sense of and interpret their environment, the fundamental ontological and epistemological assumptions of the study deviated from a purely subjective interpretivist approach, traditionally associated with qualitative research. Consensus theory argues and provides evidence that experts tend to agree more with each other with respect to their domain of expertise than do novices (Romney et al., 1986). Accordingly, it was argued that by integrating the perspectives of various experts, the study would be able to capture valuable insights into the objective reality of effective school leadership behaviour. This line of thinking is congruent with the CIT with its philosophical assumptions (Viergever, 2019) rooted in positivism, while also consistent with the more nuanced post-positivistic paradigm of critical realism. While critical realism endorses

**TABLE 1:** Competency framework from literature review.

Competency and definition	Literature support
<b>Competency role 1: Creating a school vision and setting strategic direction</b>	
<b>Developing a school vision and setting strategic direction</b> Screening and analysing the internal and external school environment and formulating a challenging school vision and subsequent strategies.	Bartram & Inceoglu, 2011; Bryk et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004, 2006; Robinson et al., 2008; Spangenberg & Theron, 2011.
<b>Establishing goals and expectations</b> Setting and communicating strategically aligned and challenging academic goals, expectations of teaching and other staff in such a way that there is clarity and consensus about these goals.	Leithwood et al., 2004, 2006; Robinson et al., 2008.
<b>Competency role 2: Preparing the school for implementing the vision and strategies</b>	
<b>Developing school staff</b> Promoting and structuring coherent teacher training and development programmes that are professional, continuous, and sustainable.	Bryk et al., 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2004, 2006; Robinson et al., 2008; Ten Bruggencate et al., 2012.
<b>Resourcing strategically</b> Behaviours that align resource selection, allocation, and optimisation with the primary purpose of teaching and learning.	Crouch & Mabogoane, 1998; Gustafsson, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008; Taylor, 2011; Van der Berg et al., 2005.
<b>Competency role 3: Implementing the school vision and strategy</b>	
<b>Maintaining a student-centred environment</b> Behaviours that are directed towards the reduction of external pressures and interruptions and the nurturing of an environment that establishes physical and psychological safety, order and discipline, and inclusivity and unity.	Gustafsson, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2004, 2006; Robinson et al., 2008; Taylor, 2011.
<b>Managing and rewarding teaching and learning</b> Managing, monitoring and rewarding the elements of teaching and learning. Includes assessing and evaluating organisational effectiveness, the curriculum as well as staff and learner performance.	Gustafsson, 2005; Kanjee & Prinsloo, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008; Taylor, 2011; Van der Berg et al., 2005.
<b>Leading across school boundaries</b> Leadership behaviours that enable school stakeholders to contribute across school boundaries. Includes the coordination and collaboration of groups within and outside the school.	Bartram & Inceoglu, 2011; Leithwood, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004; Spangenberg & Theron, 2011; Taylor, 2011.

the interpretive notion of different perspectives on reality, it rejects the idea of 'multiple realities', contending that some perspectives can be more or less correct of a real knowable world, and that by following certain procedures one is able to come to a better (although not perfect) understanding of this reality (Maxwell, 2012). This paradigm is in accordance with the practical goals of the study, with the long-term objective of developing and validating measures of school leadership competencies and outcomes, followed by a validation of the competencies against the outcomes (Maxwell, 2012). From a future research perspective, the research design of this study can be categorised as a sequential exploratory design, in which its qualitative output aims to fulfil a hypothesis generating function, informing follow-up quantitative studies (Babbie, 2011; Creswell, 2012; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Lee et al., 1999, 2011).

### Research participants and sampling method

In line with the critical incident tradition (Flanagan, 1954; Viergever, 2019) and consistent with competency modelling methodology (Campion et al., 2011), the researcher deliberately did not sample participants who were underperforming or who were average performers as the aim was to understand the behavioural requirements of successful school principals and not to draw inferences from the whole population of school principals. This approach required a non-probability purposive sampling technique called 'expert sampling' in the sense that expert participants had to be purposefully selected.

In terms of geographical location, the sampling frame was narrowed down to the Western Cape. The first criterion for participation was that participants had to be listed as high performers by the Western Cape Education Department's Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) for at least three consecutive years to ensure consistency and minimise rater noise and measurement bias. In addition to consistent performance in terms of the IQMS, participants had to have made a significant improvement and impact in at least one of the following three categories of their school's performance:

- the academic situation of the school
- the quality of parent–community ties
- the disciplinary situation of the school.

Finally, participants had to be diversified to some extent across socio-economic income of parents and school size to maximise the utility and transferability of the findings (Collins & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Gravetter & Forzano, 2009).

As described here, the study aimed to understand the reality of school leadership competencies from the combined insights of experts with recognisable track records in school leadership. In line with consensus theory (Romney et al., 1986), the purpose was to identify common themes among the experts, indicating convergence of opinions.

The aim of this study was to continue interviewing until the interview data did not produce any novel categories or sub-dimensions (Guest et al., 2006). Data saturation (Francis et al., 2010) occurred after interviews with 10 participants. Eight participants were current principals and two were recently retired. All participants met the Western Cape Educational Department (WCED) criteria for high performers. The interviewer and participants had no social or professional relationship with each other and did not interact with each other in ways that could impact on the integrity of the research process. Table 2 provides a summary of the sample characteristics.

### Data collection method

The data collection consisted of the use of semi-structured, face-to-face critical incident interviews (Flanagan, 1954) to elicit incidents that relate to the theoretically derived school principal competencies. Semi-structured interviews enabled both structure and some exploration of the topics of interest while guarding against rigidity and predefined ideas about the topics (Schmidt, 2004). The content and sequence of the interview questions were identical for all participants. The first part of the interview consisted of a question on the participant's perspective of what it means for a school to perform successfully. The importance of expressing the

**TABLE 2:** Participant and school sampling details.

Participant	Participant details		School details		
	Gender	Ethnicity	School size	Socio-economic level	Educational level
SP01	Male	White people	Large	High income	Secondary
SP02	Female	White people	Large	High income	Secondary
SP03	Male	White people	Small	Middle income	Primary
SP04	Female	White people	Medium	High income	Secondary
SP05	Male	White people	Large	High income	Primary
SP06	Male	White people	Medium	Middle income	Secondary
SP07	Female	Mixed race people	Small	Low income	Primary
SP08	Male	African people	Medium	Low income	Secondary
SP09	Male	Mixed race	Large	Low income	Secondary
SP10	Female	African people	Medium	Low income	Primary
Distribution	40% Female 60% Male	60% White people 20% African people 20% Mixed race people	40% Large 40% Medium 20% Small	40% High 40% Low 20% Middle	60% Secondary 40% Primary

Note: Small schools have less than 400 learners, medium schools between 400 and 900 learners, and large schools more than 900 learners.

answers in a way that captures the outcomes in terms of desired level of performance was emphasised as well as including measurable indicators of success. The second part of the interview focused on questions about the behaviours that school principals regarded as necessary to achieve satisfactory and superior levels of success on the performance outcomes identified in the first section. The researcher explained the importance of articulating answers in terms of incidents that include observable behaviours and actions related to the performance outcomes produced in the first section. To minimise contamination of the answers, the researcher refrained from sharing any information with the participants on the literature's stance of what constitutes school performance or any information on school leadership competencies.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the host university's research and ethical committee, with the following ethical research practices adhered to:

- Formal institutional approval was obtained from the Western Cape Education Department.
- During the consent process, participants were clearly informed that participation is voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage of the research process.
- Details were provided about the purpose of the study, time requirements, and how confidentiality would be maintained.
- Written informed consent was obtained from all participants and safely stored.

### Data recording and analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded using a smartphone device and the recordings were transferred to a password-protected folder on a secure online database. Apart from irrelevant side stories, interview conversations were transcribed verbatim to ensure contextualised and detailed transcriptions (Babbie, 2011; King & Horrocks, 2010). Utilising Bernard's (2000) suggestion of the proper mechanics of qualitative coding, the following serves as a summary of the mechanical steps that were followed:

- Step 1: Transcripts of interviews with SMEs were produced and sub-samples text were highlighted if found indicative of critical behaviour.
- Step 2: Highlighted sections were transferred to Microsoft Excel.
- Step 3: The text samples were coded according to the seven competencies identified in the literature study taking into account the context of the critical incident.
- Step 4: Text samples not fitting any of the existing categories were assigned to the miscellaneous category.
- Step 5: Following the categorisation of the data according to the competency categories, the researchers explored subthemes that emerged within each competency category in order to produce context-specific competency subdimensions.

- Step 6: Finally, some of the sub-themes across the different competency categories were combined to form four new competencies.

The process included both deductive and inductive analyses in the sense that text samples were deductively grouped by means of the literature, followed by an inductive process to identify specific competency elements or dimensions.

### Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Throughout the research phases, practices were implemented to maximise the integrity of the study. These practices stem from recent standards for qualitative primary and mixed methods research in psychology as highlighted by Levitt et al. (2018). The following checks were conducted to ensure methodological integrity. Firstly, thoroughly researched leadership and organisational effectiveness frameworks were used in the development of the school principal competencies to guide the qualitative data analysis. Secondly, the subjective influence of the researcher's perspectives was minimised during data collection and analysis by means of structured guides. Thirdly, questions were posed in such a way that real incidents were required to be mentioned during the interviews to ensure that findings are grounded in actual events. Fourthly, findings were presented in a manner that captured relevant contextual information about school principal behaviours.

### Results

Table 3 provides the frequency counts and the relative percentages of instances related to each competency dimension. Overall, 11 school principal competencies with 33 underlying competency dimensions across the three behavioural roles of school leadership were identified. All literature-based competency dimensions were supported by the findings from the interviews. The competencies and underlying dimensions were developed from 469 quoted texts and 178 different coded behavioural incidents. As anticipated, certain competencies were more emphasised by certain participants than others. Four additional competencies were created, namely 'leading with compassion', 'influencing and communicating', 'managing self', and 'making decisions'.

It should be observed that neither causality nor the relative importance can be inferred from the frequencies; nonetheless, the frequencies do reflect the proportional emphasis and salience attached to the respective school principal competencies. The researcher also wrote behavioural indicators for each of the competency dimensions that are available on request.

### Discussion

The purpose of this section is to add richness and contextual meaning to the competencies through insights provided by the participants into their realities. The competencies are discussed in a logical order that follows the leadership process

**TABLE 3:** Results of qualitative analysis: Competencies, dimensions and frequencies.

Competency definition	Competency dimensions	Dimension frequencies	Competency frequency	percentage
<b>Competency role 1: Creating a school vision and setting strategic direction</b>				
<b>Developing a school vision and setting strategic direction</b>				
Screening and analysing the internal and external school environment and formulating a challenging school vision and subsequent strategies.	Analysing and interpreting the school environment	14	37	7.89
	Formulating a school vision and strategies	23		
<b>Establishing goals and expectations</b>				
Setting and communicating strategically aligned and challenging academic goals, expectations of teaching and other staff in such a way that there is clarity and consensus about these goals.	Setting goals and expectations	8	17	3.62
	Planning and organising	9		
<b>Competency role 2: Preparing the school for implementing the vision and strategies</b>				
<b>Developing school staff</b>				
Promoting and structuring coherent teacher training and development programmes that are professional, continuous, and sustainable.	Training and coaching	14	40	8.53
	Delegating and empowering	22		
	Identifying and deploying potential	4		
<b>Influencing and communicating</b>				
Behaviours associated with effective communication and influence, including communicating, motivating and inspiring, persuading, and negotiating and debating.	Communicating	24	52	11.09
	Persuading	12		
	Motivating and inspiring	12		
	Negotiating	4		
<b>Resourcing strategically</b>				
Behaviours that align resource selection, allocation, and optimisation with the primary purpose of teaching and learning.	Acquiring and securing resources	6	11	2.35
	Allocating strategically and optimally	5		
<b>Leading with compassion</b>				
Showing understanding and concern for the aspirations, needs and feelings of school staff and learners when managing school relations, including effectively handling interpersonal and group conflicts.	Showing concern and being supportive	14	32	6.82
	Displaying sound interpersonal skills	18		
<b>Competency role 3: Implementing the school vision and strategy</b>				
<b>Maintaining a student-centred environment</b>				
Behaviours that are directed towards the reduction of external pressures and interruptions, and the nurturing of an environment that establishes physical and psychological safety, order and discipline, and inclusivity and unity.	Ensuring safety	8	21	4.48
	Maintaining order and discipline	7		
	Fostering inclusivity and unity	6		
<b>Making decisions</b>				
Behaviours that enable effective decision making in the interest of the school vision. Includes consulting, demonstrating decisiveness and hardiness, being adaptable, and being innovative during decisions.	Demonstrating decisiveness and courage	31	60	12.79
	Consulting	15		
	Showing data-based adaptability	11		
	Enabling experimentation and innovation	3		
<b>Managing self</b>				
Behaviours grounded in self-conduct and related to building trust through leading with integrity, taking initiative, self-development; demonstrating resilience and tenacity, and showing focus and dedication.	Leading with integrity	52	131	27.79
	Taking initiative	15		
	Growing and developing self	32		
	Showing resilience and tenacity	14		
	Demonstrating focus and dedication	18		
	Monitoring and moderating	13		
<b>Managing and rewarding teaching and learning</b>				
Managing, monitoring, and rewarding the elements of teaching and learning. Includes assessing and evaluating organisational effectiveness, the curriculum as well as staff and learner performance.	Rewarding and celebrating	6	22	4.69
	Restructuring and reengineering	3		
	Leading across school boundaries	13		
<b>Leading across school boundaries</b>				
Leadership behaviours that enable school stakeholders to contribute across school boundaries. Includes the coordination and collaboration of groups within and outside the school.	Leading interdepartmental coordination	13	46	9.81
	Leading across external school boundaries	33		

from the creation of a vision through to the preparation of followers for the implementation of the vision and strategy and finally to the implementation of vision and strategy.

## Competencies for creating a school vision and setting strategic direction

### Creating a school vision and setting strategic direction

This competency was developed from 37 recurrent instances in which participants described how good school principals actively envision and create a clear, challenging, and inspiring school vision. Being observant and making sense of how both the internal and external environments may affect a school's trajectory represented the first dimension of this competency, coded as *analysing and interpreting the school environment*. Participants stressed the importance of screening what is unfolding in the school's external environment, such as educational trends, the macroeconomic landscape, political realities, and technological advances. Effective principals are also able to identify the opportunities and risks presented by these external developments, based on an

assessment of the current internal dynamics of the school. The second dimension, namely *developing a school vision and strategies* involves the ability to foresee a future state (vision) where the external and internal environment can be combined optimally, thereby creating the 'where to' of the vision. Next, effective school principals formulate the strategies that enable the school to move from the current state towards the achievement of the vision.

### Setting goals and expectations

Participants highlighted in 17 separate instances that department heads and teachers can only make sense of the importance of tasks and work goals when they have a thorough understanding of the strategic place of that task or work goal. Participants also stressed that school staff is more engaged and driven when they understand what is expected of them and when there is clear consensus on the relevant goal. *Establishing goals and expectations* consequently made out the first dimension of this competency. The second dimension, *planning and organising* focused on behaviours

related to prioritising school activities to ensure that established goals are met. Good time management and the application of educational knowledge in planning and constructing school plans also characterised this dimension.

## Competencies for preparing the school for implementing the school vision and strategy

### Developing school staff

When it comes to the personal and professional development of school staff, results clearly indicated the importance of the school to be proactive in driving the formal training and informal development initiatives. Participants explained that in addition to formal training programmes, a good school principal acts as a 'leader of learning' for both academic and support staff. The first dimension of this competency was titled *training and coaching*, which was formulated from behavioural examples of principals who initiate and support continuous learning opportunities, and who share personal stories, experiences, and knowledge. The second competency dimension, *delegating and empowering*, is characterised by behaviours that facilitate the entrustment of school staff with increasing responsibility while simultaneously empowering them and keeping them accountable for their actions. Participants explained that only through such exposure do teaching and support staff really develop the ability to independently solve problems and more importantly, to be innovative and creative in the best interest of teaching and learning. Typical behavioural examples included, among others, to set high expectations of staff and learners, to refrain from doing the follower's job tasks for them, to refrain from communicating doubts to followers, and to offer structural and practical support once the person is given the responsibility. The third and final dimension that was coded was that of *identifying and deploying potential*. This dimension entails the accurate identification and deployment of human potential within the school. It includes spotting potential in staff and using them in areas that match their strengths and provide opportunities for leadership development. It also refers to promoting the "right candidates to the right positions, at the right time" to ensure that the school principal is supported by a strong leadership team.

### Influencing and communicating

Influencing and communicating was created through the coding of 52 behavioural incidents that clustered around the school principal's ability to communicate effectively and to motivate and inspire all school stakeholders towards contribution to the vision of the school. Four interrelated dimensions underpin this competency, namely (1) *communicating*, (2) *motivating and inspiring*, (3) *persuading*, and (4) *negotiating and debating*. Interview findings coded as *communicating* were categorised as generic communications skills. *Communication* in the context of this study refers to the extent to which relevant information is conveyed clearly, timeously, and in an appropriate style. Thorough listening as well as the extent to which meaning is clarified to establish mutual understanding also formed part of the definition.

Regarding the *motivating and inspiring* dimension, various interviewees expressed passionately that motivating is more than just setting an example. These participants considered the school principal's ability to make teachers see the value of their work as the primary facilitator of motivation. Other examples of motivational behaviour that came forth strongly were the school principal's ability to systematically encourage school staff through positive energy as well as offering the best possible extrinsic rewards (e.g. bonuses) from the school's side. Regarding the *persuasion* dimension, participants mentioned that persuasive principals make use of evidence-based arguments instead of making less determined, more subjective decisions. The latter should not however be confused with storytelling. Effective storytelling was also highlighted as having profound persuasive value. By sharing personal experiences and telling real-life stories while complementing the rationale behind the stories with the use of scientific measures such as surveys and questionnaires, evidence-based persuasion is combined with softer persuasive behavioural techniques to ultimately demonstrate effective persuasion. Finally, *negotiating and debating* refers to the extent to which opportunities for critical discussion and debate are promoted and the ability of the school principal to be open-minded and objective in terms of diverse views, while at the same time being able to take a firm stance when needed.

### Resourcing strategically

The competency 'resourcing strategically' was developed from captured behaviours that characterised the effective acquisition of strategic school resources as well as the extent to which these resources are strategically and optimally allocated. The first dimension, *acquiring and securing strategic resources*, consists of a set of behaviours that enable the acquisition and securement of human, financial, technological, and informational resources that are aligned with strategic school purposes and aimed towards teaching and learning. Specific actions under this dimension include displaying effort to attract and recruit the best teachers possible utilising objective staff selection procedures, focusing on networking and fund-raising initiatives, and securing resources that have growth and investment potential. The second dimension, *allocating and utilising resources*, focuses on what the leader of the school does with the resources that have been secured. It refers to the optimal allocation and utilisation of resources in line with the school strategic specific pedagogical goals and priorities. Participants also highlighted the necessity of using resources as economically as possible, finding innovative ways to rent existing resources or selling worthless resources.

### Leading with compassion

Leading with compassion was developed from behaviours that clustered into the dimensions of (1) *showing concern and being supportive*, and (2) *displaying sound interpersonal skills*. *Showing concern for school staff and learners* revealed itself as a key theme during the interviews. A large proportion of participants accentuated the influential power of behaviours

that demonstrated concern for subordinates and learners. Showing concern and being supportive was formed from behaviours that were indicative of recognising and valuing all individuals for their respective places within the school. It includes the showing of understanding and concern for learners' aspirations, needs, values, and feelings. *Displaying sound interpersonal skills* refers to the ability to interact on both an individual and collective level within the school as well as when serving in interest of the school. Some of the actions include a comfort with disagreement, and demonstrating tact, respect, objectivity, self-composure during conflict situations, and showing forgiveness when needed.

## Competencies for implementing the school vision and strategy

### Maintaining a student-centred learning environment

This competency includes the repertoire of behaviours needed to establish and maintain an orderly and student-centred learning environment. During the in-depth interviews, various dimensions of the concept of safety were put forward and reiterated. A substantial proportion of participants raised the importance of both perceived and real psychological and physical safety. On a psychological level, it was reported that the school principals should demonstrate behaviours that enable staff and learners to feel safe to make mistakes. Consequently, the first competency dimension was tilted *ensuring safety* and includes behaviours that facilitate the establishment and maintenance of a physical and psychological safe learning environment for all learners.

The second competency dimension, *creating order and discipline*, stemmed from the phenomenon that all participants strongly reminded the interviewer of the fact that school learners are not adult learners and that the behaviours needed to normalise discipline are pivotal. It includes actions ranging from the consistent instalment and enforcement of disciplinary codes to protecting classroom order from external disruptions. Finally, *creating inclusivity and unity* was developed from the importance that participants attached to the ideal that all learners, teachers, and non-teaching staff feel as if their place within the school is valued and that they do not feel alienated. This dimension also includes behaviours that facilitate unity and team spirit among staff and learners. Examples include the facilitation of team building workshops, openly protecting and recognising the value of minority groups, actively building morale after setbacks and reconciling individual and groups after conflicts occurred.

### Making decisions

Overall effectiveness of the school principal's decision-making was characterised by competency dimensions that cover both the 'how' as well as the 'what' of decision making in the context of school leadership. The first dimension of this competency, namely *gathering evidence and consulting*, includes the extent to which an effective balance is maintained in terms of making decisions individually as leader and incorporating the evidence-based data, inputs from school staff, school learners, and other school stakeholders. During

the coding of the second dimension, namely *demonstrating decisiveness and courage*, participants explained that an exceptional need for courageous principals exists to overcome the challenges that come with corruption and cronyism within South African public schools. Not turning a blind eye, disagreeing openly and strongly when needed, following through with unpopular necessary decisions, and making personal sacrifices in the best interest of the school were among typical examples provided by participants. At the same time, being flexible and adaptable was reported as being pivotal in the process of making sustainable and constructive decisions as a school principal, labelled *being flexible and adaptable*. This dimension includes behaviours that demonstrate the backtracking or reversing of decisions when the need do so arises and includes actions that foster the searching for alternative paths when new evidence is provided, plans are not working out or strategic direction needs to change. Finally, the theme of creativity and innovation in decision making rose prominently during the interviewing process to culminate into the dimension of *enabling creativity and innovation*. According to participants, creativity applies right from the beginning of the principal's job, that is, creating a vision for the school. Interestingly, participants who serve as leaders of underprivileged schools emphasised the value of creativity even more than their counterparts of more wealthy schools. It was highlighted that an effective school principal at least demonstrates ways that facilitate innovation within the school and at most, demonstrates visionary behaviours in transforming the school according to the needs of the time and context. This competency dimension includes actions that enable opportunities for innovation, identified in pursuit of improving the status quo. It also includes actions that promote the individual and collective generation of creative ideas.

### Managing self

Of all the results on the various behavioural domains in this study, the largest proportion revealed the importance of behaviours surrounding the school principal's self-management. This is probably because self-management is underlying to all other competencies. Further analysis indicated that this cluster comprises the following five dimensions: (1) *building trust through integrity*, (2) *taking initiative*, (3) *developing self*, (4) *showing resilience and tenacity*, and (5) *demonstrating focus and dedication*. *Building trust through integrity* not only received the highest frequency percentage within the managing self-competency but also proved to be the dimension that enjoyed the most in-depth discussion. Almost all participants spoke extensively and passionately about the importance of building trust through leading by example. More specifically, the following examples occurred regularly: practising what he or she preaches, demonstrating fairness to all, being consistent in procedural affairs, demonstrating a sense of humour, and refraining from shouting or screaming at teachers or support staff. The dimension, *taking initiative*, emerged from critical incidents as a set of proactive behaviours that are instrumental to the execution of strategic school objectives. This means taking

action to address potential problems and opportunities before they arise. Some principals stressed the importance of attending to issues and concerns before the start of each new day, and applying good judgement and discretion when reacting to uncertainties. This dimension of *developing self* was developed through critical incidents characterising a self-reflective, proactive, and opportunistic approach to continuous life-long learning and development. The behaviours included self-reflection, continuous enrichment through reading, proactively pursuing personal and professional development goals and taking on learning opportunities that arise. *Showing resilience and tenacity* emerged as a prominent theme, referring to the ability to bounce back after setbacks. According to the participants, an effective school principal demonstrates positivity, perseverance, and dedication during adversities and uncertainties. This competency dimension also includes the ability to withstand negative criticism. Finally, participants explained that in South Africa it is a prevalent phenomenon that many school principals have 'second jobs'. Consequently, these school principals are apparently less focused and dedicated to their job; a job that is considered by many as the most important in the current national bio-psycho-socio-economic context. According to the participants, the effective school principal on the other hand, demonstrates behaviours that serve as evidence that they unconditionally view school principalship as their primary and only job, labelled, *demonstrating focus and dedication*. Such behaviours include working beyond office hours, displaying a passion for the job, and making personal sacrifices in the best interest of the learners of the school.

### Managing and rewarding teaching and learning

This competency captures the collection of managerial behaviours that need to be demonstrated to achieve teaching and learning success. These competencies include: (1) *monitoring and evaluating*, (2) *rewarding and celebrating*, and (3) *restructuring and reengineering*. The first dimension, *monitoring and evaluating*, drew from behavioural examples that relate to the effective monitoring and evaluation of key school performance indicators. These include actively overseeing and coordinating teaching and learning activities and the ability to identify problem areas. Effective principals are able to keep track of ongoing activities and projects by creating a feedback mechanism and personally following up issues. They should also have the ability to systematically sift through and evaluate performance information. Participants also highlighted the importance of assessing the performance of staff, using objective and comprehensive measures. The second dimension of this competency, namely *rewarding and celebrating*, was coded from incidents that characterised the acknowledgement of good performance, the recognition of individual and group contributions to the school vision, and the open celebration of these contributions. Participants stressed that by acknowledging and celebrating certain behaviours and achievements, the school principal effectively sets the stage for what performance means. Finally, *restructuring and reengineering* refers to how the school

principal responds to problems and opportunities following the performance evaluation phase. This can take the form of shuffling or replacing teachers, making changes to the curriculum or implementing new structures or school policies.

### Leading across school boundaries

This competency was developed from leadership behaviours that collectively enable the school principal to lead across internal and external school boundaries to the ultimate benefit of teaching and learning. Firstly, the dimension of *facilitating interdepartmental coordination* is characterised by behavioural incidents that enable the facilitation of interdepartmental workshops and interdepartmental discussions to promote collaboration and breaking down silos within the school. This also includes meeting regularly with staff and the learner representative council to facilitate discussion. Secondly, a dimension titled *influencing across external school boundaries* was constructed from behaviours associated with building the image and external network of the school by breaching boundaries, networking and practising socially responsible citizenship. These behaviours ranged from courageous acts such as visiting gang leaders to negotiating terms on which school learners can be excluded from those targeted by the gangs to formal networking with external bodies – all aimed at maximising teaching and learning.

## Practical implications

Firstly, the National Development Plan can draw upon the findings of this study to include a concrete set of observable and measurable competencies in its policy for the appointment, development, and succession management of school principals and other school leadership positions, including deputy headmasters and heads of departments. Secondly, the South African Department of Education, public schools, private schools, and other private educational institutions can increase the return on their people investments by aligning their assessments for selection, development, and succession management with the school principals' competencies. Thirdly, these institutions can use the school principal competency framework in a diagnostic and developmental sense by using it to evaluate their performance with respect to school outcomes and the demonstration of leadership competence.

## Limitations

This study was designed to be generic enough to offer value to both the primary and secondary school contexts. One limitation is that the competencies do not include detailed contextual differences between primary and secondary schools and consequently limits the study's capacity to compare the two school levels in terms of the relative importance of specific competencies and how to transition from the one to the other.

While an attempt was made to include school principals from different socio-economic levels, it is acknowledged that the

non-probability sample of 10 SMEs is a relatively small sample of school in the Western Cape and does not necessarily represent the culturally diverse views of other school leadership experts in different environments in South Africa (Blumberg et al., 2008).

The broad objective of the study was to produce a competency framework that can be universally applied in South Africa. Strictly speaking, the qualitative approach followed does not allow for nomothetic claims without further empirical validation. However, cognisance should be taken of the position and stage of this study. The study is the first phase in a sequential design, and is of an exploratory nature. The design intent is to understand the context of schools and the specific behaviours constituting good leadership. This provides a basis for follow-up quantitative studies that will draw upon larger samples.

## Suggestions for future research

This study conceptualised and developed a framework of behavioural leadership competencies that when demonstrated, lead to success on key school outcomes. Firstly, it is recommended that future studies further validate and refine the content and dimensionality of the competency framework to eventually produce a valid and reliable school principal competency questionnaire that can be used for leadership development. This process has already been set in motion by the development of an unpublished measurement instrument, titled the South African School Principal Competency Questionnaire (SA-SPCQ). Secondly, it is suggested that follow-up studies map out the school performance outcomes in more detail (including the relationships between intermediate and final outcomes), and similarly to a competency questionnaire, develop an instrument that can be used to provide a holistic measure of school success, useful for diagnosing school functioning from an organisational development perspective. Thirdly, it is suggested that the competency questionnaire data are validated against data that are obtained on key school performance outcomes such as academic performance, learner engagement, school climate, and school-community ties. Such a validation will provide evidence of the criterion-related validity of the school principal competency questionnaire. Fourthly, building on meta-analytic research that shows the predictive validity of certain personality variables and general mental ability for leadership performance (Judge et al., 2002, 2004), future studies can explore the specific traits, attainments and other personal characteristics underlying the behavioural-based school principal competencies, and subsequently translate it into predictive measures that supplement the competency measures for selection purposes.

## Conclusion

The competency framework developed in this study provides a blueprint for the development of valid and contextualised

competency-based procedures and assessments necessary for effective selection, development and promotion of school principals. To this effect, the study addresses the call by Wills (2015b) to collaborate to create policies and procedures directed towards the transformation of the South African primary and secondary educational leadership setting.

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### Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

### Authors' contributions

J.J.v.V. was responsible for the conceptualisation of the study, data collection and analysis, and writing of the original draft. F.v.d.B. was the project supervisor and was responsible for the project design and methodology, and review and editing of the article.

### Ethical clearance

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### Data availability

Unpublished non-confidential data that support the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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