


# Influence of School Contexts on Leadership Practices: Putting Deputy Principals Under the Microscope

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## Abstract

The study reported herein examined the influence of school contexts on leaders' leadership practices in South Africa. To this end, deputy principals were put under the microscope to scrutinize the relationship between their leadership practices and the school contexts in which they operate. The narrative inquiry—a qualitative methodology—was adopted to engage with deputy principals' lived experiences. Five deputy principals were purposively and conveniently sampled, each representing a different school context. Narrative ways of generating and analyzing field texts were utilized. The findings revealed disparities in the influence of school contexts on the deputy principals' leadership practices. While lower Quintile schools appeared to subject deputy principals to a state of leadership deficit, higher Quintile schools appeared to be springboards that enable the leadership endeavors of deputy principals. These disparities reflect inconsistencies in South African communities, mostly characterized by social and economic inequality.

## Keywords

deputy principal, leadership, school context, school quintile, narrative inquiry, context-responsive leadership

## Introduction and Background

South Africa has a history of racial segregation and inequality among its communities. Despite many attempts to redress past imbalances, traces of inequality still linger. One critical effort toward redress in the education system is facilitating equitable funding of public schools. This is achieved through the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NSSF) which was proclaimed in 1998 to guide the allocation of funds to public schools (Republic of South Africa, 1998b). The NSSF policy acknowledges the inequalities of the past and, therefore, proclaims differentiated funding provisions according to the poverty status of communities in which schools are located. Through this policy, the Department of Basic Education desires to attain redress and equity in financing public education so as to enhance the quality of education, particularly in previously disadvantaged schools (Bloose & Naicker, 2018).

The Quintile system, which ranks schools according to needs, is used to classify school contexts in South Africa. Schools ranked in Quintile 1 are the poorest schools, while those ranked in Quintile 5 are the least poor

schools (Republic of South Africa, 1998b). Schools ranked in Quintiles 1, 2, and 3 are no-fee-paying schools located mainly in contexts that are in a state of deprivation such as rural and peri-urban areas (Bloose & Naicker, 2018). Christie et al. (2007, p. 6) agree that most of these schools are located in “poor socio-economic circumstances” where unemployment and parent illiteracy rates are high. It is against this background that Quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools are prohibited from charging school fees and are funded largely from the State allocation. The schools ranked in Quintiles 4 and 5 are located in the least poor communities and are better resourced. Hence, they receive a reduced financial allocation from the State, based on the assumption that they can better raise funds in their communities (Hall & Giese, 2009). For the same reason, Quintile 4 and 5 schools are allowed to charge

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school fees to the parents of learners (Republic of South Africa, 1998b).

Apart from resource allocation, the school Quintile classification reflects the contexts in which teachers and school leaders operate. In this paper, I focus on school leaders—specifically deputy principals, also known as deputy heads or vice principals in other contexts—who are senior leaders and second in command in schools. The deputy principal position has received fair attention, with many researchers highlighting unclear job descriptions and the excessive workload of incumbents occupying this position (Blose, 2018; Blose & Naicker, 2018; Kwan, 2009; Kwan & Walker, 2008). The aim of the deputy principal position in South African public schools is to assist principals in managing schools and promoting the education of learners; also, to maintain an acute awareness of the administrative procedures across the total range of school activities (Republic of South Africa, 1998a). Given the distinctiveness of school contexts in South Africa, deputy principals are exposed to different contextual realities across school Quintiles, and the enactment of their role may not be free from the influence of their school contexts.

It goes without saying that there is a relationship between leadership and context (Bredeson et al., 2011; Gardner, 2013); and this paper contributes to this scholarship. What puzzled me is the inadequacy of empirical research focusing on school contexts' influence on the leadership practices of deputy principals. Questions such as how school contexts shape the leadership practices of deputy principals and how their practices shape their school contexts added to the puzzle. A small-scale qualitative inquiry reported herein examined the lived experiences of selected deputy principals in different school contexts to understand the influence of contextual realities on their leadership practices.

### Key Research Puzzle

A research puzzle substitutes the research question. While other research methodologies frame research questions with a precise definition or expectation of answers, the narrative inquiry methodology is composed around a particular wonder (Clandinin, 2013). Thus, a research puzzle depicts a narrative inquirer's curiosity about a particular phenomenon; it carries with it, among other meanings, "a sense of a search, a 're-search', [and] a searching again"... (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124).

Below is a research puzzle that propelled the study reported herein:

- How do school contexts influence deputy principals' leadership practices in selected schools across school Quintiles?

### Delving Into the Relationship Between Context and Leadership

Since the concepts of context and leadership are critical in this paper, it is important to clarify them before exploring their relationship. Firstly, the context is generally defined by Dey (2001, p. 5) as "any information that can be used to characterise the situation of an entity [which may be] a person, place, or object ...." Oc (2018) looks at the context from a leadership perspective and views an organizational context as a place where leadership takes place. This place may be a school, community, circuit, district, province, country, and so on. In this paper, the context is viewed from an educational leadership perspective and is understood as information that characterizes the place where leadership is exercised. Secondly, the concept of leadership has enjoyed multiple definitions in research on educational leadership; words such as vision, influence, values, and organizational change are common across these definitions (Bush & Glover, 2014; Christie, 2010; Gardner, 2013; Harris & Jones, 2021). In this paper, I align myself with a definition by Gardner (2013, p. 17), who identifies leadership as "the process of persuasion or example by which an individual or a team induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers." From Gardner's point of view, there are four significant tasks for leadership, namely: goal setting, communication, relating effectively with people and motivation (Gardner, 1990, 2013).

There have previously been laments regarding the under-theorization of context in leadership research (Gronn & Ribbins, 1996; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006), with some arguing that leadership does not occur in a vacuum but within an organizational context. Porter and McLaughlin (2006) identified components of organizational contexts that they believe influence leadership exercised in a particular context; these include culture/climate, goals/purposes, people/composition, processes, state/condition, structure, and time. Adding to these contextual components, Gardner (2013) identifies, among other things, the age level of those to be led; their educational background and competencies; the size, homogeneity and cohesiveness of the group as well as the motivation and morale of the group, as contextual factors that influence the style of leadership that may be effective in a particular space.

Lately, the research showing the relationship between leadership and context seems to have gained momentum. Recent research on leadership hammers on the significance of context and views context not as a passive but as an active constituent of leadership. According to Spillane (2005) and Spillane et al. (2001), a leadership practice does not rest upon an individual leader's ability, skill, charisma

and cognition; but, is a product of interaction between three leadership constituents—a leader, followers, and the situation. These scholars perceive the situation (context) as constitutive of and constituted in, leadership practice (Diamond & Spillane, 2016). Adding to the debate on the relationship between leadership and context are Bredeson et al. (2008) and Klar, Huggins, et al. (2020) who foreground context as an important factor for leadership. Their contributions center on the context-responsive leadership approach; within this approach, they postulate that contexts vary and can enable or constrain the behavior of leaders. They further argue that leaders must know how, when, where, and what to push back to re-shape the context and achieve their long-term goals (Bredeson et al., 2008; Klar, Huggins, et al., 2020).

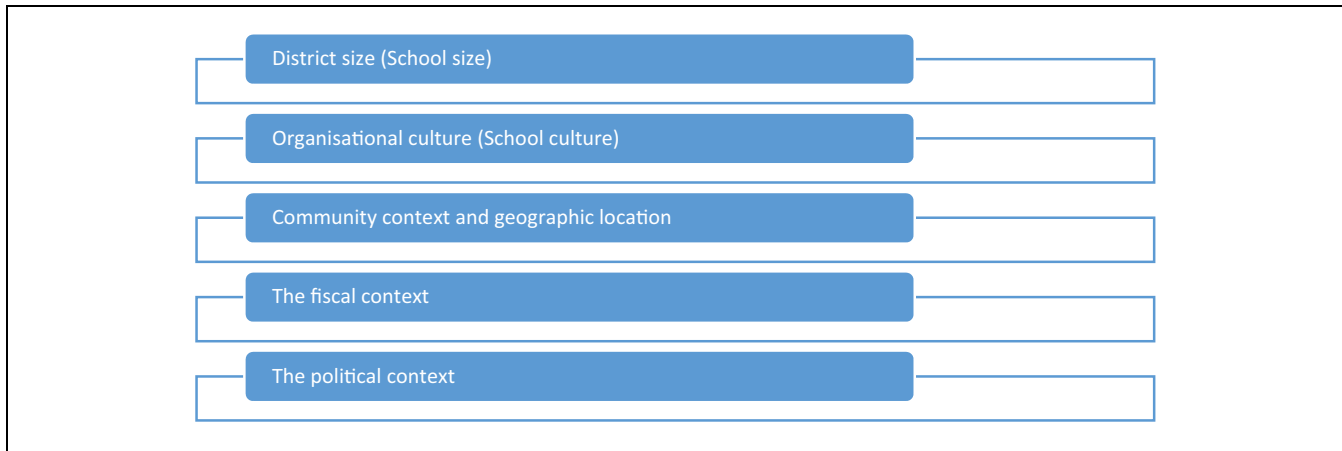
A similar sentiment is shared by Hallinger (2018) who puts forward that contextual factors may enable or impede leadership; thus, school leaders must find ways to respond creatively and coherently to all of them. This scholar dissects the context into six dimensions which he argues influence leadership practice; these dimensions are institutional, community, national culture, economic, political and school improvement contexts (Hallinger, 2018). The above discussion suggests that leaders should not exercise leadership that disregards the context in which they lead but should be conscious of its dynamics. Pashiardis, Brauckmann and Kafa (2018) argue that the school context should be given a strong focus and attention because it is an immediate variable influencing how school leadership is practiced. This view is consistent with the assertion by Hallinger (2018) and Gurr et al. (2019) that successful leaders adapt their leadership to the needs, opportunities, and constraints in their work contexts. From the above literature discussion, it is apparent that context is an active constituent of leadership. In essence, there is a symbiotic relationship between these two factors, as the context influences leadership and vice versa (Bredeson et al., 2008; Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Spillane et al., 2001).

### **Leadership and Context Variations**

Given that contexts can enable or constrain leaders' behavior (Bredeson et al., 2008), scholars have paid attention to context variations. For instance, Tan (2018) asserts that contextual variables may render leadership functions to be more effective in some environments than in others. This scholar looks at the context in relation to resources and he claims that resource shortages in high-needs schools compromise the realization of leadership plans, while in schools with abundant resources, teachers can optimize teaching and learning and enable students to actualize their learning

potential (Tan, 2018). Echoing similar sentiments, Klar, Huggins, et al. (2020) argue that high-needs schools are held accountable for student outcomes on standardized evaluation, regardless of the challenges they face. While Klar and others write from the United States, the same is apparent in the South African context where public schools are located in dissimilar contexts but are expected to produce quality learner performance in national examinations, regardless of their geographic location (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). In South Africa, there are schools located in urban areas that enjoy access to numerous resources and countless educational opportunities while others are located in rural areas and lack basic teaching amenities (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). The contextual disparities regarding urban and rural schools are also observable in Russia and Indonesia, as Komariah et al. (2022) assert that geographical disparities deprive people of receiving equal opportunities and benefits within the same country.

It is given that all schools, regardless of geographic location face challenges; but, high-needs and/or rural schools face added challenges (Klar, Huggins, et al., 2020). Scholars in the US context, identify high turnover, limited pools of teachers and leaders, difficulty in recruiting and retaining principals and a lack of community support as challenges of high-needs schools that subsequently lead to lower academic outcomes (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Klar, Huggins, et al., 2020; Klar, Moyi, et al., 2020). These challenges are also observable in disadvantaged or no-fee paying schools in South Africa. One key challenge faced by no-fee paying (high-needs) schools in South Africa is inadequacy of funds to meet schools' needs (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018; Mestry & Berry, 2016; Naicker et al. 2020); this challenge has a direct bearing on the quality and quantity of resources these schools can procure (Naicker et al., 2020). Apart from the financial resources, schools located in rural areas also experience challenges relating to basic infrastructure for sanitation, physical resources, electricity and information and communication technology, water, roads, and transport (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Myende & Chikoko, 2014). Additionally, parents' destitute socio-economic status aggravates the disadvantages of learners in rural South African schools (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Given the above challenges and disparities in the physical, financial, and human resources allocation, the learner achievement gap between urban and rural schools, as identified by Hallinger and Liu (2016) and Hallinger (2018), is justified. Thus, school leaders need to be familiar with their school communities and act in accordance with them; Klar and Brewer (2013) propound that school leaders need to embrace context-specific tactics in order to be successful in their school contexts.



**Figure 1.** Context variations of the context-responsive leadership concept.

Source: Bredeson et al. (2011).

## Context-Responsive Leadership as a Conceptual Framework

The context-responsive leadership concept proposed by Bredeson et al. (2011) framed my understanding as I engaged with the leadership practices of deputy principals across school Quintiles. In their view, context and leadership are factors that have a reciprocal relationship and they describe the context-responsive leadership as "... a practical wisdom in action, which reveals a complex mix of knowledge, skills and dispositions appropriately deployed by effective leaders as they engage in fluid conversations with dynamic situational variables" (Bredeson et al., 2011, p. 20). This type of leadership approach affirms that context-responsive leaders recognize that a context can both enable and constrain a leader's behavior (Bredeson et al., 2011). Thus, contextual literacy or awareness of critical contextual elements is imperative in this leadership approach (Bredeson et al., 2011).

The aforementioned scholars developed the concept of context-responsive leadership from a study of district leadership and based it on the notion that contexts vary. They provide five context variations from a district perspective. Since the study reported herein was conducted in schools, the "school context" took the place of the 'district context' in the framework. Figure 1 shows the context variations.

The contextual variations in South Africa may be reflected through school Quintiles.

Bredeson et al. (2011) do not identify key behaviors and attributes of context-responsive leaders. However, they suggest four known attributes of context-responsive leaders that were critical in my analysis of the leadership practices of deputy principals in the current study. These attributes are presented in Figure 2.

## Methodology

I positioned myself within the interpretive paradigm to engage with deputy principals' lived experiences and to understand their leadership practices in disparate contexts. In alignment with the interpretive paradigm, the narrative inquiry, a qualitative methodology was adopted. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 20), the narrative inquiry methodology is "a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through collaboration between researcher and participant, over time, in a place or series of places and in social interaction with milieus." Within the narrative inquiry methodology, an experience is viewed as a narrative composition. Thinking narratively about experiences, therefore, becomes crucial when embarking on a narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013).

Narrative inquirers acknowledge that experience and context are not steadfast but changing and shifting phenomena; thus, the three commonplaces—temporality, sociality, and place—are propounded as prominent thinking tools within narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013). To show my commitment to this methodology, I attended to all three narrative inquiry commonplaces by using them as thinking tools during the generation and analysis of field texts (known as data in some methodologies). Firstly, I paid attention to the past, present and future of participants to attend to temporality. Secondly, I considered each participant's personal and social conditions concurrently as a way to attend to sociality. This involved paying attention to their feelings, hopes and desires and the contexts within which their experiences occur. Thirdly, to attend to place, participants were granted the freedom to choose spaces where they were comfortable during data generation (Clandinin, 2013).

<b>Four known attributes of context responsive leaders</b>	They are contextually literate, they are sensitive to and aware of critical elements of context, purpose and actions.
	They engage in fluid conversation with situations of practice, recognizing variations in context.
	They understand that variations in context can both enable or constrain their behaviour and they respond to such variations in an appropriate time and manner.
	They both react to, and, when appropriate, take action to shape their context of practice.

**Figure 2.** Four known attributes of context-responsive leaders.  
Source: Bredeson et al. (2011).

As a result, one participant was met at a community library, another participant preferred her home, and the rest were met at their workplaces.

Five deputy principals were purposively and conveniently sampled, each representing a different school Quintile. Experience and proximity constituted a recruitment criterion. I selected deputy principals with a minimum of 5 years of experience in the role and school. They were selected from two districts (Pinetown and iLembe) in the KwaZulu-Natal province for convenience. The participating deputy principals were given pseudonyms for anonymity. The table below presents their brief biographical information:

Since the narrative inquiry methodology emphasizes narrative ways of generating field texts, a narrative or unstructured interview—a pertinent method of generating field texts in the narrative inquiry—was used. This method allows participants to freely relay the experiences they wish to share (Olive, 2014). An interview session was arranged with each participant, wherein they individually shared their stories of lived experience. After the fieldwork, the generated field texts were analyzed by means of narrative analysis (first level) and analysis of narratives (second level). At the first level, the storied field texts were re-storied to construct each participant's coherent narrative. First, the events of field texts were organized chronologically. Next, plots were developed to structure the stories of participants. Lastly, data events were combined, and coherent explanations or stories were developed. The process of combining the events involved a retrospective movement because I had to look for data elements that fit the stories of the participants (Polkinghorne, 2002). For trustworthiness purposes, I brought on board all the participants as co-composers at this level of analysis (Clandinin, 2013). They played a

significant role in checking if the stories correctly represented their experiences (Loh, 2013).

At the second level of analysis, the re-storied narratives were closely examined to identify emerging concepts and themes (Polkinghorne, 2002). Through this process, I was able to identify both common and unique themes that reflected the influence that school contexts have on the leadership exercised by the deputy principals.

It is worth noting that I observed all ethical considerations in the process of conducting the study reported herein. Among other things, participants were guaranteed autonomy, voluntary participation and non-maleficence. The permission to conduct the study was solicited and obtained from the provincial Department of Basic Education and principals of concerned schools. Also, anonymity was promised to participants and subsequently ensured; hence pseudonyms shown in Table 1 are used.

## Data Presentation and Discussion

In providing answers to the key research puzzle (how do school contexts impact deputy principals' leadership practices in selected secondary schools across school Quintiles?), six themes emerged. The first three themes focus on Quintiles 1, 2, and 3, while the remaining three themes focus on Quintiles 4 and 5 school contexts.

## A Necessity for Constant Leader Visibility

Leader visibility is viewed by Whitaker (1997) as a leadership practice where leaders immerse themselves in the atmosphere beyond their office doors. This includes classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, and cafeterias—all of

**Table 1.** Participant's Biographical Information.

Name of participant	Location of school and Quintile rank	Experience
Nomzamo	Rural secondary school ranked at Quintile 1.	More than 15 years in the position.
Jomo	Secondary school in an informal settlement ranked at Quintile 2.	More than 20 years in the position.
Mzamo	Secondary school in a township ranked at Quintile 3.	More than 20 years in the position.
Seema	Secondary school in a suburban area ranked at Quintile 4.	More than 10 years in the position.
John	Secondary school in the city ranked at Quintile 5.	More than 10 years in the position.

which are part of the school plant. This practice affords leaders an opportunity to see what actually transpires in the real world of an organization (Serrat, 2017; Whitaker, 1997). It is worth noting that visibility is important across school contexts: however, it appeared to be more significant for Nomzamo, Jomo, and Mzamo, who are leaders in Quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools. For these three leaders, visibility forms part of their daily routine; they constantly make themselves visible in the school plant to ensure that both learners and teachers are in right places and that teaching and learning materializes in classrooms. Mzamo explains:

I supervise teaching and learning by walking around the school. I check to see that all classrooms are occupied. Sometimes I do find a classroom without a teacher. That is easy to solve because learners do have a structured timetable. I normally check with the class representative and s/he will tell me that the period is for a particular subject. Thereafter, I will go and find that teacher; it sometimes happens that I find the teacher on his or her way to the classroom because teachers do tell one another that I am moving around the school.

Through being present in the school plant, Mzamo is able to ensure that a school day begins timeously, continues uninterruptedly and ends smoothly. The value that Mzamo places on leader visibility is also evident in Jomo's practice in a Quintile 2 school. On a daily basis, Jomo ensures his physical presence in various areas in and around the school.

I am at the gate every morning. I structured my timetable in such a way that I don't teach during the first and the last period for control purposes. ... I do gate control and thereafter move around the school to check if teachers have arrived in their classrooms. Again, I do not teach during the last period. Instead, I take my clipboard with a list of all teachers and move around the school. If I don't find a teacher in the classroom, I make a note that a particular teacher was not found in class.

Nomzamo in a Quintile 1 school collaborates with other leaders in her school who make themselves visible in the school plant. She explains how they try to promote teaching and learning in this way:

When the morning bell rings, we leave our offices and ensure that all learners make their way to the assembly point. After assembly, we check if all teachers are leaving staff rooms and that all classrooms are attended. ... Again, as a big three [Principal, 1<sup>st</sup> Deputy Principal and 2<sup>nd</sup> Deputy Principal], we also leave our offices during the period just before break, also during the last period of the day. We do this to ensure that teaching and learning occur from morning to afternoon.

The experiences of Nomzamo, Mzamo and Jomo in Quintile 1, 2, and 3 secondary schools suggest that their constant visibility is geared towards instilling a culture of teaching and learning, as well as protecting instructional time. Quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools are mostly located in rural areas and informal settlements where challenges such as poverty, drug and substance abuse, absence of parents in learners' lives, sexual abuse, and travelling long distances to school are prevalent. (Chikoko et al., 2015). These challenges inevitably have an impact on learner conduct, as Spreen and Vally (2006) rightly claim that learners who are stricken by poverty and who suffer all sorts of abuse, struggle to recognize the relevance of education. Thus, they often misbehave, become violent, or simply drop out of school. In addition, teachers in these school contexts tend to be demotivated and dodge the classroom (Modisaotsile, 2012). Hence, a need to constantly remind them of their responsibilities. Nomzamo, Mzamo, and Jomo seem to be aware of their contextual challenges; their practice of deliberate and constant visibility in the school plant is one way through which they respond to these challenges. These deputy principals come across as context-responsive leaders who interact with the context in which they operate (Bredeson et al., 2011). While this is the case in lower Quintile schools, deputy principals in Quintile 4 and 5 schools mentioned nothing about a need to make themselves visible; however, this does not suggest that visibility is less important in their schools. They may not be constantly making themselves visible in the school plants because there is less chaos in these school contexts. Ogonnaya and Awuah (2019) claim that affluent schools can acquire additional resources and hire additional

teachers which subsequently reduces learner teacher ratio in the classrooms and also install some form of order in the school.

### **Demand for Leadership of Care**

Care can be viewed as a fundamental human need that is necessary for school leaders as they engage with people on a daily basis (Smit & Scherman, 2016). Caring leaders listen attentively to understand the needs expressed by the cared-for and, after listening, they think about and respond to the expressed needs (Noddings, 2012). In South Africa, many schools, especially those in deprived contexts, still suffer from the wounds of apartheid and neglect and a lack of humanness still prevails (Blose & Naicker, 2018). Nomzamo is a leader in a school located in a rural setting where poverty is endemic. Her leadership practices show care for learners' well-being, which is evident in her reaction when learners do not attend school.

On several occasions, I have visited learners' homes to find out why they are not coming to school. My visits to their homes made me realise that these learners come from very unfavorable backgrounds. The conditions are very sad, such as falling houses, bed bounded grannies, sick parents and all unfavorable conditions. As a result, when I return to school, I will have a better understanding of a child and will therefore begin to treat such children with care.

The above extract shows that Nomzamo is concerned not only about her learners' academic progress, but also about the conditions in which they live, because these may affect or hinder their learning. A similar view is held by Mzamo from a Quintile 3 school, who seems to uphold the notion of Blose and Naicker (2018) that care is a crucial ingredient in turning learner attitudes around in a community stricken by different social ills. Mzamo therefore engages in the leadership of care when dealing with learners.

Many of our learners come from broken families; I therefore use every chance I get to motivate them. I tell them that if they take a full control of their lives and stay determined they will prosper. ... as teachers we need to have our learners at heart. It is through caring that learners will love to come to school. They will be motivated and we can bring the best out of them.

Jomo from a Quintile 3 school also exercises caring in his leadership. Learners in Jomo's school context do not have space to study at home as they reside in an informal settlement. Jomo shows care by availing the study space for learners and by acting as a supervisor of the study sessions himself.

Our school serves a community that is stricken by poverty ... nawe uzibonele imijondolo ekake isikole (you have seen the shacks surrounding the school when you came). Those are homes of our learners; there are one-room houses and two-room houses ... I have discovered that most of our learners do not study at home and I understand, there is no space to sit and study ... As a school, having observed this problem, we decided to provide space and time to study for Grade 11 and 12 learners through facilitating study periods ... I took the monitoring of study upon myself ... I arrive early at work and leave after 17h00 for one reason, the benefit of children. I am doing it for children! Children are at the center of my heart and that is why I chose the teaching profession.

Although the leadership of care is necessary in all school contexts, it seems to be vital in Quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools, as these schools are largely located in disadvantaged communities. Learners in such neighborhoods have to confront many social ills such as unemployment of parents, poverty, and various diseases. Nomzamo, Jomo, and Mzamo seem to be leaders who understand the challenges of their school contexts and they apply care in dealing with the learners in their respective schools. The contexts in which these leaders operate clearly demand extra care. The literature suggests that leadership of care may be the required tonic to turn such schools around. Blose and Naicker (2018) as well as Van der Vyver et al. (2014) posit that where care is absent, there are low levels of school effectiveness, teacher commitment wanes and learner performance declines.

The narratives of Nomzamo, Jomo, and Mzamo show that they engage in a fluid conversation with the contexts in which they operate, which, according to Bredeson et al. (2011), is one of the qualities of context-responsive leaders. The three leaders contribute to the conversation by displaying care in their leadership. Their leadership practices are shaped by their contexts, but they also shape the contexts in which they operate through their caring responses (Bredeson et al., 2011). While care is not context-bound, the contextual realities of Quintiles 1, 2 and 3 demanded it from Nomzamo, Jomo, and Mzamo. This was not the case in Quintile 4 and Quintile 5 schools, although Seema and John may have also applied care in their leadership practices.

### **Advocating for the Maximum Utilization of Teaching Time**

Chikoko et al. (2015) argue that maximum utilization of teaching time is one way in which school leaders and teachers could defy the odds and achieve improved learner performance in deprived school contexts. This may entail that school leaders and teachers remain at school

after the final bell and offer additional lessons to learners (Chikoko et al., 2015; Towns et al., 2001). Maximizing teaching and learning time was common among participants in Quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools. These are schools in historically disadvantaged areas, thus, they generally experience greater challenges than those in advantaged areas (Heystek, 2016). Deputy principals in these schools believe that they have an obligation to promote extra lessons and offer additional time to learners to enhance their performance. Mzamo strongly believes that additional teaching and learning time is needed in his school.

... Our school has large class sizes and this makes it difficult for teachers to attend to individual learner's needs; therefore, the provision of additional learning sessions is a necessity. At the beginning of the year, I tell my staff that they should plan all their academic activities for the year and include school holidays and weekends in their planning because our learners need our additional support. I also arrive at school well before seven and I routinely conduct morning classes.

The practice of maximizing teaching and learning time is also noticeable in Nomzamo's remark about her Quintile 1 school. She goes as far as bringing parents on board to ensure that all learners attend additional lessons.

I made it clear to parents that teachers are sacrificing their personal time to provide extended time for their children's learning. I highlighted to parents that the purpose of additional lessons is to enhance learner performance ... I have observed that learners are taking additional sessions more seriously after my engagement with their parents.

While Nomzamo and Mzamo promote additional time for teachers to provide teaching and learning, Jomo promotes additional time for learners' individual learning. He understands that learning needs to continue at home, but this is unfortunately not happening due to learners' home environments not being conducive to studying. Therefore, Jomo makes the school available for learners to continue with their studies, both after school and in the mornings before the school starts.

... most of our learners do not study at home and I understand because there is no space to sit and study at home. As a school, having observed this problem, we decided to provide the space and time to study for Grade 11 and 12 through facilitating study periods. The study times differ, Grade 11 remain for an hour (15:00 to 16:00) and Grade 12 for two hours because they are older (15:00 to 17:00). Again, we allow them another 45 minutes every morning between 07:00 to 07:45, this is just before the school starts. These 45 minutes make a great difference because even if

they did not do their homework, they can use the morning study time.

The schools in lower Quintiles are generally characterized by severe underperformance (Spaull, 2013) and dysfunctionality (Chikoko et al., 2015). As a result, school leaders and teachers in these contexts find themselves under tremendous pressure as they try to improve the performance of learners. Unlike in many affluent schools where additional teachers may be employed (Ogbonnay & Awuah, 2019) to maintain the standard South African teacher-learner ratio of 1:32, the lower-Quintile schools are characterized by a shortage of teachers and overcrowding in classrooms, among other things (Modisaotsile, 2012). The overcrowded classrooms are a severe challenge that threatens learner performance since teachers cannot easily reach out to every learner in an overfull classroom (Modisaotsile, 2012).

Although Nomzamo, Mzamo, and Jomo's school contexts pose various challenges such as classroom overcrowding, shortage of resources and lack of learner support from home, they do not succumb to these challenges; instead, they provide leadership that transcends all the hardships in their contexts (Chikoko et al., 2015; Heystek, 2016; Naicker et al., 2016). One way these three leaders display context-responsive leadership is by promoting maximum use of time in their schools. From the above discussion, Nomzamo, Jomo, and Mzamo show an acute awareness of the elements characterizing their contexts, such as large classroom sizes, poor learner performance, and learners' inability to study at home. Their practice of advocating for maximum utilization of time portrays them as context-responsive leaders who are not only aware of the variations in their contexts, but who also understand that these variations may either enable or constrain their behaviors (Bredeson et al., 2011; Spillane, 2005).

## Drive to Procure Financial Support

Earlier research shows that despite all policy initiatives imposed, South African schools still remain unequal (Mestry & Ndhlovu, 2014; Spaull, 2013; Timæus et al., 2013). On the one end of the continuum, we have Quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools—the poorest schools—while on the other end we have Quintile 4 and 5 schools—the least poor schools (Chikoko et al., 2015; Mestry & Ndhlovu, 2014). The procurement of financial support seems to be a common practice performed by Seema and John in Quintile 4 and 5 schools respectively. For instance, John is a financial officer in the school, and seeking funders is one of his key responsibilities. He explains how he receives financial support to assist disadvantaged learners:



In 2009, I got a sponsor that wanted to invest in learners who are doing Mathematics, Physical Science and English. They said to me we want you to identify a group of children and focus them on Mathematics, Physical Science and English. They gave me R300 000 and they have been making this money available for kids each year. I then developed a programme which has been running for many years now. First, I identified a group of children to benefit from the program. The emphasis was on disadvantaged kids who could not afford extra tutorials. Second, I appointed tutors who are offering tutorials to kids ...

In the above extract, John declares that his Quintile 5 school receives an amount of R300,000 each year from a single sponsor and he spends this money on disadvantaged learners in his school who cannot afford extra tuition. In her Quintile 4 school, Seema also takes part in fundraising activities and she, together with her team, accumulated an enormous amount of money for the school through one of the projects she led.

... my Principal gave me a huge project to carry out; he asked me to coordinate a Gala Day. ... I had to fundraise and get sponsors to make the day a success. In doing this, I developed a broad plan and I shared my plan with different stakeholders. We organised banners and advertised the event. We had stalls organised, we had games for children ... We also had a car show, sound show, beauty pageant and concert. It was a whole day event! Subsequently, we raised about R200 000. ... With the money that we fundraised, we were able to convert two classroom blocks into a large school hall. I am now using the hall to raise more funds by availing it for hire to the community.

The least poor schools receive less funds from the Department of Basic Education's financial allocation (Mestry & Ndhlovu, 2014; Timæus et al., 2013). Thus, these schools engage in various activities to raise funds, which they subsequently spend on acquiring the resources they need to provide quality education (Mestry & Ndhlovu, 2014). Seema and John as senior leaders in these schools play an active role in fundraising, and they have been able to procure sizeable funds for their schools. Unfortunately, in lower Quintile schools there are no, if not fewer opportunities to fundraise; thus, deputy principals in such schools do not even regard fundraising as one of their leadership practices.

Seema and John's experiences show that context matters a great deal (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Bredeson et al., 2011; Spillane, 2005), and that it can indeed enable or constrain the behavior of leaders (Bredeson et al., 2011; Spillane, 2005). The Quintile 4 and Quintile 5 school contexts enable Seema and John to procure financial support, which may be viewed as an important advantage presented by their school contexts. Although

the conditions in their schools are favorable, they have realized that their school contexts can provide much more. As a result, they exhaust all resources available to enhance their schools' performance even further. Seema and John come across as contextually literate leaders; they know when, where, why and how to re-shape elements of their school contexts in order to provide a more favorable environment for achieving their priorities and goals (Bredeson et al., 2011).

## Responsive Cooperation Between Parents and Deputy Principals

Parents are an important resource in their children's learning. The active participation of a parent in the education of a learner contributes significantly to the learner's educational performance (Modisaotsile, 2012; Okeke, 2014; Prater et al., 1997). Parent cooperation is viewed by Okeke (2014) as a parent's response to their parental obligations. This includes getting the child to school on time, being involved in the child's learning, volunteering assistance, and taking a leadership role at the child's school. While responsive cooperation between deputy principals and parents is observable across all school Quintiles, the collaboration seems to be stronger in Quintiles 4 and 5 schools. In these schools, parents actively respond to their obligations, which helps Seema and John to roll out their programs without great hindrances. For instance, John conducts a four-day mathematics program for newly admitted Grade 8 learners to maintain the excellent performance of the school. John does not talk to learners about this—he requests parents to send the kids to school on the specified days and parents actually heed John's call.

Normally, we hold an orientation day in October for our new Grade 08 learners. The orientation is attended by both parents and learners and usually, we receive a total attendance from parents. In the orientation, I request parents to send their kids to me for four days in November. The parents make sure that children do come. I then run a four-day program with the learners, this is normally after the year-end examination.

In this school context, parents not only show their responsive cooperation by sending their children when requested, they also call the deputy principal's office when they are unhappy with teachers' behavior in the school. John tells of his experience in this regard:

I receive calls from parents, sometimes they lodge complaints about certain teachers. They say "sir, my daughter has a problem in class, her teacher is doing this and that," and all I say is "okay I will look into the matter."

The fact that parents take the time to call the deputy principal shows that they take an active interest in what is happening in the school. Moreover, it displays their commitment to ensuring that their children receive quality education. In the Quintile 4 school, parents were also found to cooperate with Seema. For instance, parents are expected to arrange transport for learners from the school to a public swimming pool for swimming classes, and parents actually perform their role. Seema explains:

The school offers various sports codes including, netball, football, table tennis, chess and swimming. However, we do not have a swimming pool in the school, we use public swimming pools for classes. Most learners go to the Kingsmead swimming pool. I requested parents to organize transport for their children and also to hire an extra tutor if necessary. Parents play a significant role in making swimming classes possible.

The better cooperation of parents—as confirmed by Seema—may be associated with the contexts in which the schools are located. According to Prater et al. (1997), parents in urban contexts interact with teachers and attend school programs. In both Quintiles 4 and 5 schools, parents' cooperation serves as an enabling factor as Seema and John are not constrained by a lack of parental support in their endeavors. They are able to delegate certain responsibilities to parents and in return parents avail themselves to assist and cooperate. This kind of parental behavior is not always possible in Quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools. Parents in poor communities are often unable to be actively involved in their children's education due to various reasons, including afar employment, single parenthood, and illiteracy. Apart from this, parents are sometimes discouraged by teachers' negative actions and attitudes (Okeke, 2014).

While Seema and John in Quintile 4 and Quintile 5 schools cooperate easily with parents, their counterparts in Quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools are exposed to totally different scenarios. Although parents do participate in Quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools, their participation is challenged by various socio-economic forces. For instance, Mzamo explains that on several occasions he telephoned parents to collect unwell learners and parents could not come because they work very far from home.

Sometimes I experience cases where a learner is sick or attacked by fits. When I call the parent requesting him or her to collect the child, they give excuses like "I am at work, I am still trying to call my neighbor who can come there." In most cases learners remain in the sick room until they get better. Even when they feel better, I still cannot let them go home, because in most cases there is no one at home. Sometimes keys are with the child.

While Mzamo often looks after sick children at school, Nomzamo explains that she resorts to home visits when learners stay away from school without any notification from the parents.

... I have visited learners' homes to find out why they [learners] are not coming to school. My visits to their homes made me realise that these learners come from very unfavorable backgrounds. The conditions are very sad, such as falling houses, bed bounded grannies, sick parents and all unfavorable conditions.

From the above remarks, we are learning that the cooperation of parents in Quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools with deputy principals does not compare to Quintile 4 and 5 schools. This is due to various challenges, such as distant employment, poverty and illness, as Nomzamo and Mzamo suggest. Their accounts resonate with Okeke's (2014) sentiments; this scholar claims that, in previously disadvantaged communities, parents' cooperation in their children's education is not prevented by lack of interest, but rather problems of poverty, single parenthood, illiteracy and the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, among other factors. The poor participation of parents in lower-Quintile schools is another contextual factor that shapes the practices of school leaders. For instance, Mzamo keeps unwell learners at school until they get better, and Nomzamo visits learners' homes when they do not attend school.

### Reduced Teaching Workload

The core duties and responsibilities of a deputy principal include assisting the school principal with administrative work, teaching, overseeing extra- and co-curricular activities, supervising personnel, as well as interacting and communicating with stakeholders (Republic of South Africa, 1998a). According to the *Employment of Educators Act, 76 of 1998*, a deputy principal is expected to spend 60% of their time on teaching. However, it seems that this rule is not adhered to in Quintile 4 and Quintile 5 schools, since Seema and John's teaching workloads are not in keeping with the job description for deputy principals. For instance, John in a Quintile 5 school, is exempted from teaching. Instead, he manages various other components of the school, including human and financial resources, learner admissions, and the curriculum. Since these activities take up a great portion of John's time, the school management decided to exempt him from teaching.

Due to the myriad of tasks I perform in the school, we decided that I should be exempted from teaching. My teaching was not fair to learners because I missed many lessons

due to meetings and other administrative duties I had to attend.

John's workload is structured in an unusual manner that seems to transgress the policy prescriptions since he spends 100% of his time—instead of 40%—on managerial and administrative activities (Republic of South Africa, 1998a). John plays the role of a full-time manager in his Quintile 5 school and he is involved in various critical tasks in the school, such as managing all staff employed by the School Governing Body (SGB).

I am responsible for all School Governing Body employed staff, I manage among other things, their leaves and salaries. The Department of Basic Education pays thirty-five teachers, and we have sixty-five; it pays one administration person and we have eleven, also it pays one general assistant and we have ten. Therefore, to maintain the school, the way it is and to be able to pay our staff competitive salaries, I need to ensure that fees are collected from parents.

John also takes on the role of financial manager in his school.

I draw up the budget of the school, which is about R18 million; manage the accomplishment of the budget and report to the school governing body, because everything is reported to the SGB. I make sure that the protocols are properly followed in terms of cash payments. Again, I ensure that everyone involved understands how we do payments. There is a lot of nonsense happening in schools in terms of the misappropriation of funds. Basically, I make sure that such things do not happen here.

Furthermore, John is responsible for managing learner admissions in the school.

I also play a leading role in the admissions of new learners. It is my responsibility to receive applications from new learners and to make the selection at the beginning of each year.

Although Seema does teach, her teaching load in her Quintile 4 school is reduced and she teaches only two classes.

As Deputy Principals, we always had 16 teaching periods ... In 2014, we ... approached the Principal and requested him to reduce our teaching loads. He did not have a problem, he reduced our teaching time from 16 hours to 10 hours a week. So, in the last three years, we started teaching two classes. Our work is now manageable because we have two periods of teaching in a day ...

The least poor schools, which are normally ranked either Quintile 4 or Quintile 5, still charge fees to parents of learners and they actively raise funds. They use these funds to employ additional teachers in order to maintain

a reasonable learner-to-teacher ratio and deliver quality education (Mestry & Ndhlovu, 2014; Spreen & Vally, 2006). This practice of supplementing the school's funds allows for deputy principals to have a reduced teaching load or to be wholly exempted from teaching, because their teaching loads may be allocated to other teachers.

In contrast, deputy principals in Quintiles 1, 2, and 3 schools, carry many other responsibilities beyond their expected teaching load. For instance, Nomzamo in a Quintile 1 school, explains that she teaches a language in four class divisions: "I teach isiZulu home language in all four Grade 12 classrooms." Mzamo's teaching load in a Quintile 3 school also goes beyond the stipulated 60% expectation, as he explains: "I teach two Physical Science classes in Grade 11 and two in Grade 12." Mzamo thus, spends 4 hours a day teaching, which adds up to 20 hours a week. Although 20 hours a week is already beyond the 60% that is expected, Mzamo offers an additional teaching hour every morning. "I strongly believe in offering additional time for teaching and learning ... I arrive at school well before seven and I routinely conduct morning classes."

From the above discussion, it is clear that deputy principals in Quintile 4 and Quintile 5 school contexts carry a much lighter teaching load and, in some cases, they do not teach at all, while their counterparts in lower Quintile schools carry beyond the expected teaching load.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The study reported on in this paper utilized the Quintile ranking of public schools to mirror school contexts in South Africa. Research confirms that Quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools are the poorest, while Quintile 4 and 5 are the least poor schools (Blose, 2018; Blose & Naicker, 2018; Christie et al., 2007; Modisaotsile, 2012). When I examined the influence of school contexts on deputy principals' leadership practices, I observed commonalities among deputy principals in the poorest schools (Quintiles 1, 2, and 3). I also noticed characteristics shared among deputy principals in the least poor schools (Quintiles 4 and 5).

On the one hand, deputy principals in the lower Quintile schools experienced generally low morale among learners and teachers, overcrowded classrooms, poor learner performance, and limited teaching and learning resources. Moreover, their schools were located in areas where poverty, substance abuse, and poor parent cooperation were the order of the day. The leadership exercised by the participating deputy principals in such school contexts was found to be not ignorant of these contextual realities; instead, they exerted leadership practices that showed an acute understanding of these realities. First, they made themselves visible in school plants to

constantly remind teachers and learners of their obligations. Second, they exercised leadership of care since they attended to learners with emotional tolls. Third, they maximized teaching time to respond to learners' learning needs. These leadership practices show that the school contexts shape what school leaders do in practice.

On the other hand, the Quintile 4 and Quintile 5 schools are mostly located in urban areas and are better resourced. The deputy principals in these schools were found to determinedly exploit the possibility of raising funds to supplement their schools' resources and maintain the delivery of quality education. Also, parents in these schools were found to be involved in their children's education; thus, the deputy principals collaborated with parents to ensure that school programs took place. Furthermore, the Quintile 4 and Quintile 5 schools sampled in this study could afford to hire additional teachers. As a result, deputy principals' teaching workloads were reduced, or they were totally exempted from teaching and thus able to focus all their attention on other strategic duties in the school. While the *Employment of Educators Act, 76 of 1998*, stipulates that deputy principals are expected to spend 60% of their time on teaching, the current study revealed that a deputy principal in a Quintile 4 school had a reduced teaching load and a deputy principal in a Quintile 5 school was not teaching at all. Although this arrangement may appear to defy the policy stipulations, it was quite feasible and caused no harm in the higher Quintile school contexts.

Considering the inconsistencies in South African communities, one may argue that the influence of school contexts on deputy principals' leadership practices reflects social and economic inequality. The above findings show that the leadership practices of deputy principals in Quintile 4 and 5 schools (in affluent communities) differ significantly from those of their counterparts in lower Quintile schools (in deprived communities). While Quintile 4 and Quintile 5 school contexts appear to be a springboard that enables deputy principals to achieve more in their leadership, the Quintile 1, 2, and 3 school contexts present numerous drawbacks with which deputy principals need to grapple to keep schools afloat. The findings do not necessarily suggest that the least poor schools present no challenges to deputy principals' leadership; they do. However, the findings of this study revealed more opportunities in less poor school contexts compared to the poorest school contexts.

It was interesting to observe that despite dissimilar contextual influences, the participating deputy principals understood and were responsive to the school contexts in which they operated; I can refer to them as contextual-responsive leaders. However, the school contexts in which they operated divergently shaped their leadership practices. While the participating

deputy principals occupied a similar leadership role, this study shows that their responsibilities and leadership practices are not homogeneous. Instead, they depended on school contexts, which this study found to be unbalanced in presenting challenges and opportunities. The findings of this study do not only confirm Bredeson et al.'s (2011) notion that context-responsive leaders recognize that a context can both enable and constrain a leader's behavior, but they show that a school context can significantly enable or constrain the endeavors of leaders. For this reason, the product of leadership exercised by deputy principals across school Quintiles was found to be dissimilar, because one size does not fit all in exercising leadership.

## Research Limitations and a Recommendation

This was a small-scale qualitative study, and I wish to declare that its findings may not reflect the views of all deputy principals in diverse school contexts in South Africa. Given that context and leadership influence each other, I deem it vital to consider the school contexts when examining the leadership practices and effectiveness of school leaders. Therefore, I recommend further research on the relationship between leadership and school contexts. Further studies may involve other groups of school leaders to gather a more comprehensive understanding. Also, researchers may use other methods to further understand the influence of school contexts on leadership practices.


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## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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