

# Principals' Perspectives on the Connection between Context and Student Learning in Cameroonian Presbyterian Schools

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## Abstract

This study examines the role of secondary school leadership in enhancing student learning in Cameroon, focusing on Presbyterian school principals and their understanding of the relationship between learning context and student outcomes. Principals are expected to demonstrate professional skills and knowledge of how various components of student learning interact. However, the study highlights a significant gap in leadership training among Cameroonian principals, focusing predominantly on teacher-centric approaches rather than student learning. Utilising relational leadership theory, the qualitative research includes insights from six Presbyterian Church secondary schools. Findings indicate a lack of awareness among principals regarding the interplay between context and student learning, compounded by barriers hindering the establishment of positive learning environments. They underscore the need for enhanced leadership training, prioritising student learning, and establishing positive learning environments. The study advocates for strengthened policies and training initiatives prioritising school leadership development to improve student learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** context; professional training; relational leadership; school leadership; student learning

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## Introduction

A common feature of successful schools is the high-quality leadership of principals who positively and significantly impact on student learning (Bezzina et al. 2018). As school leaders, principals are responsible for exercising effective school leadership. Effective leadership requires principals to mobilise and empower teachers by providing for their academic needs and serving students with integrity (Smith and Piele 2006). The ability of leadership to properly mobilise and empower school members is based on personal and professional values that enable principals to attain school objectives (Bush and Clover 2014). The main aim of schools is to ensure that principals intelligently link and pay equal attention to the four components of student learning (i.e., the learning context, process, content, and outcomes). Thus, principals must be conscious of the relationship between context (learning conditions) and student learning to impact on teaching and learning positively. This consciousness will improve principals' interaction with students and teachers and improve teaching and learning conditions. Principals can significantly contribute to learning outcomes and the general improvement of schools only when they exhibit high-quality leadership (Bush et al. 2011). This study examines how Cameroonian Presbyterian school principals (CPSPs) understand the connection between "context" and "student learning" and what limits their ability to connect these concepts in practical terms. The findings of this study have implications for policy and practice.

### **Why Context Matters in Leadership for Student Learning**

Much of the current discourse about leadership for student learning takes place against the backdrop of the school context in which students learn. In other words, as is generally acknowledged, each school in every country has a unique identity and operates in its specific situation (Marishane 2020). This situation suggests that leadership, like student learning, cannot be de-contextualised. The two processes are so context-bound that discussion on school leadership cannot proceed without the context in which students learn. Unfortunately, as Hallinger (2018) has found in his analysis of leadership in context, context is virtually hidden behind the shadow of leadership. There is no denying that the school context has become increasingly complex and unpredictable and that different schools operate in different contexts shaped by many factors. Some contextual factors shape the school's organisational context and influence students' learning and achievement. These factors include school climate, safety, interpersonal relationships, teaching, and organisational structure (Baskia 2014). Understanding and responding to the dynamics of the school's organisational context are fundamental for a school leader. Research (Ross and Gray 2006) tells us that while school leaders indirectly influence student learning, on the contrary, the context has a direct influence on such learning (Conway et al. 2009). The school context, therefore, mediates between school leadership and student learning through the agency of a school principal. Considering the role of context, it becomes imperative for a principal to connect to the context by creating conditions that will enhance successful student learning. The ability to do so requires this consideration, which shows that the nature of

the relationship between the school leader and the school context shapes successful student learning.

### **Linking Student Learning to Context through Leadership**

For principals to understand the link between context and student learning and put this knowledge into practice, they must possess professional intelligence qualities such as knowledge of subject matter, problem identification and solving ability, exemplary behaviour, a personality of integrity, good interpersonal relationships, approachability, and flexibility (Marishane 2020). These qualities are not just desirable but essential for effective school leadership. However, many school heads in Cameroon lack basic administrative competence, resulting from insufficient professional leadership values and skills. As a result, these principals largely depend on the ideas of others to enable them to create positive learning contexts (Monjong and Fon 2016), which suggests a disconnection between student learning and school leadership in this country.

### **Problem Statement**

As heads of secondary schools, principals are expected to be effective planners, organisers, leaders, and administrators (Lunenburg 2010). By implication, these expectations require principals to have an in-depth understanding of pedagogy, administration, financial control, and human relations. Thus, principals are the first professionals in schools. Nevertheless, principals in Cameroon and other countries in Africa are faced with challenges because of a lack of emphasis on leadership training and development programmes for principals who train on the job for the most part (Ashu 2014; Mbua 2003; Mufua 2019; Wirba 2015). A study in Pakistan has revealed that principals face the same problem (Nasreen and Odhiambo 2018). It is also noted that limited knowledge of the leadership role of principals is a characteristic of African principalship, and this deficiency results in a lack of innovation (Oplatka 2004). Principals focus more on instructional leadership and neglect the conditions in which students learn (i.e., context). Even so, it is doubtful whether principals in Cameroon are effective in discharging their duties because they are only trained as teachers and serve as teachers or vice principals, discipline personnel, or departmental heads before appointment (Wirba 2015). School leadership can be more challenging for principals of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) appointed from teachers with bachelors degrees and superficial knowledge of pedagogy and administration. Even though universities now offer programmes for teacher preparation, it has emerged that those who graduate are not well prepared to teach because their learning is not connected to student achievement (Hightower et al. 2011). This implies that the appointment of principals is not based on competence but rather on longevity, which is a shortcoming. Although inadequately trained personnel are identified as a significant challenge for Cameroon's education, the situation has not improved (Mufua 2019). This implies that many principals cannot effectively coordinate student learning due to a lack of school leadership knowledge and skills.

How principals of Cameroonian Presbyterian Church schools understand the connection between context and students is examined in this article. The problem is presented from a theoretical and practical perspective, and the article concludes with policy expectations of secondary school leadership preparation, which calls for a critical quest for educational reforms in Cameroon, Africa, and the world.

## Theoretical Background of Principals as Professional Leaders

This study was based on Hollander's (1964) relational leadership theory, which presents leadership as a reciprocal influence and a social trade connection between leaders and their followers. The theory stresses the importance of relationships and interactions between leaders and followers in a social context. It assumes that relationships are created through relational exchanges in which members belonging to the relationship appraise each other's ability, benevolence, and integrity (Brower et al. 2000). Such a relationship comprises values of trust and respect demonstrated among members in their shared organisational context. Against this background, Hallinger (2010) asserts that leadership is a contextual and highly responsive relational process. This view suggests that for a leader to engage in a positive relationship with the followers, they must be responsive to the context in which this relationship is rooted. The theory assumes that a positive relationship between a leader and followers depends on the leader's disposition to embrace social justice and the ethics of care (Smit and Scherman 2016). For a school principal, this view suggests the need for a leader to possess skills and knowledge of how to care for the well-being of students and ensure that their learning takes place in a familiar, safe, secure, and enjoyable environment—the environment to which they can relate and connect. It follows from the theory's assumptions that any disconnection between actors (i.e., principals and learners) and their shared social context will likely harm student learning.

The theoretical foundation in this section is followed by essential qualities that leadership must possess for effective performance, as suggested in the literature (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). The qualities include the leader (principal) being a good communicator, an initiator of positive dialogue with teachers and students, and someone who applies technical knowledge and practical wisdom. The implication is that when principals are technically and practically skilled, they will appreciate the vital role that the context (learning conditions) plays in student learning. This awareness will influence principals to communicate effectively, establish trust, and engage members in discussions that benefit the school, involve members in decision-making, and create positive relationships (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). When this happens, the learning conditions will be positively impacted on, giving hope for effective student learning.

## Research Methodology

This study followed a qualitative approach based on an interpretivist paradigm and a case study design. The approach was chosen based on its ability to explore and provide

deeper insights into real-world issues and problems by collecting participants' perceptions and experiences of the situation in which they worked (Corner et al. 2019). The study was conducted in Cameroon, where a criterion sampling technique was used to select data from six secondary school principals. This is a sampling technique in which a researcher considers specific pre-determined criteria when selecting participants to participate in the study (Nyimbili and Nyimbili 2024). Two criteria were used to align with the sampling technique. First, the study included principals who had served at the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon secondary schools (PCCSS) for over a year. Second, both male and female principals were included. The basis for using this criterion was to ensure that principals could relate to the phenomenon investigated. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews with principals at their schools. Before data collection, permission to conduct the research was obtained, and participants were assured of privacy protection by treating their contributions with confidentiality. A thematic analysis procedure advocated by Clarke and Braun (2013) was followed to analyse the data collected. This analysis was chosen based on its ability to classify, organise, and present the participants' perceptions in detail and into themes. Hence, data obtained were classified by assigning codes to participants' perceptions, which were later organised into categories to develop themes for presentation, as the literature suggests (Saldana 2021).

## Findings and Discussions

This section presents the results and discussions under three main identified themes: principals' perceptions of context and student learning, significant challenges that limit PCCSS principals from connecting context to student learning, and measures to be taken to improve principals' perceptions of this connection.

### **Principals' Perceptions of the Connection between Context and Student Learning**

This theme examined school principals' perceptions of the connection between context and student learning. The interviews showed that some principals understood the relationship between context and student learning while others did not. Out of the six principals interviewed, the principals of schools 2, 4, and 6 views' expressed a clear understanding of the link between context and student learning. For instance, the principal of school 2 interpreted the link between context and student learning as "leadership practices that promote environments that are suitable for learning and students' success."

Influential school leaders must be able to articulate the vocabulary surrounding their functions and be conscious of how the context is linked to student learning. This is because the context of student learning is very relevant (Entwistle and Ramsden 2015). We view context as the platform or foundation on which all the other components of student learning rests. This perspective explains that if the context is not supportive enough, the other three components of student learning will be negatively affected. Hence, the learning context and student learning are like two sides of the same coin.

This aligns with UNICEF and UNESCO (2007), which indicate that the prevalent environmental school conditions significantly determine students' learning. In this regard, the principals' consciousness of the connection that "context" has with "student learning" was a positive signal suggesting that they could identify and relate with teaching and learning-related concerns for facilitating student learning. However, the awareness of this link is not enough proof that these principals implemented their practices correctly, owing to the deficiency identified in their professional capacity.

Though the principals of schools 1, 3, and 5 had different responses to this question, they failed to explain clearly how context is linked to student learning. While Principal 1 viewed the link between the concepts to mean "the practice of suitable leadership that gives support to teachers for learning," another saw it as "monitoring activities of students to ensure their success" (Principal 5). Others opined as follows:

I ensure that teachers have the didactic material to complete their syllabuses so that students benefit from the knowledge, give tests, and achieve their goals. (Principal 2)

I connect the context to student learning by following up on students' activities so that they can learn and pass. (Principal 5)

There are two issues involved in the two quotations. First, the quotations suggest that principals are more obsessed with teaching than teaching conditions. The findings revealed that the principals' attention is more focused on how teachers teach than the conditions (context) in which teachers teach and students learn. However, studies (Leithwood et al. 2004) show that teacher support contributes to student learning with due consideration given to the conditions under which teaching and learning occur. This view suggests that principals do not sufficiently attend to school contexts in PCCSS. The view is backed by the literature, which confirms that many Cameroonian school leadership studies focus on instructional supervision rather than leadership for student learning (Mufua 2019). This contrasts with literature that indicates that school heads must be able to implement their practices most suitably, in unity with the contexts in which they operate, if they have to impact on student learning positively (Day et al. 2011). Thus, the failure of principals to understand and respond accordingly to the connection between context and student learning indicates their weak leadership and departure from the relational leadership theory. Özgenel (2020) affirms that disregarding the school environment may result in leadership ineffectiveness that will hamper student learning. Still, in the first quotation, the second issue exposed is that principals concentrate more on students' academic achievement than their learning conditions, as opposed to literature that emphasises that school leaders must pay equal attention to the four components of student learning to ensure positive student achievement (Marishane 2020). Ignoring these conditions is likely to harm relationships between school leaders and students, contrary to the tenets of the relational leadership theory.

In the second quotation above, the principal of school 6 perceived context and student learning as leadership monitoring for students' success. Therefore, the link between context and student learning was equated with leadership monitoring and students' activities. This was yet another demonstration of a superficial response as it failed to present the relationship between "context and student learning," rooted in the relational leadership theory. Strangely, some principals did not understand the crucial link between "context and student learning." A lack of knowledge on how the school context relates to student learning suggests a lack of initiative to ensure supportive conditions for student learning, which indicates a severe leadership deficiency. In a study conducted in Cameroon, principals expressed doubts about effectively implementing inspirational and motivational skills (Wirba 2015). This lapse in the leadership skills of the principals of PCCSS is contrary to the relational leadership theory, which demands organisational leaders to be professionally competent by possessing practical wisdom and technical knowledge (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011).

PCCSS are owned by a private organisation (PCC). The private sector operates under the supervision of the government. This organisation is expected to assist the state in providing sound education to the citizens and non-citizens in the country. The evidence of leadership incapability indicates that the state did not provide enough supervision over the running of the private education sector. Putting a check on the quality of leadership to be delivered in private secondary schools would help direct and caution school providers on conditions to ensure that school leaders are professionally proficient. Hence, there is an urgent call for educational policy reforms in Cameroon and in Africa.

### **Major Challenges Limiting Principals of PCCSS from Connecting Context to Student Learning**

This theme is presented under four sub-themes: poor development policy for principals and teachers, insufficiency and absence of modern school resources, student resistance, and increased teacher attrition.

#### *Poor Development Policy for Principals and Teachers*

Principals noted that the PCC restriction policy on professional development is a major stumbling block in executing their duties effectively. The church policy for secondary schools does not encourage teachers to further their studies as those who requested study leave are expected to apply as new job seekers upon accomplishment of studies. If such persons are recruited, they would be treated as new employees, irrespective of their positions before leaving for studies. Thus, principals and teachers are discouraged from furthering their studies because the certificate they have earned will have little or no influence on the salary scale. Studying while working is difficult due to the cumbersome nature of their workload, which is accompanied by extra duties. These overwhelming tasks give them a hard time and deter them from developing themselves as teachers

before they are appointed principals. Principals lamented the ongoing workshops for being insufficient to support their job, as one stated:

The PCC policies are not friendly. Those who go to school must reapply when they return and are considered new in the system. We do not have time to learn while working because the work is much and seminars are not held regularly. ... One is scared to take study leave, which will not improve one's salary.

Other studies in Cameroon have found that many principals lack essential administrative capacity (Monjong and Fon 2016) because they learn on the job for the most part (Mbua 2003). According to Ashu (2014), learning on the job may be blamed on the lack of programmes for professional development. Oplatka (2004) has confirmed that lack of innovation is a significant characteristic of principalship in Africa because of insufficient knowledge of the administrative role of leadership. Nevertheless, many scholars have argued against this development policy for PCC teachers and principals, which impedes progress. Rodriguez-Gomez et al. (2019) have noted that principals' professional development improves educational institutions' quality. Therefore, recruiting qualified teachers who later become principals can improve schools (Gray 2000). Rodriguez-Gomez et al. (2019) and Gray (2000) argue that principals and teachers need to engage in formal pre-professional and in-service training programmes, coupled with informal sources of learning, for their development to impact on student learning positively. Trained principals possess supervisory and managerial skills, significantly impacting on teaching and learning contexts (Siahaan 2020). PCC teachers and principals are employed and appointed without formal professional preparation, and insufficient ongoing learning hinders principals' ability to understand the connection between context and student learning. This deficiency likely affects their ability to ensure favourable learning conditions to enhance student learning.

### *Insufficiency and Absence of Modern School Resources*

Most principals lamented the nonexistence and inadequacy of modern teaching aids and unequipped facilities. For example, internet facilities for research, modern staffrooms, libraries and laboratories, projectors, and whiteboards were absent, and there were not enough classrooms in some schools. A principal reported the absence of chairs where students could sit and study at the library. They said that these conditions affected their schools' teaching and learning conditions. All the schools suffered one problem or another. Regarding this challenge, a principal stated that:

The students cannot use the library because there are no chairs. We lack modern teaching resources such as projectors, library books, the Internet, whiteboards, sufficient classrooms and equipped laboratories ..., which makes work hard.

Schools that do not invest in teaching and learning resources are not likely to make a difference in student learning and performance (Bush and Clover 2014). For novice teachers to lack teaching support poses a considerable challenge to principals, given that

principals of PCCSS are highly restricted by the poor financial capacity of the PCC in providing costly institutional needs (Presbyterian Church in Cameroon 2014, 16). Principals disclosed that viable schools were not only cautioned to avoid expensive projects in their annual budgeting but were also expected to forward financial surpluses to the Synod Office at the detriment of the provision of environmental needs of the schools. However, two principals revealed that the lack of funds due to low enrolment limited the availability of modern teaching and learning resources. The enactment of Laws No. 86/022 and 766/PJL/AN of 1987 gave private education providers the freedom to determine their fees to provide adequate infrastructure and appropriate equipment for efficient teaching (Ndongko and Tambo 2000). So, the absence of essential school resources is a sign of neglect by the PCC. In this regard, the attention and intervention of the government and PCC schools are crucial. This situation requires teachers and principals to find ways to solve such problems, as reiterated in relational leadership theory and interpersonal trust. Using this approach will empower leadership to provide supportive teaching and learning contexts.

The findings also revealed that frequent electricity cuts, which hinder students' learning, characterise schools in rural areas. The absence of pipe-borne water coupled with water shortages also poses a difficulty as students are constantly sick because they consume unclean water. This unhygienic situation was quite delicate for an academic environment that is supposed to protect the students. One principal said: "We always experience blackouts due to the rural location of our school, and this situation hinders students from reading. We lack pipe-borne water, which affects sanitation and students' health."

It is worth noting that effective schools ensure the cleanliness and brightness of the physical learning environments (Day et al. 2011). Students cannot learn effectively in the absence and inadequacy of their essential needs, much less when they are sick. A situation of this magnitude will likely keep principals in a fix, let alone untrained ones who may not take the initiative.

### *Resistance from Students*

Another challenge principals face in their quest to make the environment conducive for learning is that some students become defensive in the process of being beaten, which sometimes results in fights, as indicated in this excerpt: "We are disrespected by some students who go to the extent of fighting back at us when they are beaten." This is a revelation of a high degree of violent context, which does not help student learning. Many educational experts and bodies have debunked school violence (Ngwokabuenui 2015; Obsuth et al. 2017; UNICEF and UNESCO 2007). The relational leadership theory and interpersonal trust are also against insecure work environments, which deter trusting relationships and members' capacity to achieve (Brower et al. 2000; Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011; Sklaveniti 2016). A lack of emphasis on leadership and teacher training for current principals and teachers leaves PCC principals with limited knowledge surrounding their duties. As a result, students' rights are violated, conflicting

with the rights-based approach to education (UNICEF and UNESCO 2007). This approach posits that students' best interest is of primary importance to principals, and Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF and UNESCO 2007) requires the development of peaceful and student-friendly education.

### *Rising Teacher Attrition Rates*

Principals of Presbyterian secondary schools face the problem of teacher attrition and shortages because of low pay for teachers in the private sector instituted in 1976 through the enforcement of Law No.76/15 (Ndongko and Tambo 2000). This problem leaves principals with no choice but to assign teachers to teach multiple subjects. This is more challenging to teachers who lack professional skills, resulting in non-compliance with leadership instructions, creating friction between principals and teachers, and preventing principals from instituting favourable contexts for student learning. Experienced teachers are replaced by inexperienced ones, making principals' leadership difficult. A principal said, "Seasoned teachers abandon their jobs because of low payment. Both old and newly employed ones from university but no teaching background are compelled to teach other subjects, and this causes resistance and tension." The Presbyterian Church must revise its employment criteria and employ trained teachers to promote quality teaching that strongly supports quality leadership and student learning (Darling-Hammond 2008; Hightower et al. 2011).

### **Measures to Be Taken to Improve Principals' Perceptions of the Connection between Context and Student Learning**

Students' learning is the central aspect of educational institutions (UNICEF and UNESCO 2007). Thus, it is crucial to take feasible measures to improve principals' perception of the link context has with student learning for effective leadership. This is a pressing need for principals in Africa, particularly in Cameroon, which lacks trained school heads because classroom teachers are appointed as school principals (Wirba 2015). These measures include providing pre-service and in-service training for secondary school heads, ensuring pre-service and in-service training for secondary school teachers, investing in professional training institutions, and redirecting educational reforms. These measures are presented in the following sections.

### *Providing Pre-Service and In-Service Training for Secondary School Heads*

A key finding in this study revealed that principals of Presbyterian secondary schools failed to relate context with student learning because they lacked pre-service and regular in-service training. Pre-service and in-service training also means professional development, which is the formal and informal activities that engage school leaders and teachers in learning new knowledge concerning the practice of their profession (Knapp 2003). Professional training can be obtained formally and informally. Formal sources include conferences, workshops or seminars, network teams, and training courses at a university. Though there is no specific criterion for becoming successful principals,

Deborah (2016) argues that professional training, life experiences that shape leadership practices, and individual development are essential in building strong leadership. Firm principals can create favourable contexts for teaching and learning and inspire teachers to be stable for students' success (Levin et al. 2020). Thus, strong school leadership is indispensable at this time when schools are making efforts to retain teachers to ensure students' success. Principals greatly influence the quality of learning in schools. For this reason, principals must have the capacities and skills required to coordinate student learning properly. Proper coordination of student learning demands principals to have pre-knowledge in educational management through formal pre-service training before appointment (Anderson and Pounder 2018; Marishane 2020; Siahaan 2020; Usman and Syaputri 2020). Adequate preparation enables principals to better relate to all the components of student learning (context, content, process, and outcome), and by doing so, principals are conscious of the vital role of the school context (learning conditions) in enhancing the other components of student learning.

Principals must be dynamic and possess current knowledge and skills surrounding their fields (Nasreen and Odhiambo 2018). Principals, according to Huber (2008) and Perez (2011), are also expected to have a mastery of academic content and instruction and always be ready to support teacher development effectively (Anderson and Pounder 2018; Barber et al. 2010; Hull 2012). So, even after appointment, principals must be continuously trained to ensure their development and success. As such, training principals and ensuring their success through continuous professional training is fundamental because students' success and school effectiveness are highly connected to school leadership (Dinham 2007; Nasreen and Odhiambo 2018). Schleicher (2016) affirmed that practical professional training requires ongoing training, practice, follow-up support, and feedback. Nasreen and Odhiambo (2018) advise that in ongoing professional training, emphasis should be placed on modern practice and knowledge because, according to Oduro (2009), cited in Swaffield and McBeath (2013), principals in Africa see themselves as those who implement policies and not as school leaders. This ideology of African principals indicates they lack the knowledge needed to perform effectively, which calls for improvement in their management abilities (Siahaan 2020). Additionally, principals must pay utmost attention to their professional training by learning from various sources such as superiors, colleagues, and individual research (Barber et al. 2010). Ongoing professional training enables principals to acquire new knowledge, affirm previous perceptions, and maintain high school standards (Waniganayake et al. 2008).

It is imperative for principals as school leaders to possess practical wisdom and technical knowledge (Brower et al. 2000; Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). In addition, they should have professional intelligence and problem-solving abilities, and promote positive relationships among school members that enhance a healthy context for student learning (Marishane 2020; Rodriguez-Gomez et al. 2019). Principals need to be equipped with these values and skills. Therefore, the government and the PCC must intentionally provide pre-service and in-service development programmes for principals

because, according to Cheney and Davis (2011), positive teaching and learning contexts do not happen by chance.

### *Providing Pre-Service and In-Service Training for Secondary School Teachers*

Teachers are expected to be the guarantors of quality education and providers of all professions (Law No. 98/004 of 14 April 1998). Thus, the need for them to obtain formal and continuous educational and leadership training is crucial, especially in Cameroon, where principals are appointed from teachers who have no professional leadership training (Wirba 2015), and particularly in Presbyterian secondary schools where untrained teachers act as vice principals, discipline personnel, and departmental heads. Teachers must be well equipped with teaching and leadership skills to effectively support leadership and student learning. To be effective, teachers need to have a deep understanding of the subject matter, teach in ways that resonate with students, understand students' different experiences and their different approaches to learning, and understand the adolescent development of students to enable them to help students overcome social and emotional challenges (Darling-Hammond 2008). These goals can only be achieved when teachers are formally trained before they are employed because it is risky for students to learn by trial and error. Regular in-service training is indispensable because knowledge is not static. Even so, teachers learning on the job (Mbua 2003) must consciously improve their performance through informal sources. Research reveals that quality teaching positively impacts on student learning and that the most essential school-based factor in student achievement is teacher quality (Hightower et al. 2011; McCaffrey et al. 2003). According to the Centre for High Impact Philanthropy (2010, 7), a quality teacher is described as

one who positively affects student learning and development through content mastery, command of a broad set of academic skills, and communication/interpersonal skills .... They establish an environment conducive to learning and leverage available resources outside and inside the classroom.

Teachers' exhibition of the skills mentioned above reinforces principals' ability to provide contexts that enhance student learning and create a foundation for teachers who may be appointed as principals in the future. Hence, pre-service and in-service training for secondary school teachers must be reconsidered to ease principals' connection between context and student learning.

### *Investing in Professional Training Institutions*

Investing in professional training institutions requires the state and the PCC to continuously improve and create institutions for professional training for principals and teachers because of the complexity surrounding school leadership (Morrison 2012). This study has revealed the deficiency of principals and teachers. This may be associated with the constant cry of principal turnover (Nasreen and Odhiambo 2018) and teacher shortages (Ingersoll and Tran 2023) worldwide. The implication is that a lack of opportunities for professional development may contribute to teacher attrition because

of insufficient confidence in their ability to perform. Thus, investing in professional training institutions is urgent. The PCC, which supports the government to provide secondary education (Law No. 98/004 of April 14, 1998), has been doing so since 1966 (PCC 2007) without a secondary school training institution from which their secondary schools and other private secondary schools could be staffed. This study provides solid reasons for the PCC to engage in this venture.

To strengthen the capacities of principals and teachers in training schools, the state and the PCC must ensure that quality training is provided through the involvement of highly qualified staff and that the training staff continuously improves the relevance of programmes (Mendels et al. 2013; Syed 2015). Ensuring the involvement of educational experts to design innovative programmes that can support effective leadership performance is vital (LaPointe and Davis 2006). Formal leadership learning programmes should be carefully planned with a coherent curriculum that provides content for mentoring and coaching (Sparks and Hirsch 2000). Such programmes must also include content that supports teacher- and learner-friendly contexts (UNICEF and UNESCO 2007) and content that involves classroom training (Hightower et al. 2011). It is strongly advised that principals should be taught what they should know and do (Syed 2015). Lastly, Hightower et al. (2011) observed that university programmes for the preparation of teachers need to be upgraded because their programmes fail to link their coaching to learning outcomes. It was the wish of participants that measures of this magnitude would significantly improve the execution of leadership functions by principals.

### *Redirection of Educational Reforms*

Over the years, educational policies and research have focused less on the context in which teachers teach and students learn (Kraft and Falken 2020). This subsection calls on the state to formulate policies that create awareness among school members and researchers on the unique role of context in student learning. The PCC must revise their policy of professional development in a way that will give opportunities to and encourage principals and teachers to engage in professional development. For example, principals and teachers should be assured that their pay will improve after formal professional training. This will reduce the rate of attrition and result in overall school improvement. Revision of the development policy for PCC staff will also motivate them to acquire practical and technical knowledge (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). These qualities are needed to enable them to understand the connection between context and student learning and create school contexts that are friendly to student learning. Employing professional counsellors to handle students' needs will give principals and teachers time to engage in formal and informal professional development while working and improving the school context. Furthermore, educational policies that will enhance principal quality are necessary because students and teachers are controlled by principals (Fonkeng and Tamajong 2009).

## Conclusion

Secondary schools are places where students are expected to learn in a safe and secure environment, and principals are required to ensure this. The findings of this research show that some principals do not understand the link between context and student learning. This weakness poses significant challenges that limit PCCSS principals' ability to connect context to student learning. These limitations emerge from a lack of a context-responsive policy on pre-professional training and ongoing professional development programmes for principals and teachers in PCC secondary schools. Guided by a policy in place, such training will equip principals with the leadership skills needed to create conditions enabling Cameroonian students to learn effectively, succeed, and become relevant to the increasingly changing world.

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