

Unseen Influencers: Deputy Principals' Perceptions of Their Roles in Primary School Leadership

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Abstract: This study examines the often overlooked yet critical roles of deputy principals in primary schools, exploring how they perceive their responsibilities within the existing school hierarchy. Although deputy principals make significant contributions to the quality of educational activities and the promotion of a positive school environment, their roles are minimally recognised in the Personnel Administration Measures (PAM). This limited recognition may influence how they perceive their impact and responsibilities, affecting their interactions and effectiveness in the school setting. Guided by Distributed Leadership Theory, which highlights the shared distribution of leadership roles across different school levels, these roles can be shaped by factors such as race, gender, age, and other intersecting identities. However, this study specifically focuses on gender. Grounded within the qualitative interpretive paradigm and using phenomenological narrative inquiry through individual face-to-face interviews, this study purposively selected four female deputy principals to capture their experiences and perspectives on their roles. Data were analysed thematically. Findings revealed that deputy principals' perceptions shape their roles and reinforce mutual relationships between actions and perceptions. The study recommends that policymakers implement policy changes, emphasising the need for increased recognition and support for deputy principals to cultivate school environments that promote positive educational outcomes and encourage staff collaboration.

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Keywords: Deputy principal, distributed Leadership, narrative inquiry, perception, primary school.

1. Introduction

Literature focusing specifically on primary school deputy principals is scarce, and many aspects of the deputy principal's role remain underexplored by academics and policymakers (Khumalo & Van der Vyver, 2020; Khumalo et al., 2018). The study by Jansen and du Plessis (2023), titled *The Role of Deputy Principals: Perspectives of South African Primary School Principals and their Deputies*, indicates that the *School Leadership Development Framework* for the Gauteng Department of Education devoted only one page to the role of deputy principals. Similarly, the Mathew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance report, which consists of 69 pages, includes only a single page on the deputy principal's role. Furthermore, Jansen and du Plessis made a comparable observation of the 103-page *Schools that Work Report* to the Minister of Education, where the deputy principal is mentioned only once. Both reports focus predominantly on the roles of the principal and departmental heads. Consequently, in this study, deputy principals are referred to as "unseen influencers," acknowledging their vital yet often overlooked role in school management and administration. They are an "unseen" but integral part of the school management team (SMT), which has the statutory duty to undertake the professional management of schools. Jubilee (2013, p. 8) describes the deputy principal's position as "nebulous," while Weller and Weller (2002, p. 13) and Nieuwenhuizen (2011, p. 10) consider them a "jack of all trades."

This situation arises despite the presence of policies. Policy documents, including the 1996 and 2016 versions of the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) (RSA, 1999: C64–C65; RSA, 2016a: A30–A31), published under the Employment of Educators Act, 76 of 1998 (Department of Basic Education,

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Republic of South Africa, 2016), as well as the Strategy to Improve School Management and Governance in Schools (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2017), outline the expected roles and responsibilities for deputy principals. Despite these prescriptive guidelines, practical challenges arise as deputy principals often struggle with unclear role definitions, especially as their responsibilities overlap with those of the principal. This ambiguity leads to issues within school leadership and management. Deputy principals perform a wide variety of tasks within a school, and their role is universally perceived as very important (Khumalo & Van der Vyver, 2020), yet complex. Furthermore, the National Development Plan 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2012) and Vision 2025 (South African Government, n.d.) highlight the need for deputy principals' contributions towards school effectiveness and their roles and responsibilities.

However, Johnson (2015, p. 31) suggests that the deputy principal plays a significant role in school improvement and development, yet they receive limited formal recognition, which in turn impacts their leadership approach and undermines the quality of education. Therefore, research into the perceptions of deputy principals is essential to shape policies that acknowledge their vital role in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015) and the objectives of Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2015). 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, 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. Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore how deputy principals perceive their roles within the school.

1.1 Research question

To address this, the study answered the question: *How do deputy principals' perceptions of their roles impact their tasks and relationships within the school hierarchy?*

1.2 Problem statement

Deputy principals are critical to maintaining the quality of educational activities, promoting positive behaviours, addressing challenges, and supporting principals in school leadership. Despite their significance, their roles are underrepresented in existing legislation, particularly in the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) (RSA, 1999: C64–C65; RSA, 2016a: A30–A31), which were published in terms of the Employment of Educators Act, 76, of 1998. This legislation prioritises the responsibilities of principals and departmental heads. This lack of explicit recognition may influence how deputy principals perceive their contributions, potentially leading to an undervaluation of their roles within the school hierarchy. According to Salazar et al. (2020), perceptions shape reality; thus, the perceived roles of deputy principals are as influential as their formal job descriptions in defining their contributions to school operations and dynamics.

Policy implementation further complicates this issue. In the case of South Africa, the Quality Management System (QMS), introduced under ELRC Collective Agreement Number 2 of 2020, provides performance appraisal protocols for school-based educators. While the QMS aims to streamline evaluations, it employs uniform criteria for leadership, particularly for principals (post-level 4 educators) and deputy principals (post-level 3 educators). These criteria are primarily aligned with educator job expectations rather than leadership-specific tasks, failing to adequately reflect the unique responsibilities of deputy principals.

Scholars such as Jansen and du Plessis (2023) and Khumalo et al. (2018) have called for a deeper exploration of the leadership trajectories of deputy principals to recognise their full impact. Understanding how deputy principals perceive their roles is essential for addressing these gaps in policy and practice. Their perceptions influence their tasks, actions, and relationships within the school, directly affecting its effectiveness. Therefore, this study investigates deputy principals'

perceptions of their roles within the school. Insights from this research can inform policy adjustments and appraisal systems, ensuring that deputy principals receive the recognition and support necessary to enhance school leadership and overall educational outcomes.

2. Review of Related Literature

This paper reviews the literature on the following themes: the legislative framework regarding the role of deputy principals in South Africa, perceptions of primary school deputy principals, and strategies employed by deputy principals to manage leadership dynamics. These themes are discussed in the following sections.

2.1 The legislative framework on the role of deputy principals in South Africa

The Legislative Framework on the Role of Deputy Principals in South Africa highlights the essential yet often under-recognised role of deputy principals in the effective functioning of schools (Somoza-Norton & Neumann, 2021). Deputy principals play a critical role by supporting principals in instructional leadership, fostering a positive school culture, managing administrative duties, and enhancing academic outcomes. According to both the 1996 and 2016 Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM), as outlined in the Employment of Educators Act of 1998, and the Strategy to Improve School Management and Governance in Schools (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2017), deputy principals' duties are multifaceted, encompassing general administrative tasks, teaching responsibilities, extra- and co-curricular activities, personnel management, and stakeholder communication (RSA, 1999: C64–C65; RSA, 2016a: A30–A31). Despite these vital contributions, the PAM places greater emphasis on the roles of principals and departmental heads, leading to a lack of formal recognition for deputy principals. This limited acknowledgment may affect how they perceive their responsibilities, potentially diminishing their effectiveness in supporting school success and fostering a high-quality learning environment.

The Strategy to Improve School Management and Governance in Schools (2017) further underscores the need for clear policies and structured performance guidelines for deputy principals, noting that "incompetent middle managers will weaken the management teams of schools" (Department of Basic Education, 2017, p. 7). The Department of Basic Education argues that a school management team's capacity and competence are pivotal in addressing school performance issues (2017, p. 4). Accordingly, deputy principals need comprehensive administrative and leadership skills to operate effectively within the national development agenda. The importance of skills identification and development for deputy principals is reinforced by the National Development Plan 2030 and Vision 2025, which call for a workforce of "highly skilled individuals" and emphasise the need for continuous professional growth to strengthen leadership capacities. These policies acknowledge that deputy principals are indispensable stakeholders in the school leadership structure. To enable deputy principals to contribute meaningfully to improved learning outcomes, the specific skills required must be identified and nurtured as part of their ongoing professional development.

Furthermore, Collective Agreement Number 2 of 2020 introduced the Quality Management System (QMS) as a streamlined protocol for appraising school-based educators in South Africa. The QMS was developed to replace previous appraisal systems with a more cohesive and standardised approach. It encompasses a set of performance standards designed to evaluate the professional and leadership effectiveness of educators at different post levels. However, the QMS applies uniform appraisal criteria across post-levels 3 and 4, which include deputy principals (post-level 3) and principals (post-level 4). This standardised framework evaluates both leadership roles based on the same seven performance standards, which are aligned with general educator job expectations rather than leadership-specific responsibilities. These criteria cover areas such as curriculum management, learner outcomes, staff development, and general school administration.

While the QMS promotes consistency, this uniformity raises concerns regarding its suitability for deputy principals. Deputy principals hold distinct roles that often involve deputising for principals, supporting instructional leadership, and fostering teacher development. These responsibilities differ significantly from the broader leadership and governance duties assigned to principals. By appraising both roles using the same criteria, the QMS does not adequately capture or evaluate the unique contributions and challenges associated with the deputy principalship. The lack of differentiation in appraisal criteria could result in inaccurate assessments of deputy principals' performance, potentially overlooking their specific leadership efforts and developmental needs. As a result, this approach may undermine the recognition of deputy principals' contributions, limit opportunities for targeted professional growth, and fail to provide an understanding of their roles within the school leadership hierarchy. This issue underscores the need to revisit and refine the QMS to better align its appraisal standards with the distinct roles and responsibilities of post-level 3 and post-level 4 educators.

2.2 Perceptions of primary school deputy principals

The way primary school deputy principals perceive their roles significantly impacts their professional relationships, task prioritisation, and overall leadership approach within the school environment. As Rauschnabel et al. (2022) suggest, perceptions can shape reality, meaning that how deputy principals view themselves can be as impactful as their formal job descriptions. These self-perceptions affect how they interact with staff, manage tasks, and handle challenges in the school setting.

From their comprehensive research on school principals' opinions regarding the meaning and sources of workload, Türkoğlu and Cansoy (2020) express concern over the ambiguity surrounding the primary school deputy principal's job description, finding that assistant principals' roles lack clarity. Similarly, Jansen and du Plessis (2023) characterised the deputy principal's role as a nebulous position, describing it as a "jack of all trades." Deputy principals are often associated with duties such as maintaining discipline, tracking learner attendance, scheduling, and providing administrative support to the principal (Khumalo & Van der Vyver, 2020). Many deputy principals express frustration at the vagueness of their job descriptions, which commonly include phrases like "supporting the principal" or "overseeing non-teaching staff," reflecting a limited understanding of the role's complexities (Marshall & Hooley, 2006, p. 3).

For this reason, Cooke (2015) suggests a need to recognise deputy principalship as an independent leadership role with clear definitions. Jansen and du Plessis (2023) report that principals often define their deputy principals' roles at their discretion, frequently delegating tasks they prefer to avoid. Deputy principals thus take on a wide variety of responsibilities, and while their role is widely acknowledged as important (Jansen & du Plessis, 2023; Khumalo & Van der Vyver, 2020), it is complex and often lacks a clear understanding of their contributions to school effectiveness. Stronge and Xu (2021) argue that, depending on their responsibilities, deputy principals can play a critical role in school improvement and development. Chitamba (2019) reinforces the view that deputy principals' roles are vital to a school's success, yet acknowledges the persistent ambiguity surrounding their specific roles and responsibilities.

Moreover, Ertürk and Akgün (2021) conducted a study examining teacher perceptions of the roles of principals and deputy principals, involving 289 teachers from nine public primary schools, nine secondary schools, and seven high schools. The study revealed that teachers associated 84 metaphors with the concept of a deputy principal, with common ones being porter, bridge, bee, employee, traffic sign, robot, scales, orchestra drummer, sergeant, and messenger. The frequent comparison of deputy principals to porters highlights their significant workload; hence, Köse (2018) refers to the deputy principals' role as a misuse of human resources in schools.

2.3 Strategies employed by deputy principals to manage leadership dynamics

Deputy principals often face complex leadership dynamics, especially when working with principals who may feel insecure or threatened (Jansen & du Plessis, 2023). To foster a collaborative and productive environment, deputy principals employ various strategies to navigate these challenges effectively. One key strategy is building trust and fostering collaboration. Open communication, described by Blose (2024) as responsive cooperation, ensures alignment and mutual understanding between deputy principals and principals. This perspective aligns with Köse (2018), who highlights the role of deputy principals in promoting cohesion, mediating among stakeholders, and organising educational activities. Emphasising teamwork, deputy principals engage in collaborative problem-solving and shared decision-making, positioning themselves as allies rather than competitors. This approach aligns with the Department of Basic Education's (Republic of South Africa, 2017, p. 7) assertion that "incompetent middle managers will weaken the management teams of schools."

Clarifying roles and responsibilities, as noted by Tahir et al. (2023), is another critical strategy, ensuring that the deputy principal's contributions complement the principal's leadership without overstepping boundaries. Deputy principals also practice subtle leadership and influence. They adopt a caring approach, respecting the principal's authority while taking the initiative in areas where they can add value (Blose, 2024). By working in the background to support the principal's initiatives, they influence school operations without seeking recognition or overshadowing the principal (Jansen & du Plessis, 2023). Modelling professionalism, reliability, and strong work ethics further reinforces their leadership role as staff role models.

Aligning their efforts with the principal's vision, deputy principals frame their successes as part of collective leadership, strengthening the principal's position as the primary leader of school improvement (Ertürk & Akgün, 2021). They are also recognised as valuable educational leaders, whose knowledge and skills should be utilised to complement the principal's efforts. In managing conflict, deputy principals lead by addressing issues calmly and diplomatically, preventing escalation (Ntepe, 2020). They provide constructive feedback in a non-threatening way, framing suggestions as collaborative solutions.

Professional growth is another focus, with deputy principals continuously developing skills in areas like curriculum and staff development (Fairman et al., 2020). This expertise allows them to take charge of specific responsibilities, such as school discipline, staff training, and student support, without competing for recognition. During crises or heavy workloads, deputy principals step in to support operations, balancing their responsibilities without creating friction. By fostering trust, respecting authority, and contributing meaningfully, they create an environment conducive to effective leadership and school success. Visibility, as part of their daily routine, ensures they remain actively involved in school management (Blose, 2024).

2.4 Distributed leadership theory

This study adopted Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT) as its theoretical framework, offering a progressive perspective on the roles of deputy principals in school leadership. DLT conceptualises leadership as a collaborative, practice-focused, and contextually embedded process, aligning with the evolving demands of contemporary organisations, particularly in the education sector. Advocated by Gronn (2000) and Spillane (2005), DLT posits that leadership is distributed across individuals, their interactions, and the contexts in which they operate. Drawing on sociocultural and activity theory, DLT emphasises the influence of social and cultural contexts in shaping human activity, marking a shift from individual-centred models to a collective and practice-oriented view of leadership. Leadership practices are interdependent, arising through dynamic interactions between leaders, followers, and contextual factors. Effective leadership relies on shared expertise and mutual influence, enhancing problem-solving and decision-making. DLT advocates for decentralised,

collaborative structures that challenge traditional hierarchical leadership models. Traditionally, school principals have been regarded as the central figures in leadership, often minimising the significant contributions of deputy principals. DLT provides a valuable framework for analysing how deputy principals collaborate with principals and other stakeholders to shape school culture, manage operations, and enhance educational outcomes.

Therefore, focusing on distributed leadership practices, this study highlights the critical yet often underappreciated roles of deputy principals. Deputy principals frequently take the lead in initiatives such as curriculum development, teacher mentoring, and crisis management – key responsibilities essential to a school's success, yet often overlooked in conventional leadership paradigms. Additionally, DLT's emphasis on shared expertise and collective decision-making complements the vision of schools as adaptive learning organisations. Its foundation in sociocultural and activity theory, coupled with its focus on collective practices, makes it particularly suited to investigating the multifaceted roles of deputy principals. By employing this framework, the study seeks to advance the understanding of distributed leadership and advocate for greater recognition of deputy principals as essential contributors to educational excellence.

3. Methodology

In this study, I adopt an interpretive qualitative paradigm, utilising a phenomenological narrative inquiry to explore and understand deputy principals' perceptions of their roles within the school context. As defined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry examines lived experiences through collaborative storytelling between researchers and participants, taking into account the social contexts and interactions that shape these narratives. This methodology enables an understanding of the personal and professional realities experienced by deputy principals. Data were collected through open-ended, in-person interviews with four deputy principals from the same education circuit in Pinetown, KwaZulu-Natal. Participants were selected using purposive and convenience sampling to fulfil the study's objectives. Purposive sampling targeted deputy principals with a minimum of five years of experience, ensuring that their expertise aligned with the research focus, while convenience sampling addressed practical data collection challenges by recruiting accessible and willing participants. The study adhered to ethical standards by assigning pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and securing informed consent from participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from my institution, and school principals, acting as gatekeepers, granted access to participants. These measures safeguarded participant rights and ensured transparency while facilitating meaningful data collection. During the interviews, participants reflected deeply on their perceptions, offering emotional and cognitive insights that illuminated their understanding of their roles (Aguas, 2022; Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021). The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, which facilitated the identification of recurring themes. Rigor was ensured through data triangulation, which involved cross-verifying information collected from multiple participants, and member checking, which validated the interpretations against the participants' perspectives.

4. Results and Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate a gap between the ideal of collaborative leadership, which emphasises well-defined roles and inclusive decision-making, and the actual challenges faced by deputy principals. Participants consistently reported experiencing role ambiguity, feelings of redundancy, underutilisation of their leadership skills, and a strong demand for clearer, more defined roles and responsibilities. Several key themes emerged from these perceptions, which can be summarised as follows.

Table 1: Research question and generated themes

Research question	Themes
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What are deputy principals' perceptions about their roles within the school?	Theme 1: Ambiguity Theme 2: Perceived Redundancy Theme 3: Underutilisation of Leadership Potential Theme 4: Need for Clear Roles and Responsibilities
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This table outlines the research question being addressed and the themes derived from deputy principals' perceptions of their roles within the school. Each theme reflects a key aspect of their experience, contributing to the broader objective of improving leadership effectiveness and role clarity in the school environment.

4.1 Theme 1: Ambiguity

The statements from the four deputy principals highlight key challenges they face, including role ambiguity, inequitable task distribution, and decision-making difficulties. As **Deputy Principal A** notes, *Sometimes, it feels like we're caught in the middle. The principal expects me to manage certain tasks, but the boundaries of my responsibilities are not always clear.* This reflects the lack of clarity about their authority, which is compounded by vague job descriptions in policy documents such as the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM). **Deputy Principal B** echoes this frustration, saying, *I'm trying to figure out where my role ends, and the principal begins.* This role ambiguity undermines their confidence and leads to inefficiency. **Deputy Principal C** shares a similar concern, stating, *I've faced situations where staff approach me with issues, but when I act, I'm told I've overstepped. The lack of a clear definition of my role means I'm constantly second-guessing my decisions.* Additionally, **Deputy Principal D** highlights how the overlap in duties confuses both deputies and staff, stating that *there's a lot of overlap between my duties and the principal's, and it's not always clear who is supposed to take the lead.* This overlap confuses both the deputies and the staff, who are unsure whom to approach for certain issues. Inequitable task delegation is another significant problem. This frustration mirrors the findings of Jansen and du Plessis (2023) and Khumalo et al. (2018), who describe how principals often offload undesirable tasks onto deputy principals. This dynamic is also reflected in Köse's (2018) metaphor of deputy principals as "porters," emphasising the disproportionate workload placed on them without adequate recognition. These perceptions of being undervalued contribute to dissatisfaction and a lack of motivation among deputy principals. Additionally, decision-making challenges present a significant barrier. The study reveals that the absence of role clarity hinders deputy principals from fully participating in this collaborative model, limiting their contributions to school leadership. This highlights the fact that deputy principals perceive their roles as unclear, undervalued, and fraught with obstacles that diminish their effectiveness. The findings of this study make a substantial contribution to the limited body of literature on deputy principals, emphasising the need for policy reforms that address their challenges related to role ambiguity, where unclear boundaries between their responsibilities and those of the principal result in confusion and inefficiency. They are often caught in a middle ground, uncertain about their authority and where their responsibilities begin and end. This lack of clarity undermines their confidence and limits their ability to contribute effectively to the leadership team. The absence of well-defined roles compels deputies to second-guess their decisions, reducing their capacity to make meaningful contributions to the school's strategic development. The theoretical framework of Distributed Leadership highlights the necessity of shared leadership practices (Spillane, 2005; Gronn, 2000), but the lack of role clarity prevents deputy principals from fully engaging in collaborative leadership, instead assigning them primarily to operational tasks and crisis management.

4.2 Theme 2: Perceived redundancy

The data highlights that the participants have a profound sense of perceived redundancy, as **Deputy Principal A** expresses: *Sometimes I feel like I'm stuck in limbo, questioning whether the school would*

function just as well without me. This causes deputy principals to question their value and their impact on the school, aligning with the research of Khumalo and Van der Vyver (2020), who also noted that deputy principals' roles are often poorly defined and can lead to feelings of redundancy. Similarly, **Deputy Principal B** *Honestly, sometimes it feels like the school would keep going just fine without me. I'm stuck doing things that no one else wants to handle.* This experience resonates with the findings of Jansen & du Plessis (2023), who suggested that deputy principals often bear the brunt of undesirable tasks, further contributing to their sense of marginalisation. Deputy Principal C echoes these frustrations, expressing the emotional toll of unclear responsibilities: *I'm always second-guessing myself. It feels like I'm just filling in or playing a secondary role, rather than being an integral part of the leadership team.* This mirrors the research of Rauschnabel et al. (2022), who highlighted the emotional consequences of role ambiguity for deputy principals, leading to self-doubt and a diminished sense of purpose. **Deputy Principal D** also identifies an overlap between their duties and those of the principal. It *almost feels like my role is redundant, and that's disheartening.* This aligns with the work of Spillane (2005), who emphasised the importance of clarifying roles within distributed leadership structures to avoid confusion and redundancy, as overlapping responsibilities can lead to a lack of clarity and authority. The data indicates a struggle with undefined roles, limited recognition, and emotional challenges, which collectively diminish deputy principals' sense of purpose and efficacy within the school leadership framework. Deputies perceive themselves as redundant in their roles and feel that the school might function effectively without them. This perception is compounded by exclusion from strategic decision-making processes and instead being delegated undesirable tasks. This marginalisation contributes to a sense of professional stagnation. The overlap in duties between deputy principals and principals adds to the confusion, with both staff and deputies unsure of who should lead on specific issues. From a theoretical perspective, distributed leadership highlights the need for clearly delineated roles to ensure effective collaboration and shared authority. However, the ambiguity undermines this model, leaving deputy principals feeling disconnected and questioning their contributions to the school's leadership.

4.3 Theme 3: Underutilisation of leadership potential

The participants' narrative reveals insights into the complex and often underappreciated role of deputy principals in primary schools. Deputy Principal A expressed their frustration, stating, that *most of my time is spent on operational tasks, like timetabling or handling day-to-day crises, rather than being involved in the big-picture decisions that shape the school's direction.* This highlights a clear disconnect between their desire to lead and the administrative nature of their role, reflecting a broader issue of misalignment between their leadership aspirations and assigned responsibilities. This sentiment aligns with the literature, which describes deputy principals as "jack of all trades" (Jansen & du Plessis, 2023; Khumalo & Van der Vyver, 2020). Deputy Principal B further underscored the exclusion from strategic decision-making, remarking that *my role seems to be limited to supporting the principal and ensuring that things run smoothly daily ... This leaves me feeling undervalued and stuck in my career progression.* Their experience highlights a recurring theme in the literature, where deputies are seen as unseen influencers whose contributions to strategic discussions are overlooked (Weller and Weller, 2002). This exclusion affects their professional morale and represents a missed opportunity for schools to leverage their expertise. Similarly, Deputy Principal C pointed out a widespread misconception regarding the deputy's role, stating, *I think there's a misconception that deputies are just there to execute the principal's vision. It's demotivating and makes me question whether this role is preparing me for a future principalship.* This reflects concerns about the limited delegation of meaningful leadership responsibilities, echoing Cooke's (2015) call for recognising deputy principalship as an independent leadership role. Such misconceptions not only diminish the deputies' current contributions but also raise questions about their preparedness for future principal roles. Deputy Principal D articulated the systemic implications of their restricted role, noting that *the lack of delegation when it comes to leadership tasks is a missed opportunity not just for me but for the school.* This perspective emphasises how administrative overload and restricted leadership opportunities hinder

individual growth and institutional effectiveness, reinforcing Johnson's (2015) argument about the critical yet underacknowledged role of deputy principals in school development.

The challenges articulated by the deputy principals resonate with distributed leadership theory, which emphasises leadership as a shared practice involving multiple stakeholders (Spillane, 2005). This approach contrasts with the traditional top-down leadership structure often experienced by deputies. Despite the guidelines provided in policy documents like the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM), ambiguity surrounding deputies' responsibilities persists, leaving them feeling undervalued and overburdened (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Türkoğlu & Cansoy, 2020). Aligning their roles with distributed leadership principles, clarifying responsibilities, and fostering inclusive leadership practices are essential to empower deputy principals and strengthen leadership structures within schools. These reforms are not only vital for individual deputies but also critical for achieving broader educational objectives, such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education) and Agenda 2063's vision for transformative education. Moreover, the underutilisation of their leadership potential deprives them of the desire to contribute to the school's strategic direction, as their responsibilities are largely administrative, such as managing timetables, addressing disciplinary issues, and resolving daily crises. This misalignment between their leadership aspirations and assigned tasks creates frustration and demotivation. Theoretical insights into leadership distribution suggest that involving deputies in strategic planning not only strengthens the leadership team but also enhances institutional effectiveness. However, the exclusion of deputy principals from such processes negatively impacts their perceptions and limits their professional growth, as well as the school's ability to leverage their expertise.

4.4 Theme 4: Need for clear roles and responsibilities

The participants' narratives provided the critical need for clearer role definitions to enhance the effectiveness of school leadership. **Deputy Principal A**, for example, states, *"I feel like I'm caught in a constant balancing act. I often don't have the time or space to engage in the strategic leadership ..."* This misalignment between their potential and the tasks assigned to them is reflected in Khumalo and Van der Vyver's (2020) study, which refers to deputy principals as "jack of all trades," often expected to handle diverse responsibilities without clear boundaries. **Deputy Principal B** suggests a solution to this challenge, advocating for regular meetings with the principal to align their roles more clearly. They note, *"One solution could be regular meetings with the principal to align our roles more clearly. If we had agreed-upon expectations and defined responsibilities, it would be easier to work towards shared goals."* This approach reflects the idea of fostering open communication and role clarification, which is supported by the literature on distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005). **Deputy Principal C** echoes the desire for greater involvement in strategic planning, stating, *"I often feel sidelined when important decisions are made. A clearer, more inclusive role for me in school planning could make a significant difference... I don't want to just execute the principal's vision I want to help shape it."* This statement underscores the need for a more inclusive leadership model, one that aligns with distributed leadership theory, which advocates for shared decision-making and collaboration (Spillane, 2005). **Deputy Principal D** suggests the introduction of a structured succession plan, arguing, *"A more structured succession plan would also be beneficial..."*

This proposal aligns with Johnson's (2015) argument that deputy principals are often overlooked in leadership development frameworks, which limits their growth and readiness for future roles. By offering clear career pathways and leadership opportunities, schools could better prepare deputy principals for principal positions while simultaneously enhancing their contributions to the school's growth. The narratives shared by the participants in this study, combined with the theoretical framework of distributed leadership, reveal the critical importance of clear roles and responsibilities for enhancing school leadership. There is a need for well-defined role descriptions and structured leadership pathways that emphasise the importance of regular communication with the principal to

align responsibilities and expectations. Such alignment could prevent confusion and create opportunities for shared goal setting, potentially leading to structured succession planning for future leadership roles. Theoretical perspectives on distributed leadership advocate for collaborative leadership structures with well-defined roles and inclusive decision-making; however, there is a gap between this ideal and the realities faced by deputy principals.

5. Implications for Practice

Revising the Personnel Administration Measures (PAM) document to include explicit and detailed role descriptions for deputy principals is essential for delineating their responsibilities from those of principals. This modification would reduce ambiguity, prevent role overlap, and foster a sense of purpose and authority, thereby enabling deputy principals to engage more effectively in leadership processes. Furthermore, regular alignment meetings between principals and deputy principals should be implemented to establish a shared understanding of roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Such communication would strengthen collaboration and diminish confusion within the leadership team. Incorporating deputy principals into strategic planning and decision-making processes would further harness their leadership potential, fostering professional growth, motivation, and a more significant contribution to the leadership team. Structured succession planning, which includes mentorship, targeted training, and pathways to future leadership roles, should be designed to prepare deputy principals for higher positions. This approach would cultivate a sense of career progression and professional fulfilment. To enhance their strategic impact, routine administrative tasks should be delegated to other staff members or specialised roles, allowing deputy principals to concentrate on strategic and instructional leadership. Schools should also adopt inclusive leadership practices that engage deputy principals in decision-making, promoting collaboration and alignment with Distributed Leadership theories. Targeted professional development programmes should be provided to strengthen the confidence and decision-making capabilities of deputy principals. By addressing these implications, schools can bridge the gap between theoretical Distributed Leadership models and the realities of practice, creating an empowering environment for deputy principals to lead effectively and contribute meaningfully to school success.

6. Conclusions

Deputy principals, often regarded as the silent pillars of school leadership, play an essential yet underappreciated role in shaping educational outcomes. However, the ambiguity surrounding their responsibilities and the overlap with the principal's duties renders them unseen influencers within the leadership dynamic. Their potential to drive strategic vision and facilitate meaningful change is often eclipsed by an overwhelming focus on operational and crisis management tasks, resulting in a disconnection from the broader leadership mission. The challenges they encounter underscore the urgent need for role clarity and a reimagining of leadership structures within schools. Embracing the principles of Distributed Leadership necessitates more than theoretical acknowledgement; it requires practical implementation through explicit delineation of boundaries, shared decision-making, and structured pathways for leadership growth. Without such adjustments, deputy principals remain underutilised, their contributions undervalued, and their potential unrealised. Ultimately, deputy principals are not redundant; they are reservoirs of untapped leadership capacity. By redefining their roles and fostering inclusive leadership practices, schools can transform deputies from unseen influencers into visible, impactful agents of change. Recognising their unique position as both executors and leaders will not only enhance their professional fulfilment but also fortify the collective strength of the leadership team, thereby driving schools towards greater effectiveness and innovation.

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