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Obscured leadership: Deputy Principals' Lived Experiences of Leadership in Schools

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Abstract

Deputy principals occupy a pivotal yet paradoxical position in South African schools. While formally recognized as members of School Management Teams (SMTs) with significant administrative and instructional responsibilities, their leadership voices are often muted within hierarchical structures dominated by principals. This study explores the phenomenon of silenced leadership among deputy principals, focusing on how they negotiate the tension between policy expectations and the lived realities of school leadership. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the research seeks to uncover the meanings deputy principals ascribe to their roles, the ways in which their authority is constrained, and the strategies they employ to navigate silencing within SMTs. Data will be generated through in-depth interviews and reflective narratives, enabling a rich interpretation of deputy principals lived experiences. The study contributes to the discourse on distributed leadership by repositioning deputy principals as co-leaders rather than subordinate assistants, offering insights for policy reform, leadership development, and the cultivation of more inclusive school leadership cultures in South Africa.

Keywords: Silenced Leadership, Deputy Principals, Hierarchical, Phenomenological Approach SMT, Authority Reflective Narratives.

Introduction

School leadership in South Africa is widely acknowledged as a critical determinant of educational quality and learner achievement. Within this leadership landscape, deputy principals play a central role in sustaining the daily functioning of schools, supporting principals, and ensuring the effective implementation of teaching and learning. Yet, despite their strategic positioning within School Management Teams (SMTs), deputy principals often remain silenced actors in leadership discourse. Their contributions are overshadowed by the dominant authority of principals, and their roles are frequently reduced to administrative or disciplinary functions rather than recognised as integral to strategic leadership.

The silencing of deputy principals is not merely a matter of organizational oversight but reflects deeper structural and cultural dynamics within schools. Policy frameworks such as the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) provide limited clarity on the scope of deputy principals' leadership responsibilities, reinforcing their marginalization. Recent scholarship highlights how deputies are often positioned as "principals-in-waiting" rather than autonomous leaders, with their voices muted in decision-making processes [1]. This silencing is further compounded by gendered expectations, hierarchical traditions, and the absence of structured professional development pathways.

This study, titled Obscured leadership, seeks to foreground the lived experiences of deputy

principals in South African schools. By adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, it aims to interpret how deputy principals make sense of their leadership roles, how they experience silencing within SMTs, and how they navigate the tension between formal expectations and lived realities. In doing so, the study contributes to the reimagining of deputy principals' leadership identities, advocating for policy and cultural shifts that recognize them as co-leaders in the pursuit of school improvement

Background to the Study

School leadership is widely recognized as a cornerstone of educational quality and learner achievement. In South Africa, the School Management Team (SMT) comprising the principal, deputy principal(s), and heads of department forms the nucleus of school governance and instructional leadership. While principals are positioned as the ultimate authority, deputy principals occupy a critical yet paradoxical role: they are entrusted with significant administrative, instructional, and disciplinary responsibilities, but their leadership voices are often muted within hierarchical structures. Recent scholarship highlights how deputy principals are frequently positioned as "principals-in-waiting" rather than autonomous leaders. Their contributions are overshadowed by principals' authority, and their roles are often reduced to operational tasks rather than strategic leadership.

This silencing undermines the principles of distributed leadership and limits the potential of deputy principals to contribute meaningfully to school improvement. This study, titled Obscured leadership: Deputy Principals' Lived Experiences of Leadership in South African Schools, seeks to foreground the lived experiences of deputy principals, exploring how they interpret their roles, navigate silencing, and construct leadership identities within SMTs.

Problem Statement

Despite their centrality to school functioning, deputy principals remain silenced actors in leadership discourse. Policy frameworks such as the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) provide limited clarity on their leadership scope, reinforcing their marginalization. In practice, deputy principals are often relegated to administrative and disciplinary duties, with little influence in strategic decision-making.

This Silencing Has Significant Implications

Firstly, it undermines distributed leadership, which is essential for sustainable school improvement. It, secondly, also constrains deputy principals' professional identity development, leaving them in ambiguous roles. Thirdly silenced leadership perpetuates hierarchical and gendered leadership cultures, where deputies, particularly women that are further marginalized.

The problem, therefore, is that deputy principals' leadership contributions are muted, leaving a gap between their formal expectations and their lived experiences. This study addresses this gap by exploring the phenomenon of silenced leadership through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens

Research questions

The Study is Guided by The Following Overarching Research Question

How do deputy principals experience and interpret their leadership roles within South African schools, particularly in contexts where their authority is silenced?

Sub-questions:

1. How do deputy principals describe the tension between formal role expectations and their lived experiences?
2. In what ways do deputy principals experience silencing within School Management Teams?
3. How do deputy principals interpret and negotiate their professional identities in contexts of obscured leadership?
4. What strategies do deputy principals employ to navigate or resist silencing in their leadership practice?

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore and interpret the lived experiences of deputy principals in South African schools, with a focus on how their leadership roles are silenced, negotiated, and redefined within SMTs.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the gap between deputy principals' formal role expectations and their lived experiences.
- To explore the phenomenon of silencing and its impact on deputy principals' leadership practices.
- To interpret how deputy principals construct and negotiate their professional identities.
- To contribute to the discourse on distributed leadership by repositioning deputy principals as co-leaders in school improvement.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons:

Theoretical Contribution: It extends the discourse on distributed and hermeneutic phenomenological leadership by highlighting the lived experiences of silenced deputy principals.

Policy Contribution: It provides evidence for revisiting frameworks such as PAM to clarify and strengthen the leadership scope of deputy principals.

Practical Contribution: It offers insights for leadership development programmes, mentoring, and professional support structures tailored to deputy principals.

Social Contribution: By amplifying the voices of deputy principals, the study advocates for more inclusive and equitable leadership cultures in South African schools.

Rationale for the Study

The rationale for this study stems from the recognition that deputy principals are indispensable to school functioning yet remain under-researched and undervalued in leadership scholarship. While principals have been the focus of extensive research, the deputy principalship has been treated as a secondary role, often framed as preparation for principalship rather than as a leadership position.

By adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study seeks to uncover the essence of deputy principals lived experiences, moving beyond surface-level descriptions to interpret the meanings they ascribe to their roles. In doing so, it challenges hierarchical assumptions about leadership and contributes to the reimagining of deputy principals as active, interpretive leaders whose voices matter in shaping school culture and improvement.

Literature Review

Introduction

Deputy Principals' Lived Experiences of Leadership (2020–2025)

Conceptual Framing: Obscured leadership and Distributed Leadership

The concept of obscured leadership refers to the paradoxical position of deputy principals formally second-in-command yet often excluded from strategic decision-making. This is compounded by distributed leadership models that promise shared power but frequently reinforce hierarchical norms [2].

Deputy principals occupy a pivotal yet often under-recognized position in school management teams. While they are expected to support principals, manage staff, and ensure effective teaching and learning, research increasingly highlights how their voices are silenced or marginalized within hierarchical school structures. This literature review synthesizes recent studies (2020–2025) that explore the roles, challenges, and silencing of deputy principals in South African and international contexts.

Deputy Principals as "Unseen Influencers"

Describes deputy principals as "unseen influencers" whose contributions to school leadership are critical yet minimally acknowledged in policy frameworks such as the Personnel Administration Measures (PAM). The study, grounded in distributed leadership theory, found that deputy principals—particularly women—often experience limited recognition, which shapes their perceptions of their roles and diminishes their authority in decision-making processes. This silencing reinforces hierarchical dynamics where principals dominate leadership discourse [3].

Contextual Inequities and Leadership Deficit

Investigates how school contexts mainly quintile rankings character deputy principals' leadership practices. In lower-quintile schools, deputies encounter structural constraints and leadership deficits, while higher-quintile schools offer further autonomy. This stresses how socioeconomic inequality or socioeconomic imbalance intersects with obscured leadership [4].

Critical Skills and Professional Development

Argue that deputy principals require critical skills including role awareness, technical competence, and self-awareness to perform effectively. However, the lack of structured professional development leaves many deputies dependent on principals' discretion. This dependency contributes to their silencing, as deputies are positioned as "principals-in-waiting" rather than autonomous leaders. Without empowerment, their voices in SMTs remain muted.

Sensemaking and Identity Construction

Applies a sense-making framework to explore how deputy principals interpret their leadership roles. Her findings show that deputies often internalize marginalization, navigating tensions between formal authority and informal influence within school hierarchies.

Policy Silence and Leadership Frameworks

Critique the Gauteng School Leadership Development Framework, noting that deputy principals obtain minimal job descriptors, actually it is on just one page in the entire document. This policy neglect contributes to their muted status and lack of professional development

Contextual Variability of Roles

Highlight that the roles of deputy principals vary significantly depending on school context. In well-resourced schools, deputies are often positioned as principals-in-training, with responsibilities shaped by principals' leadership styles. However, this flexibility can also silence deputies, as their roles are defined externally rather than through self-determination. The study underscores that principals' dominance in role allocation often marginalizes deputies' agency in leaders [5].

Gendered Leadership Experiences

Highlight how female deputy principals experience compounded marginalization due to gendered expectations. Their leadership is often framed as supportive rather than strategic, reinforcing patriarchal norms within school governance.

Gendered Silencing

Recent research emphasizes the intersection of gender and silencing. Found that female deputy principals often face compounded marginalization, where both gendered expectations and hierarchical structures limit their leadership voice. This aligns with broader scholarship on gendered leadership in education, which shows that women in deputy roles are frequently tasked with pastoral or administrative duties rather than strategic leadership, reinforcing their invisibility in SMT decision-making.

Narrative Inquiry and Lived Experience

Several studies, [6] employ narrative inquiry to foreground deputy principals' voices. This methodology reveals emotional labor, relational leadership, and the struggle for recognition elements often absent in quantitative leadership studies.

Distributed Leadership: Promise vs. Practice

While distributed leadership is widely promoted, empirical studies show that principals often retain decision-making power. Deputy principals are delegated operational tasks but excluded from vision-setting, undermining the ethos of shared leadership [7].

Leadership Preparation and Professional Development

Research by [8] and emphasizes the lack of targeted leadership development for deputy principals. Without formal training or mentorship, deputies rely on experiential learning, which reinforces informal and reactive leadership styles.

Emotional Toll and Identity Negotiation

Deputy principals report feelings of invisibility, frustration, and identity conflict. Their leadership is often relational and pastoral yet undervalued in performance metrics. This emotional toll contributes to burnout and disengagement [9].

Theoretical Insights

Across these studies, distributed leadership theory and phenomenological inquiry emerge as key frameworks. Distributed leadership highlights the need for shared authority, yet in practice, deputy principals' voices are constrained by hierarchical norms. Phenomenological approaches reveal the lived experiences of silencing, showing how deputies interpret their roles as both supportive and subordinated.

Implications for Policy and Practice

- Policy Reform: Current frameworks (e.g., PAM) inadequately define deputy principals' roles, reinforcing their marginalization.
- Leadership Development: Structured mentoring and professional development are needed to empower deputies as independent leaders.
- Cultural Shift: Schools must move from hierarchical to collaborative leadership cultures, where deputies' voices are valued in SMT decision-making.

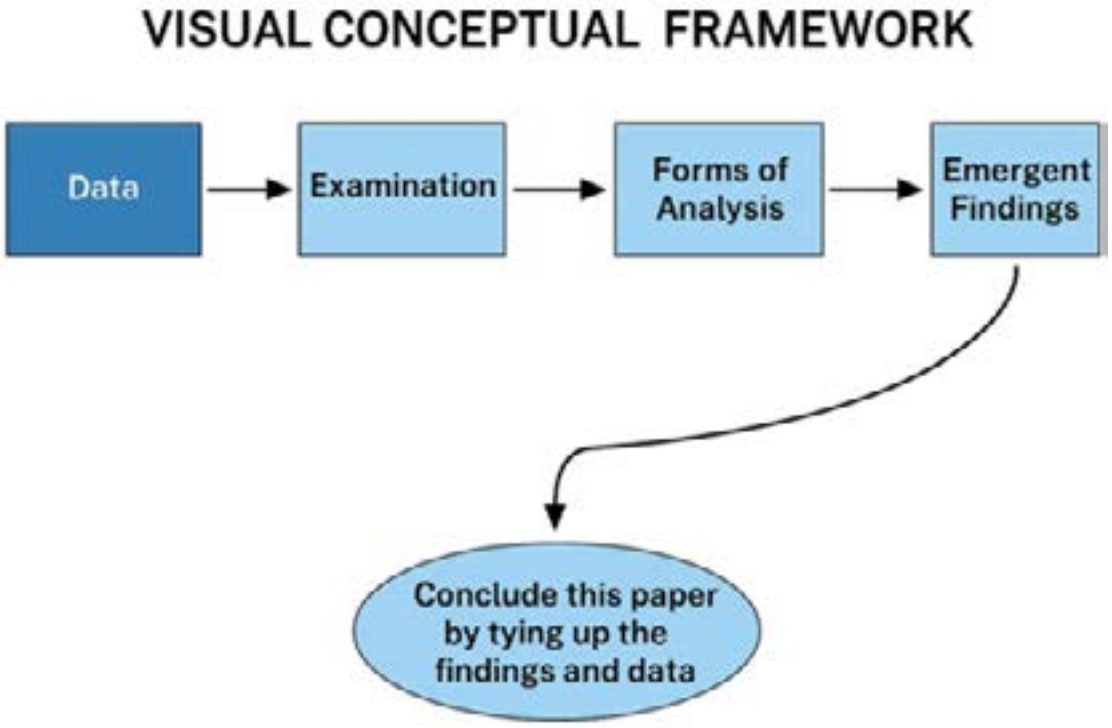
Conclusion

The literature (2020–2025) consistently shows that deputy principals are silenced actors in school management teams. While they play crucial roles in sustaining school operations, their contributions are undervalued, their voices marginalized, and their leadership potential constrained. Addressing this silencing requires policy recognition, professional development, and cultural change within schools to reposition deputies as co-leaders rather than subordinate assistants.

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a qualitative paradigm to deeply explore the lived experiences of deputy principals from quintile 2 and 3 schools. Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding, rooted in hermeneutic methodological traditions, that seeks to investigate social or human problems through rich, contextual analysis [10].



Data Collection Techniques

To uncover the lived experiences of deputy principals, the researcher engaged in focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews, and observations. These methods facilitated in-depth engagement, allowing for the capture of detailed perspectives and interactions.

Unit of Analysis and Analytical Framework

The unit of analysis was established through a thematic approach, enabling the identification and interpretation of key patterns within the data. The research design is situated within a constructivist epistemology and employs an interpretative phenomenological perspective. In this framework, the researcher and participants are interactively connected, resulting in findings that are co-constructed as the enquiry unfolds. Interpretative Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis (IHPA) enabled the study to uncover rich thick data to make meaning of how deputy principals circumnavigate obscured leadership that is prevalent at quintile 2 and 3 schools.

This study uses Interpretative Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis (IHPA), a contemporary qualitative methodology first introduced by Jonathan Smith in 1996. Although IHPA originated in psychology, it is increasingly applied across the human, so-

cial, and health sciences [11]. IHPA recognizes that individuals perceive the world in unique ways, shaped by their personalities, life experiences, and motivations. In educational research, interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology constructs a complex and holistic picture, analyses multiple inputs, reports comprehensive viewpoints, and conducts inquiries in natural settings. The research design in this study, Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis, is particularly suited for educational contexts and is relatively new within the field.

Hermeneutics in Educational Leadership Research

Hermeneutics, the theory and practice of interpretation, underpins the methodological approach of this study. The research demonstrates the value of hermeneutics as a credible, rigorous, and creative means to investigate how the roles and functions of deputy principals are often obscured or downplayed. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of their positions as managers at the Centre of operational, organizational, and functional aspects of daily school life [12].

The data that was collected is separated into six themes that directly engages with the four sub-research that unpacks the main research question.

Data analysis and commentary

The main research question that unearths the acuteness of how the silencing of deputy principals impacts teaching and learning is all encompassed by the four research sub- questions that expands on the theoretical and conceptual focus of the lived experiences of deputy principals. The sub-themes are the interplay of role expectations and lived Experience; manifestation of silencing leadership; reimagining leadership; Identity formation and job satisfaction; hierarchical school cultures and policy ambiguities and resistance through agency and advocacy.

Findings from Data Analysis

Research question 1: How do deputy principals describe the tension between formal role expectations and their lived experiences?

Deputy principals often describe the tension between formal role expectations and their lived experiences as a complex interplay of invisibility, emotional labor, and adaptive leadership within constrained systems The participants shifted gears by exposing their current lived experiences of how formal role expectations are obscured because their lived experiences are challenging. “My life is a roller coaster of multiple tasks that encompasses hard skills, soft skills, transferable skills, and adaptive abilities when it comes to my two-fold duties of maintaining a balance with teacher, learners and parents.” (Focus group 1, Participant A)

The formal roles according to the PAM document is not as straightforward as it reads. The task and duties are intensive, and it gets intensified continually. Most of the time unannounced and as the deputy principal it is my duty to strike a working partnership to juggle school crisis, problems, disputes, hearings, teacher welfare and learner academic support...” (Focus group 1, Participant B) “Besides the main concerns schools are obliged to concede to provincial and national regulations relating to priorities. In midst all the necessary requirements for institutional progress the break in communication between a and a deputy principal can escalate operational, organizational and curriculum accountability to levels of dysfunction or under-performance from teachers and learners…(Focus group 1 , Participant C)

At my school I was short changed because some other leaders like mine to meet their professional responsibilities in inducting newly appointed deputy principals (NADP), despite government-mandated policie” (Focus group 1, Participant D) “Although I do my best and get help from other DP, I am always compared with other DP’s who are competent and they run the school well, yet our school is poorly …perceived by outsiders. I have not got used to the governing body as yet not the full compliment. I have told that the professional lack of accountability is not ignorance but deliberate noncompliance to responsibility. It becomes very tense are stabbed at my professional integrity. It pierces my soul which creates withdrawal and sadness to well-being…” (Focus group 1, Participant E)

There is a serious lack of communication between my principal and myself over trivial issues like reporting something like an early departure or an individual that is late a midst other critical problems like participation at district level, no water or ...conducting an urgent staff brief. To me this results in stress and burnout if I every reprimand from the head so rather than being, I search for strategies for self-care and emotional regulation as a professional develop for staff to my sanity…must recreate a strategy to acclimatize the prevalent culture a school to make certain the policies are followed strictly because in the end my will pounce onto me if things go against DBE accountability level…”(Focus group 1, Participant F)

“I have nobody to take my professional problems to. They cannot be called in for minor problems. But when many accumulate it becomes very tense, and relationship gets strained which is not healthy for the school environment. Being a deputy principal requires and grit. My problems escalate because I cannot take every issue the Department of Education through the Senior Education Manager (SEM) appointed to my school...”(Focus group1, Participant B)

At face value our school looks well managed, but it seems that the head is deliberately non-compliant. He flouts and rules and gets frustrated when things backfire. He tends to blame and shame people all the (Focus group 1, Participant G)

Findings and Discussions

The Interplay of Role Expectations and Lived Experience Participant A describes the deputy principal’s role as a “roller-coaster of multiple tasks,” encompassing a diverse range of hard and soft skills, transferable skills, and adaptive abilities. This balancing act is necessary to manage relationships with teachers, learners, and parents. Participant B echoes this sentiment,

highlighting that the formal roles outlined in the PAM document are far more complex in practice. Duties intensify continuously and often arise unexpectedly, requiring the deputy principal to juggle crises, disputes, teacher welfare, and academic support for learners. These experiences reveal the gap between formal expectations and the lived realities of deputy principals, where their day-to-day responsibilities extend well beyond what is prescribed.

Manifestation of Silencing Leadership

The notes indicate that deputy principals, such as Participant B, experience an increasing workload that demands resilience and adaptability. The pressure to manage multifaceted tasks results in frustration, especially when communication with principals breaks down. This lack of dialogue hampers teamwork and creates an environment where deputy principals feel overworked and blamed for shortcomings in policy implementation. Participant F notes the necessity of developing self-care strategies and emotional regulation to cope with the stress and prevent burnout, as the deputy principal is often held accountable for systemic issues beyond their direct control [13].

Reimagining Leadership

Participants B and D call for a reimagining of leadership within schools. Participant D recounts a lack of proper induction for newly appointed deputy principals, despite government-mandated policies. This neglect by principals undermines the development of effective leadership structures and compromises the school's overall direction. The absence of active leadership and mentorship from the principal compels deputy principals to seek external advocacy and support, highlighting the need for leadership that actively promotes a culture of excellence in teaching and learning.

Identity Formation and Job Satisfaction

Participant E shares the emotional toll of working in an environment where professional integrity is questioned, leading to feelings of withdrawal and sadness. The constant comparison with other deputy principals and the perception of the school by outsiders undermine job satisfaction and personal well-being. Participant F underscores the need for advocacy groups to support and upskill novice teachers and provide structures that clarify policies and regulations, thus addressing the demands placed on deputy principals by the Department of Education [14].

Hierarchical School Cultures and Policy Ambiguities

Participant F provides insights into the challenges posed by hierarchical school cultures, where principals may micromanage deputy principals and underestimate their capabilities. This dynamic creates ambiguity around policies and responsibilities, further complicating the deputy principal's role and diminishing their authority to manage the school effectively [15].

Resistance Through Agency and Advocacy

Participants F and G highlight the absence of strong partnerships between principals and deputy principals as a significant challenge. The ongoing dilemmas and lack of collaboration result in deputy principals being blamed and shamed when accountability issues arise, often due to the principal's actions. This environment interrupts the smooth operation of the school and underscores the need for agency and advocacy to address leadership gaps and promote effective school management.

Research question 2: How are deputy principals silenced within School Management Teams

Data from participants

My principal gives me more tasks than I can handle in a day. I get accused of being lacking ability, in from of my lower line managers…"(Focus group 2, Participant H)

"There is a continual lack of clarity in setting tasks that are achievable withing the time frames. Being super-loaded with operational duties and organizational responsibility results in my inconsistent outlook and limited autonomy…" (Focus group 2, Participant I) "… at my school the top-down hierarchy approach is what my principal follows in strategic and operational decisions. As a DP I am relegated to administrative or disciplinary tasks, with little input on pedagogical or policy matters. I feel like a." (Focus group 2, Participant J)

" My principal has a queer hierarchical stance and gate-keeping of leadership opportunities is availed to the other person openly and optimally. He determines which deputies are allowed to initiatives or represent the school and it's never me…" (Focus group 2, Participant K) "In my school how female deputy principals experience silencing through expectations and limited access to leadership spaces because the Department head being male has more privileges." (Focus group 2, Participant L)

"Overlapping factors such as race, age, and cultural background further marginalize deputies, especially in a diverse school community like my school space where leadership norms reflect dominant cultural narratives sidelining other races on the premises…Lack of trust and collaboration: In my SMT I feel excluded from meaningful dialogue or strategic. This erodes trust and creates a reinforced culture of compliance rather collaboration…"(Focus group 2,Participant M)

"All my contributions academically or organizationally go unnoticed although my concerted efforts are totally overlooked. Even when I as the second contribute significantly to school functioning, my efforts may go unacknowledged in public forums, departmental reports, or community engagements, reinforcing my representational invisibility "(Focus group 2, Participant N)

Findings and Discussion

The Interplay of Role Expectations and Lived Experience

The experiences of deputy principals, as shared by participants in the focus groups, reveal a noticeable disconnect between the formal expectations of their roles and the realities they face within the school management structure. For example, Participant H expresses a sense of disregard for his position as second in command, especially when it comes to the structural positioning

within the school and the implementation of policies. Although he holds a key leadership role, his authority is often overlooked, leading to frustration and a breakdown in professional cohesion. This sense of being silenced is echoed by Participant L, who highlights the impact of gendered marginalization. As a female deputy principal, she notes that the male department head enjoys more privileges, which undermines her well-being and self-worth.

Manifestation of Silencing Leadership

The data provides ample evidence of how silencing leadership manifests in the school environment. The lack of trust and collaboration on professional matters undermines the deputy principal's confidence and their role in maintaining accountability and compliance. When deputy principals are not included in decision-making or recognized for their contributions, it can disrupt the operational and organizational functions of the school, ultimately weakening the leadership structure.

Reimagining Leadership

Participant N's account further illustrates the consequences of silencing leadership. The absence of recognition from principals whether in reports, public forums, or some other forms of commendation leads to sensitiveness of invisibility among deputy principals. Despite their fundamental effort to the thriving completion of tasks and activities, their exertion often goes unheeded, which diminishes their sense of agency allegiance and mental vital principles.

Identity Formation and Job Satisfaction

The phenomenon of professional distancing between principals and deputy principals has intense implications for their working relations. When deputy principals feel omitted by their principals, it leads to a splintering of human relations. This distancing negatively the day-to-day operations, accountability, and the overall organization at the agency level, resulting in decreased job satisfaction and weakened identity formation among deputy principals.

Hierarchical School Cultures and Policy Ambiguities

Participants J, L, and N collectively expose the challenges embedded in hierarchical school cultures and ambiguous policies. Despite being second in charge, deputy principals often find themselves excluded from significant policy and curriculum decisions. Their participation in meetings, which should strengthen their professional authority, is undermined by unfair practices such as the unequal distribution of leadership responsibilities in the absence of the principal. This obscured leadership approach disempowers deputy principals, preventing them from fulfilling their roles effectively.

Resistance Through Agency and Advocacy

The struggles of deputy principals are further highlighted when their authority is publicly challenged. Participant H describes being reprimanded by the principal in front of lower-line managers, an act deemed both unfair and unprofessional. Such experiences damage the self-image of deputy principals and pose serious risks to their mental well-being. Despite their hierarchical standing, these public reprimands exemplify the ongoing challenges faced by deputy principals in asserting their agency and advocating for their professional dignity.

Research question 3: How do deputy principals interpret and negotiate their professional identities in contexts of obscured leadership?

Data from Participants

"As a deputy principal my job description unclear and overlapping responsibilities with principals and heads of departments further complicates my functionality obligations. This ambiguity fosters uncertainty about my leadership scope…" (Focus group 3, Participant O) "As a female DP I experience professional distancing from my principal. My experience encompasses invisibility and stereotyping, where leadership undervalues me or I am seen as secondary to male counterparts." (Focus group 3, Participant P)

"By engaging in interventions and advocacy for professional scaffolding and development, enhance my professional journey, offering nuanced understanding of the challenges of, learners and parents My journey of being pushed aside(silences) gives me the impetus to understand being unrecognized and the creation of ongoing negotiation to ignore silenced leadership treatment from my principal. I am forced to bulldoze decisions that are imposed me… I never hesitate to go back to the PAM document and tell my CEO that I fully understand and interpret PAM exclusively to execute my duties, and this not be altered or overlooked. (Focus group 3, Participant S) "I am forced to align myself with school improvement goals or community engagement efforts to gain legitimacy and visibility, even when formal authority from my principal is limited or absent" Focus group 3: Participant T)

Findings and Discussions

The Interplay of Role Expectations and Lived Experience

The lived experiences of deputy principals reveal a significant disconnect between their formal role expectations and how these roles are perceived and enacted within the school environment. For example, Participant P describes that, although she is formally recognized as second in command and is expected to act in the principal's stead, when necessary, there remains a pervasive disregard for this status. She notes being undervalued and perceived as a secondary figure, rather than being acknowledged as the primary authority after the principal. This marginalization highlights the ongoing challenges deputy principals face in securing recognition and legitimacy within hierarchical structures.

Manifestation of Silencing Leadership

Silencing leadership manifests in ways that undermine the deputy principal's authority and agency. Participant S provides a clear example, stating that it often becomes necessary to assertively correct actions that go against established policy. He describes instances where he must confront the principal, referencing policy documents and "bulldozing" through decisions that are imposed upon him without proper consultation. This approach underscores the need for deputy principals to remain steadfast in

upholding organizational standards and to resist being sidelined in decision-making processes.

Reimagining Leadership

The experiences outlined by Participant T illustrate the necessity of reimaging the deputy principal's role when faced with muting or silencing. Despite occupying a position of authority, deputy principals may find their influence diminished. In response, Participant T demonstrates self-motivation by aligning closely with school improvement initiatives and community engagement projects. Through these efforts, she seeks to gain recognition and validate her leadership, even when formal acknowledgment from the principal is limited or absent. This proactive stance reflects the adaptive strategies deputy principals employ to maintain visibility and impact.

Identity Formation and Job Satisfaction

Identity formation and job satisfaction for deputy principals are closely linked to their ability to enact meaningful interventions and advocacy within their professional contexts. Participant S exemplifies this by actively engaging in advocacy work and supporting colleagues' professional development. Through such self-initiated efforts, he not only enhances his own recognition but also constructs a deeper understanding of the diverse needs and perspectives of teachers, learners, and parents. This process of continual self-reflection and professional scaffolding contributes to a more robust and resilient leadership identity.

Hierarchical School Cultures and Policy Ambiguities

The hierarchical nature of school cultures, combined with policy ambiguities, further complicates the deputy principal's role. As discussed by Participant T, the deputy principal's experience is often shaped by the degree of professional support or lack thereof from the principal. When the principal's presence or guidance is limited or "absent," opportunities for effective collaboration and stakeholder engagement are diminished. This lack of partnership adversely affects the smooth operation of organizational duties and the overall functioning of the school.

Resistance Through Agency and Advocacy

Resistance to silencing is frequently enacted through determined agency and advocacy. Participant S's experience illustrates the importance of swiftly addressing policy violations committed by the principal, emphasizing the need to reference and uphold Department of Education regulations. The muted nature of the deputy principal's functional role becomes most apparent to those who have themselves faced marginalization within the leadership structure. Ultimately, these acts of resistance and advocacy serve to reinforce the deputy principal's commitment to ethical leadership and regulatory compliance.

Research Question 4: What strategies do deputy principals employ to navigate or resist silencing in their leadership practice?

Deputy principals often operate in ambiguous leadership spaces, where their authority is constrained by hierarchical norms. To resist silencing, they adopt adaptive and relational strategies.

Data from Participants

"As a deputy principal I counterattack through interactive control, tactical aligning, and circulated agency by cultivating conviction, formal influence, and reframing my roles as co leaders rather than subordinates…" (Focus group 4, Participant U) "To resist silencing, I implement adaptive and relational strategy… As a deputy principal I am obliged to reinterpret my roles not as a subordinate executor but as strategic co-leaders. This reframing allows me to assert influence in subtle, context- sensitive ways." (Focus group 4, Participant V)

"I make every effort to build trust-based relationships with staff and my principals, using emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills to gain legitimacy. This relational capital enables me to reskill and retool professionals and shape decisions formal power" (Focus group 4, Participant W) "I find that by embracing spread leadership, I share responsibilities with heads of departments and teachers, creating collaborative spaces where their voice is rather than peripheral." Focus group 4, Participant X) "As my professional development obligation, I engage my down-line leadership training and mentoring networks to enhance or empower them to articulate their own leadership identity even if I take a flack or get silenced from taking credit for my hard work. (Focus group 4, Participant Y).

"As curriculum and professional responsibility, I proactively take on strategic tasks, such as curriculum planning, staff development, or well-being initiatives that position teams as indispensable contributors to school leadership " (Focus group 4, Participant Z) "In my school that predominantly serve inclusive cultures or working with a principal that practice shared leadership, as a unionized and empowered deputy principals I resist silencing from my superior any more… I am fully aware and of demands…" (Focus group 4, Participant AA) "Being in larger schools often allow for clearer role differentiation and more opportunities for me to lead distinct portfolios. Were education policies acknowledge me as deputy principals (not just assistants), to gain structural to resist silencing " Focus group 4, Participant BB)

Findings and Analysis of Data

The Interplay of Role Expectations and Lived Experience

Participant U's account highlights how deputy principals counteract silencing by embracing principles such as collaborative control, deliberate alignment, and distributed agency. By fostering self-confidence, cultivating informal influence, and consistently reframing their roles as co-leaders rather than mere subordinates, deputy principals can navigate hierarchical limitations. This approach allows them to maintain a sense of agency and assertiveness within their leadership practice, despite the constraints imposed by their position.

Manifestation of Silencing in Leadership

The experience shared by Participant BB illustrates the importance of strategic role responsibility in resisting silencing. By becoming thoroughly familiar with the specific demands and policy frameworks governing their role, deputy principals can

prevent principals from exploiting their positional authority. This detailed understanding of policies and responsibilities empowers deputy principals to defend their professional space and ensure their contributions are recognized.

Re-imaging Leadership: Professional Development as Resistance

According to Participant Y, surviving and thriving in an environment where deputy principals may be muted requires a proactive commitment to professional development. Lived experience suggests that deputy principals feel compelled to support and empower their colleagues by facilitating leadership training and establishing mentoring networks. Through such initiatives, they help others articulate and develop their own leadership identities, even when their own efforts may go unrecognized or unrewarded. This commitment to professional growth serves as both a form of resistance to silencing and a means of strengthening the broader leadership culture within the school.

Identity Formation and Job Satisfaction

Participant Z's reflections reveal how they lived experience of deputy principals shapes their professional identity, particularly through the execution of curriculum planning and the assumption of professional accountability. By taking on strategic responsibilities such as curriculum design, staff development, and well-being initiatives, deputy principals reinforce their loyalty to the institution and contribute to the enhancement of teaching and learning. This active engagement not only bolsters staff morale but also deepens the deputy principal's own sense of job satisfaction and expertise.

Navigating Hierarchical School Cultures and Policy Ambiguities

The collected experiences underscore that passionate deputy principals can transcend hierarchical barriers and policy uncertainties, especially in relation to teaching and learning strategies. Even when muted or marginalized by principals, deputy principals utilize relational capital to engage staff and principals alike, reskilling and retooling professionals' responsibilities that are traditionally associated with the principal's role. As Participant W notes, deputy principals who rise above such setbacks can influence key decisions and drive change, despite lacking formal authority.

Resistance Through Agency and Advocacy

Resistance to silencing frequently manifests through exclusion from decision-making processes or a lack of recognition for one's contributions. Deputy principals, however, deploy various strategies to counteract this marginalization. As Participant V explains, by reinterpreting their roles from that of subordinate executor to strategic co-leader, deputy principals can assert influence in subtle and context-sensitive ways. This tactical reframing enables them to advocate for themselves and their teams, ensuring their voices are heard within the leadership structure.

Research Findings

Deputy principals frequently articulate a profound tension between what is formally expected of them in their roles and the realities they encounter day to day. This tension is characterized by a sense of invisibility, wherein their essential contributions to school leadership are often overlooked or unrecognized within the broader educational structure. Despite being responsible for substantial leadership tasks, deputy principals may not receive the formal authority or acknowledgment that aligns with their responsibilities.

Emotional labor forms another crucial dimension of their experience. Deputy principals regularly suppress or manage their own emotions to maintain a professional demeanor, especially when dealing with staff conflicts, supporting teacher well-being, or addressing challenges that arise within the school community. This emotional management is demanding and frequently invisible, yet it is fundamental to sustaining a positive school climate.

Furthermore, deputy principals engage in adaptive leadership, navigating ambiguous situations and responding flexibly to evolving contexts within constrained systems. They mobilize informal authority and demonstrate initiative in leading change, even though such leadership may not be formally recognized. The complexity of their role arises from balancing these adaptive leadership practices with the limitations imposed by hierarchical structures and policy frameworks. Together, these elements of role invisibility, emotional labor, and adaptive leadership underscore the multifaceted and often underappreciated leadership enacted by deputy principals within schools.

The Paradox of Positional Authority and Lived Leadership

Deputy principals frequently navigate a paradoxical space where formal role expectations are, often administrative, compliance-driven, and subordinate to the principal clash with the nuanced, relational, and often invisible leadership they enact daily. This tension manifests as a complex interplay of invisibility, emotional labor, and adaptive leadership within constrained systemic architectures. While policy discourses may frame deputy principals as operational support, their lived experiences reveal a deeper engagement with the affective and moral dimensions of school life: mediating conflict, supporting teacher well-being, and sustaining school culture in the face of resource scarcity and policy overload.

Drawing on construct of emotional labor, deputy principals often subdue personal emotions to maintain professional equanimity, especially when managing staff tensions or shielding learners from systemic dysfunction. Their leadership is thus not only technical but deeply emotional and relational. Simultaneously, adaptive leadership theory [9] helps illuminate how deputy principals mobilize informal authority, navigate ambiguity, and lead change without formal recognition. Yet, this leadership is frequently rendered invisible both in policy texts and in the public imagination contributing to a sense of marginality despite their centrality to school functioning.

This disconnectedness between role prescription and role enactment highlights the need for a more distributed and human-cen-

tered leadership paradigm, one that values the interpretive agency and emotional intelligence of deputy principals. Their descriptions, when surfaced, challenge leading narratives of leadership and generates a reimaging of school leadership as a combined, positioned, and emotionally surfaced lived experience.

Recommendations

Based on the rich qualitative data and thematic analysis from the study Obscured leadership:

Deputy Principals' Lived Experiences of Leadership in Schools, here are constructive recommendations for education watchdogs, policy makers, and school governance bodies:

Clarify Deputy Principals' Roles in Policy

Revise frameworks like the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) to explicitly define the strategic leadership responsibilities of deputy principals, moving beyond administrative and disciplinary tasks.

1. Mandate Inclusive Decision-Making Structures

Require School Management Teams (SMTs) to adopt collaborative leadership models that ensure deputy principals have a voice in pedagogical and policy decisions.

2. Monitor Hierarchical Leadership Cultures

Conduct regular audits of school leadership practices to identify and address top-down management styles that silence deputy principals.

3. Professional Development and Support: Targeted Leadership Development Programs

Create structured mentoring and training initiatives specifically for deputy principals, focusing on strategic leadership, emotional intelligence, and policy navigation.

4. Ensure Proper Induction for New Deputies

Enforce mandatory induction protocols for newly appointed deputy principals to ensure they are adequately prepared and supported.

5. Promote Peer Learning Networks

Facilitate regional or national forums where deputy principals can share experiences, strategies, and innovations to counter silencing and build collective agency.

6. Gender and Equity Advocacy: Address Gendered Silencing in Leadership

Implement gender-sensitive leadership policies that recognize and counteract the marginalization of female deputy principals in SMTs.

7. Promote Equity in Leadership Opportunities

Ensure fair access to leadership initiatives, external representation, and professional development regardless of gender, race, or cultural background.

8. Emotional and Psychological Well-being

This is a very important aspects of addressing soft skills and pastoral care that shapes the mind of deputy principals which is essential in being healthy and professionally productive.

9. Recognize Emotional Labor in Leadership Metrics

Include relational and emotional leadership contributions in performance evaluations to validate the invisible work of deputy principals.

10. Provide Mental Health Support Structures

Offer confidential counselling, wellness programs, and resilience training tailored to the emotional demands of deputy principalship.

11. Create Feedback Mechanisms for Deputies

Establish anonymous reporting systems where deputy principals can raise concerns about silencing, role ambiguity, or leadership abuse.

12. Include Deputies in External Evaluations

Ensure deputy principals are consulted during school inspections and evaluations to provide a fuller picture of leadership dynamics.

Conclusions

This study set out to explore the obscured leadership experiences of deputy principals in South African schools, particularly within quintile 2 and 3 contexts. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, it illuminated the nuanced and often obscured realities of deputy principals whose leadership roles are formally recognized yet practically constrained. The findings reveal a persistent tension between policy expectations and lived experiences, where deputy principals are burdened with multifaceted responsibilities but denied strategic voice and recognition within School Management Teams (SMTs).

The data Underscores Several Critical Themes:

- Role Ambiguity and Emotional Labor: Deputy principals navigate a complex terrain of administrative, instructional, and pastoral duties, often without clear boundaries or institutional support. Their lived experiences reflect emotional strain, identity conflict, and a need for adaptive resilience.
- Silencing Within SMTs: Participants described systemic silencing through hierarchical gate-keeping, gendered expectations, and representational invisibility. Leadership opportunities are unevenly distributed, and deputies especially women are often excluded from strategic decision making.
- Reimagining Leadership and Identity: Despite structural constraints, deputy principals demonstrate agency by reinterpreting their roles, advocating for professional development, and seeking collaborative cultures. Their narratives reflect a desire to move beyond compliance toward meaningful leadership engagement.
- Policy and Cultural Gaps: The study highlights the inadequacy of frameworks like PAM in defining and supporting deputy principals' leadership scope. The absence of struc-

tured induction, mentorship, and recognition perpetuates their marginalization and undermines distributed leadership ideals.

- Resistance and Advocacy: Participants employ strategies of emotional regulation, peer support, and informal leadership to resist silencing. These acts of agency signal the potential for deputy principals to be re-positioned as co-leaders in school improvement.

In conclusion, this research affirms that deputy principals are not merely subordinate assistants but interpretive leaders whose voices are essential to the functioning and transformation of schools. Their lived experiences challenge the dominant narratives of hierarchical leadership and call for a reconfiguration of policy, practice, and culture. By foregrounding their obscured leadership, this study contributes to the discourse on distributed leadership and advocates for inclusive, context-sensitive leadership development in South African education.

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