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Exploring Perceptions of Effective School Leadership and Its Challenges in Morocco

Zakaria El Hilali^{1*}

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how public school principals perceive effective leadership and the challenges they encounter in Morocco's Oriental Region. Twenty eight principals participated in an online qualitative survey, and their responses were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of thematic analysis. Findings indicate that participants perceive their roles as involving a balance between administrative management and leadership. Successful school leadership is described as involving a set of attributes including effective communication, collaboration, shared decision-making, ethical and professional integrity, offering guidance, and role modeling. Participants also stress that successful leadership requires patience and composure. School leaders' efforts, however, might be hindered by the various challenges that reflect the demanding nature of leadership within this context. Key challenges that are highlighted involve managing relationships and collaboration, engaging stakeholders, work overload, dealing with unqualified or difficult staff, and enforcing regulations. These findings highlight the contextual complexity of school leadership in the Moroccan context and suggest the need for professional development programs that emphasize communication, relationship-building, stakeholder engagement, and contextual understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is not a set of universal attributes or behaviors that work in every setting. To be effective, leadership needs to be driven by the specific challenges of the context (James, 2011). As school leaders, principals encounter leadership challenges that may not be found in other organizational contexts. However, professional development for principals often lacks a connection between theory and practice because the specific context in which leaders work is neglected (Walker & Dimmock, 2004). Miller (2018) states that "no sensible evaluation of school leadership (practice, effectiveness) can take place without consideration of the context within which leadership is enacted" (p. 177).

In the Moroccan context, Amghar (2019) stresses that public school principals need to take a more active leadership role in driving reform and responding to challenges that their schools face. However, research on school leadership in this setting is scarce, and it often relies on universal leadership theories and neglects the importance of context in shaping leadership practice and effectiveness (e.g., El Bakkali, 2020; Elmeski, 2023; Laouni, 2023).

This study, therefore, aims to explore how effective school leadership is perceived in Moroccan public schools and the challenges school leaders encounter in this context. The guiding research question of this qualitative study aims to answer the following research question:

How do principals of Moroccan public schools view effective leadership, and what contextual challenges do they encounter?

LITERATURE REVIEW

School leadership is among the main factors that influence school effectiveness (Dinham, 2007). Systematic reviews by Hallinger & Heck (1996), Marzano *et al.* (2005), and Robinson (2007) suggest that school leaders have a positive impact on student achievement. This positive relationship is mediated by factors such as teacher motivation, school climate, school culture, and professional collaboration (Kalkan *et al.*, 2020; Özdemir *et al.*, 2022; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). However, contextual factors influence the effectiveness of the school leader (Miller, 2018).

Context determines what leaders must do and what they can achieve, as schools are affected by many external factors such as the social, geopolitical, and economic conditions of the environment within which these schools are located (Klenke, 1996). In addition, internal factors such as school size, staff quality, and community involvement also influence the practice of leadership within schools and what school leaders can do. Other factors are related to the governance of schools including the effectiveness of the institutions that manage schools as well as the adequacy of support provided by the Ministry of Education/Education Department to schools in terms of resources required (financial and technical) (Miller, 2018).

As outlined in Decree 2.02.376, principals in Moroccan public schools manage the school's educational, administrative, and financial operations. The principal does not do this individually, but each school forms

¹ Mohammed First University, Morocco

* Corresponding author's e-mail: zakaria.elhilali@ump.ac.ma

four councils that participate in managing the school. The principal heads these councils and implements their decisions. The principal is also tasked with preparing an annual work plan as well as a yearly report to assess the school's performance. Moreover, school principals are also responsible for ensuring timetables are respected, supervising curriculum progress, and evaluating staff performance. In addition, they coordinate between school councils, communicate updates from educational authorities, call meetings as required, manage the school's budget and maintain equipment, represent the school at local government meetings and community events, and establish partnerships with civic society associations and institutions (Ministry of National Education, 2002). There are, of course, other duties that principals have and that change depending on the size of the school and the administrative staff as well as the type of school (e.g., primary or high school, boarding or day school). These duties are not independent of those of the school councils and the administrative staff. The main duty of the school principal, however, is to supervise the school's administrative, educational, and financial operations (Taalim Press, 2020). School principals in Moroccan public schools have an extensive list of responsibilities, and their effectiveness as leaders can be compromised by such an overwhelming list of responsibilities.

The context of leadership also involves the culture within which it operates. Thus, what is regarded as effective leadership might vary among cultures. Dorfman (2004) comments that "leadership processes are inexorably intertwined within one's culture" (p. 265). That is, what leaders do is influenced by the values, norms, and practices that characterize their culture (Hartog & Dickson, 2018). According to the implicit leadership theory (ILT), perceptions affect leadership effectiveness. ILT was put forward by Lord and Maher (1991), and it posits that people, based on their experiences, develop preconceptions of the characteristics that effective leaders possess (Boffey, 2022). Thus, how we judge others' leadership abilities and how we classify them as leaders or non-leaders and as effective or ineffective is based on how closely they fit our implicit leadership theories (Mathews, 2022). Based on the work of Lord and Maher, House *et al.* (2004) developed the concept of endorsed implicit leadership theory, which they referred to as CLT. CLT describes what constitutes expected leadership at the cultural level rather than the individual level. In other words, perceptions of effective leadership are influenced by the cultural contexts in which leadership is practiced. Thus, perceptions of effective leadership vary among individuals, organizations, as well as among cultures. Moreover, leadership is also fundamentally a personal activity as school leaders have unique life and professional experiences that affect their values which in turn affect how they perceive and practice leadership (Miller, 2018). Leaders have different values; what one leader prioritizes may be different from what another leader values most. For instance, a leader who values order and punctuality

will naturally emphasize discipline and adherence to timetables.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Model

This study explores how principals of Moroccan public schools perceive effective leadership and the challenges they encounter as school leaders. Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative approach was adopted. A qualitative approach is suitable for exploring the social phenomenon of leadership within its natural context (Klenke, 2016). Qualitative research seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of how individuals experience aspects of their lives and how context shapes those experiences (Teherani *et al.*, 2015). In the current study, a qualitative approach allows participants to describe their perceptions of leadership in their own words, which can provide depth and richness to the data.

Research Sample

The participants in this study were 28 principals working in Moroccan public schools across the Oriental region. Only 4 were female, while the rest were male. In terms of age, most principals (32.1%) were between 35 and 40 years old, 28.6% were 41–50, and another 28.6% were 51–60. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling due to the geographical dispersion of the target population and the voluntary nature of participation. Principals were invited to participate through WhatsApp groups commonly used by school principals for communication. This sampling strategy allowed access to a diverse group of principals representing different provinces of the Oriental region of Morocco.

Data Collection Tools and Procedure

A qualitative survey method was used as a data collection method to collect open-ended responses from a relatively large and geographically dispersed group of participants while maintaining the depth associated with qualitative data (Davey *et al.*, 2019). This method also provides a high degree of anonymity, which encourages more open answers unlike face-to-face interviews in which interviewees might be reluctant to speak openly, especially when the topic of research is sensitive (Braun *et al.*, 2021). The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms, and it consisted of two sections. The first collected demographic information, including gender, age, and city of employment while the second included five open-ended questions designed to explore principals' perceptions of school leadership. The open-ended questions addressed the following aspects:

- Principals' views of their primary roles as school leaders (Question one),
- The attributes they consider essential for effective leadership (Questions two and three),
- The challenges they face in their work (Questions four and five).

The first question focused on how participants perceive

their primary roles as school principals. Questions two and three concerned attributes that participants perceive as essential for effective school leadership. Leadership could be understood in terms of skills, qualities, or behaviors. Thus, to gain a fuller picture of what constitutes effective leadership, question two dealt with skills and qualities associated with effective leadership while question three focused on behaviors that reflect effective leadership. Questions four and five asked participants about the challenges they face as school leaders. Two questions addressed the challenges of school leadership to ensure participants could provide a complete view of their experiences. The survey questions were translated into Arabic and reviewed by a group of 5 Arabic teachers to ensure clarity and appropriateness.

Data Analysis

Responses were translated into Arabic and then analyzed following the six-phase process introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Coding was conducted using QDA Miner, a qualitative data analysis software.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure trustworthiness, five participants took part in member checking. Moreover, a detailed description of participants, the research context, and the data collection process were provided. To minimize researcher bias, participants' own words were used in the data analysis and producing the report. The study, moreover, followed ethical research guidelines to guarantee the protection and respect of all participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study. They were also informed that the answers provided would be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained after analyzing the data are divided into three sections: 1) Perceived Roles of School Principals, 2) Effective School Leadership Attributes, and 3) Leadership Challenges.

Perceived Roles of School Principals

The first question focused on how participants perceive their roles as school principals. Eight key themes were identified in the data.

Theme 1: School Management and Supervision. This theme presents the principal as responsible for the general management of the school, through supervising activities, identifying and solving problems to ensure the normal functioning of the school, in addition to facilitating the school staff's work. For instance, P4 mentions that the main role of the school principal is "ensuring the normal functioning of the school and supervising all the activities taking place in the school."

Theme 2: Facilitating Communication and Coordination.

This theme highlights the principal's responsibility for promoting effective administrative communication, as well as coordination between teachers, the administration, and the educational authorities. Managing conflict is also stressed under this theme. For instance, P2 maintains that the roles of the school principal revolve around "communication, coordination, and involving everyone in managing the school." P15 similarly notes that the school principal is a "coordinator between the teaching staff and administration to facilitate their work under suitable conditions to ensure the success of the school while promoting communication and patience."

Theme 3: Providing Guidance and Support. This role involves guiding the staff, counseling, serving as a role model, and being a companion. Participant 6, for instance, stresses that the principal is "a leader, a companion, and a guide." P28 adds that among the roles of the school principal is "serving as a role model for hard work."

Theme 4: Driving School Success. Participants pointed to the school leader's role in achieving the school's excellence and success. It includes aspects such as improving the school outcomes and productivity and reaching the school objectives. P11, for example, mentions that the primary role of the principal is "reaching the established educational objectives successfully."

Theme 5: Leading the School. Under this theme, the principal is viewed as responsible for leading and directing the school and staff. For example, P14 describes the primary role of the principal as "leading and managing the school administratively, educationally, and socially."

Theme 6: Creating a Positive Work Environment. This theme concerns the role of the principal in creating a positive work environment. P18 points out that the role of the principal involves "creating a positive learning environment for all members of the school community." P23 similarly indicates that the principal's primary role includes "creating a healthy work environment, providing the necessary resources, and solving the never-ending problems."

Theme 7: Motivating the School Staff. This theme underlines the principal's role in motivating the school staff. Participant 1, for instance, mentions that the role of the principal involves "motivating and directing the school's administrative and educational staff to reach the established goals."

Theme 8: Establishing a Collaborative School Environment. This theme presents the principal's role as responsible for forming a collaborative school team and involving everyone in managing the school and making decisions. Participant 24 mentions that "the main role is forming the school team."

Effective School Leadership Attributes

After coding the responses to the second and third questions in the questionnaire, five main themes emerged.

Theme 1: Effective Communication. The majority of participants highlight the importance of effective communication, active listening, and conflict

management. P4, for example, emphasizes that effective leadership involves primarily “positive communication with all participants involved in the educational process, whether within or outside the school.”

Theme 2: Collaborative and Team-Oriented. This theme highlights the importance of consulting with school staff, practicing participatory management, and embracing a democratic leadership approach. P1 maintains that effective school leadership involves “collaborative work, communication with all stakeholders, and showing respect for everyone.” P19 similarly highlights the importance of “consultation, democracy, and teamwork.” P27, likewise, mentions that “effective communication and adopting a participatory approach” reflect effective leadership.

Theme 3: Ethical and Professional Integrity. This theme emphasizes ethical conduct, professionalism, respect, fairness, dedication, and sound judgment as key to effective school leadership. P1, for example, states that effective school leadership must involve “showing respect for everyone” while P17 stresses that effective school leadership requires “seriousness, dedication, and commitment to work, along with decisiveness and serving as a model of excellence.”

Theme 4: Offering Guidance and Role Modeling. This theme emphasizes that effective school leaders offer guidance to teachers and lead by example. P2, for instance, includes guidance as one of the primary leadership qualities and skills effective school leaders should have along with communication, planning, and involving the staff. P23 likewise mentions that “being a role model for hard work, dedication, and communication” is part of successful leadership.

Theme 5: Demonstrating Patience and Composure. Patience and composure were stressed as key to effective school leadership. P3, for instance, emphasizes that effective school leaders must demonstrate “Patience, thoughtfulness, and effective communication”. P5 also emphasizes “communication, modesty, and patience” as important leadership qualities.

Leadership Challenges

Questions four and five asked participants about the difficulties and challenges they face as school leaders. Eight themes were identified.

Theme 1: Managing Relationships and Maintaining Team Cohesion. Participants highlighted challenges of managing relationships and conflicts, coordinating with staff, fostering cohesion, and ensuring collaboration. To illustrate, P5 states that one of the most difficult aspects of being a school leader is managing “conflicts in the school among teachers or between teachers, the administration, or the school environment. Additionally, this participant underscores the difficulties in “establishing collaboration and trust among everyone in the school.” P24 adds that “the most difficult aspect is establishing cohesion among the staff”. For P9, the main challenge as a school leader lies in “balancing conflicting interests among various stakeholders within the school” is the most difficult

aspect of the school leader’s job.

Theme 2: Engaging Stakeholders. Participants discussed challenges related to engaging both internal and external stakeholders in school activities and decision-making. Such challenges include engaging staff in school activities and managing the school, as well as collaborating with stakeholders. P7, for instance, mentions the challenge of “convincing everyone to be effectively involved in improving learning quality.” Challenges related to external stakeholders include families not supporting or collaborating with the school and the lack of supportive civil society organizations. In particular, P23 highlights challenges related to “dealing with the school’s local community, especially in conservative and rural areas.”

Theme 3: Work Overload. Participants underscored the challenges related to having too many duties as a school principal. For example, P9 mentions that one of the key challenges encountered as a school leader involves “reconciling numerous tasks that are often overwhelming, work overload, and paperwork.”

Theme 4: Achieving Educational Success. This theme highlights difficulties of achieving the school objectives, meeting success expectations, and driving meaningful change. Participant 17 mentions that among the main challenges faced as a school leader is “making the school a pilot school, an attractive environment, a place that students particularly and anyone generally love, and a place for education in its true sense.” Participant 9 similarly states that the challenge lies in “achieving success rates that meet expectations.”

Theme 5: Challenges with Unqualified and Difficult Employees. This theme emphasizes that a key challenge they face is the lack of qualified teaching staff and dealing with irresponsible or difficult staff. P4, for instance, remarks, “The lack of resources or qualified teaching staff is a major problem.” P10 adds, “What makes the job more difficult is having disruptive and difficult individuals who obstruct and oppose everything for the sake of opposition.”

Theme 6: Enforcing Regulations. This theme emphasizes that implementing the law may be resisted by teachers and that it can be difficult to strictly follow administrative procedures. P15 highlights the difficulty of making “top-down decisions with which you do not agree.” P18 similarly adds that the difficulty as a school leader involves implementing “a law that is completely rejected by the teachers.”

Discussion

The following section discusses the findings presented above. It starts with how participants view their roles as school principals, followed by what they describe as effective school leadership attributes, and the challenges they encounter as school leaders.

Perceived Roles of School Principals

The findings show that participants see their work as involving both administrative management and

leadership aspects. The difference between management and leadership is not clear-cut, as the degree of overlap between the two concepts is a point of sharp disagreement (Yukl, 2008). Management concerns handling an organization's daily routine. Leading, on the other hand, is "influencing, guiding in direction, course, action, opinion." Thus, while leaders are more concerned with activities of vision and judgment (i.e., effectiveness), managers are more focused on activities of mastering routines (i.e., efficiency) (Bennis & Nanus, 2003, p. 20). Daft (2010) states that effective management is crucial in organizations, but effective managers must also have leadership qualities. Management and leadership involve different qualities, but the same individual can embody both sets of qualities. While some individuals may naturally possess more of one set of qualities than the other, the ideal manager develops a balance of both management and leadership qualities (Daft, 2010). A common problem with many organizations, particularly those that are failing, is that they tend to be overmanaged and underled (i.e., excessive management but insufficient leadership). Such organizations might be effective in managing the day-to-day operations, but they never question the value or need for these operations (Bennis & Nanus, 2003).

School Management and Supervision entails the formal duties of the principal as an administrative manager of the school. This theme describes the principal's role as being responsible for the general management of the school, through supervising activities and identifying and solving problems to ensure the normal functioning of the school. The remaining themes regarding the perceived roles of the principal all involve leadership dimensions. Leading the School explicitly states that the role of the school principal is to lead the school. *Facilitating Communication and Coordination* includes formal aspects of the principal's job, and it defines the principal's role as promoting effective administrative communication and coordination between teachers, the administration, and the educational authorities. This theme, however, also includes leadership aspects such as building a shared vision through effective communication. Therefore, school leaders' effectiveness depends largely on the degree to which they establish effective communication with and between teachers and students (Marzano *et al.*, 2005).

Guidance and Support as a key role of the school principal was also emphasized. The path-goal theory of leadership highlights the importance of support and guidance. It argues that leaders can help followers on the path to their goals by adopting particular behaviors that suit both the needs of followers and the demands of the situation. Effective leaders provide guidance, support, and motivation to help followers navigate the path toward achieving their goals (Northouse, 2016). The transformational approach to leadership also emphasizes the importance of guidance and support through individualized Consideration. Individually considerate leaders create a supportive climate in which they carefully

attend to the individual needs of their followers (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Creating a Positive Work Environment is another important leadership role that was emphasized by the participants. Work environment is often described in the literature as organizational culture (Schein, 2010). In the context of schools, it is referred to as school culture, a term that describes:

"a school's own unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that seem to permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about or avoid talking about, whether they seek out colleagues for help or don't, and how teachers feel about their work and their students" (Deal & Peterson, 1999, pp. 2–3)."

A positive school culture is the main instrument that the school leader can use to promote change within their schools (Scribner *et al.*, 1999). Successful leaders help their schools develop cultures where shared norms, values, and attitudes encourage mutual trust and concern among the school members (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Among the primary ways leaders shape the culture of their organizations is through what they regularly pay attention to, measure, and control. This requires acknowledging the positive and recognizing the negative (Schein, 2010). For instance, if the school leader consistently emphasizes open communication and addresses disrespectful interactions, this reinforces a culture of positive communication within the school.

Motivating the School Staff is another key theme that the participants emphasized. The importance of motivating the staff is highlighted in Bass's (1985) transformational leadership theory, which stresses that to be effective, leaders need to motivate their followers by (a) raising their awareness about the importance of task outcomes, (b) encouraging them to act in the best interests of the organization or team rather than their own self-interest, and (c) targeting their higher-order needs (Yukl, 2008). Research shows that motivated employees tend to perform their tasks more effectively (Shahzadi *et al.*, 2014). They are also more likely to have higher job satisfaction and lower job stress (Davis & Wilson, 2000). Teacher motivation is also positively associated with student achievement (Hayden, 2011).

Establishing a Collaborative School Team focuses on the role of the principal in creating a collaborative school team. This theme highlights the importance of a collaborative climate for a team or organization to work effectively. A team's ability to collaborate is vital for the success of any team. In a collaborative climate, members focus on addressing problems, listen to and understand each other, feel safe to take risks, and are willing to support one another (Northouse, 2016).

Achieving School Objectives describes another key role of the principal as a school leader. This role concerns the school leader's efforts to set a clear vision and goals for the school to improve the school outcomes and ensure that school objectives are successfully met. Effective leaders articulate their vision at every opportunity

and communicate their vision to their staff and other stakeholders (Bush & Glover, 2003). This role therefore represents the principal's responsibility to ensure that everyone in the school works toward achieving the school's objectives.

The themes identified regarding the perceived roles of the school principal highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of the principal's job within the context of this study.

Effective School Leadership Attributes

Regarding effective school leadership attributes, the majority of participants highlight the importance of *effective communication*. The effectiveness of the leader depends largely on their ability to communicate since leadership "is first, and foremost, a communication-based activity... [and] the higher the level of leadership, the higher the demand for communication competence" (Johnson & Hackman, 2018, p. 21). Moreover, successful leaders "focus attention on key aspects of the school's vision and communicate the vision clearly and convincingly" (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 4).

Participants stressed that successful leadership requires *patience and composure*, which highlights the challenging nature of school leadership. School leaders are expected to perform various tasks, including "decision-making, planning, and organizing to coordination, communication, ordering, coordinating, controlling, and monitoring to enable the better functioning of schools" (Karakose *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). Thus, to be effective, the school leader needs to develop resilience or "the ability to positively adapt to, withstand, and/or rebound from significant adversity and distress" (Everly *et al.*, 2013, p. 2). Resilience can help leaders endure pressure, adapt, and return to a stable state. Certain qualities that reflect resilience include emotional intelligence, ability and desire to learn from past experiences, flexibility in using different leadership styles, etc. (Dartey-Baah, 2015).

Another important attribute that was highlighted is being *Collaborative and Team-Oriented*. Distributed Leadership theory suggests that leadership in schools is a shared, interactive process that involves both principals and teachers who collaborate to influence teaching, learning, and organizational improvement. The theory argues that when teachers are involved in decision-making, they develop a stronger sense of authority and a broader perspective on professional responsibility (Printy & Liu, 2020). Moreover, involving teachers in decision-making is strongly related to the performance of schools (Ingersoll *et al.*, 2018). The importance of being Collaborative and Team-Oriented within the context of this study is further underlined by research on cross-cultural leadership that groups Morocco among the countries in which participative and team-oriented leadership is regarded as one of the most important leadership attributes (House *et al.*, 2004; Kabasakal *et al.*, 2012). Team-oriented leadership stresses team unity and a collective goal among members of the team, while Participative leadership

reflects the extent to which leaders involve others in making and implementing decisions. Participative leadership is reflected in behaviors that are participative and nonauthoritarian (House *et al.*, 2014).

Ethical and Professional Integrity stresses that effective school leadership is characterized by ethical conduct, professionalism, respect, fairness, dedication, and sound judgement. The importance of these attributes is stressed by the theory of ethical leadership, which posits that ethical leaders demonstrate honesty and trustworthiness, and they make fair and principled decisions. They show genuine concern for people and society, and they are ethical in both their personal and professional lives. Such leaders make ethics a clear focus of their leadership by promoting moral values and setting a visible example of ethical behavior. This kind of explicit behavior helps leaders highlight ethics in a way that draws attention within organizations where ethical issues are often overlooked (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Research shows that ethical leadership positively impacts work engagement and decreases organizational misbehavior (Demirtas, 2015). It also has a positive influence on employees' ethical performance (Huang & Paterson, 2014) as well as job satisfaction and job commitment (Neubert *et al.*, 2009). Thus, effective leadership is ethical and professional, and it can positively affect teacher engagement and satisfaction.

Effective school leaders are also described as individuals who offer *guidance to teachers and lead by example*. Transformational leadership emphasizes the importance of these two attributes through two types of behavior: Idealized Influence and Individualized Consideration. Effective leaders demonstrate idealized influence, which means acting as strong role models by embodying high moral and ethical standards. Such leaders can always be trusted to do what is right. Effective leaders also show individual consideration by creating a supportive climate in which they carefully attend to the individual needs of their followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Leadership Challenges

Participants highlighted six major types of leadership challenges. Managing Relationships and Maintaining Team Cohesion was particularly emphasized. Managing relationships as a leader is challenging since leadership is inherently a "relational practice" that requires "the ability to work with and through others" (Fletcher, 2012, pp. 121-122). As such, leadership is not just about how leaders interact with others personally, but it also involves creating a work environment where everyone can build good relationships. Moreover, it means using relational skills, not simply to maintain good relationships, but also to achieve positive organizational results. Maintaining relationships at work, however, might be mistakenly labeled as "feminine" and "nice" instead of being recognized as essential leadership practices, which makes it particularly challenging for male leaders to prioritize them (Fletcher, 2012). Moreover, maintaining positive

relationships with followers is challenging as it requires from the leader not only good relationship-building skills but also the capacity to manage different individuals and ensure everyone feels treated fairly. This can be difficult since developing high-quality relationships takes time and regular social exchanges, which may be limited by various factors such as a large number of employees, time constraints, or scarce resources. In short, the more followers a leader must manage, the less time and attention they can give to each individual, which limits relationship quality (Martin *et al.*, 2016).

Work Overload was also stressed. Principals are often expected to put others' needs before their own. Combined with demanding schools and limited resources, this can lead to stress and burnout (DeMatthews *et al.*, 2021). According to Philips *et al.* (2007), school principals experience heavy administrative workloads and long working hours, which lead to high levels of stress and an imbalance between working life and private life. Such negative impacts of work overload might limit the effectiveness of the school leader.

Participants emphasized challenges related to engaging internal and external stakeholders in school activities and decision-making. Inside the school, these challenges include engaging staff in school activities and managing the school. Challenges related to collaboration are especially present in schools with a large number of employees since collaboration is more effective in small teams compared to larger groups that require more time and create more complex relationships. In addition, not all individuals are willing to collaborate equally. Some might feel reluctant to share their ideas and suggestions (Kramer & Crespy, 2011). Challenges related to external stakeholders include lack of support and collaboration from parents and community, civil society organizations, and educational authorities. Distributed Leadership Theory stresses that "formal leaders acting alone will not achieve school and system transformation" (Harris, 2013, p. 11). Lack of collaboration and engagement of stakeholders can therefore hinder the effectiveness of the school leader's efforts (Afrianti *et al.*, 2024). This makes building strong relationships with parents, teachers, and the community is important for improving school performance and achieving inclusive education (Yihong *et al.*, 2024). When families and community groups collaborate with schools, both student achievement and overall school performance improve (e.g., Al Kafri, 2025; Henderson & Geller, 2020).

Another challenging aspect of the school leader concerns achieving the school goals, meeting success expectations, and driving meaningful change. Effective school leadership is a crucial factor in improving student learning (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004). However, meeting success expectations may be hindered by the lack of institutional recognition and clear authority for school principals, which limits their capacity to lead reforms effectively and achieve educational success (Ait Khzana, 2017). This theme aligns with the other themes, as the ability to meet

success expectations may be constrained by the various challenges faced by the school leaders. Furthermore, achieving the school's expectations depends on the collective efforts of the leadership and all stakeholders, and insufficient collaboration or engagement may undermine the school leader's efforts (Martin *et al.*, 2016). A further challenge that is stressed is the lack of qualified teaching staff and dealing with irresponsible or difficult staff. The Ministry of Education assigns both teaching and administrative staff (Hari, 2023). Thus, the school principal cannot ensure they get either qualified teachers or responsible employees. They are forced to manage the staff they receive, even if those employees are incompetent, difficult, or a poor fit for the school's needs. As a result of this, 'difficult' or 'challenging' teachers present one of the toughest challenges school principals may ever face. Teachers who perform poorly not only do not achieve the expected results, but also their poor behaviour may distract others from doing their work. They consume much of the principal's time and occupy posts that could be more beneficially filled by better performing teachers. Their poor performance also may damage the school's reputation (Yariv, 2004, p. 149).

Such difficult staff members "fight, attack, and attempt to sabotage improvement attempts. Their efforts regularly thwart any type of change" (Whitaker, 2002, p. 8). Such difficult staff consume valuable principal time, disrupt the leader's efforts, and their poor performance negatively impacts student results, distracts other staff, and damages the school's reputation.

Participants also mentioned that they face resistance when attempting to enforce school regulations or apply administrative procedures as a response to employee misconduct, such as addressing repeated teacher tardiness, unapproved absences, failure to follow curriculum guidelines, neglecting classroom management responsibilities, etc. Liu *et al.* (2024) argue that leaders face a dilemma when responding to employee misconduct. Using leniency might be adopted by the leader instead of punishment. However, such a response might be effective or might encourage future misconduct.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings of this study show that school principals in Moroccan public schools perceive their roles as complex and multifaceted. These roles can be categorized along two dimensions. The first concerns ensuring that the school operates properly (i.e., managing the school) while the second relates to leading the school, and it involves encouraging effective communication, guiding and supporting staff, creating a positive school culture, motivating the staff, establishing a collaborative team, and achieving school objectives. Effective school leadership, therefore, balances management and leadership, which are both equally necessary for the success of any organization (Daft, 2010).

Findings also indicate that effective school leadership is described as involving a set of attributes including

effective communication, collaboration, shared decision-making, ethical and professional integrity, offering guidance, and role modeling. Participants also stress that successful leadership requires patience and composure. The school leader's efforts, however, might be impeded by the contextual challenges and constraints of their schools. Such challenges reflect the demanding nature of school leadership. Managing relationships and lack of collaboration are highlighted as a key challenge faced by the school leader. Maintaining positive relationships with followers is difficult since it does not only require good relationship and communication skills; it takes time, and it requires fairness and regular interaction with employees, which are difficult to achieve when leaders face time limits or a large number of employees (Martin *et al.*, 2016). Engaging Stakeholders is another challenge that can impede the leader's efforts. As highlighted earlier, leadership is not a personal activity. It is instead a collaborative process that requires stakeholders' engagement. Moreover, Work Overload is another difficult aspect of school leadership. With too many tasks to handle do, the school principal will naturally spend time managing than leading the school. Excessive management but insufficient leadership is a characteristic of failing organizations. A balance between management and leadership is essential for the success of any organization (Bennis & Nanus, 2003). The challenge of Achieving Educational Success is the direct and natural result of excessive management, which might be effective in handling day-to-day operations but does not necessarily lead to achieving the school goals (Bennis & Nanus, 2003). In addition, achieving the school's expectations depends on the collective efforts of the leadership and all stakeholders (Martin *et al.*, 2016). Thus, the less stakeholders are engaged in achieving the school's objectives, the less effective the school leader's efforts. Dealing with unqualified or difficult staff is another difficulty of the school leader's job. Applying the Law, as a challenge, is related to the dilemma school leaders face when responding to employee misconduct. While employing leniency might be adopted instead of punishment or following legal procedures, such a response might work in certain situation by might also encourage more misconduct (Liu *et al.*, 2024).

As implications of these findings, the study suggests that training programs offered to principals should focus on better understanding the school context. Principals need specialized leadership training that takes into account the unique context of Moroccan public schools. Such training should focus on communication and relationship-building skills, teamwork and collaboration techniques, conflict resolution and stakeholder management, and other attributes identified in this study. Training should also pair new principals with those who have more experience and a deeper understanding of their school context. In addition, the Ministry of Education needs to offer resources for managing authentic challenging situations with staff and stakeholders. Heavy workload is also highlighted as a main challenge. To address this, the

ministry is recommended to reduce administrative tasks and provide more administrative staff to allow principals to focus more on their leadership roles. Further, school principals cannot improve the school outcomes without the engagement of the school staff and external stakeholders. Thus, this study recommends that the ministry need to develop programs to encourage parent and community involvement at schools and promote strong school-community partnerships.

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