

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL ™

INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

Towards best practices in school-based promotion processes: A case study of principal selection

by

Sibonelo Mthiyane
(224024338)

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Supervisor: Professor I. Naicker
Date Submitted: June 2026

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This dissertation is submitted with my approval.



Professor Inbanathan Naicker

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my son, Lethokuhle Mthiyane. Two months after I commenced this program, he developed kidney failure. During that time, it was difficult to balance work, study, and caregiving. It was sometimes difficult to concentrate and come up with ideas. I almost quit my studies, but his strength and courage encouraged me to keep going and finish this qualification.

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ABSTRACT

In KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), the school-based principal promotion processes (SBPPP) are often criticised for irregularities such as bias, favouritism, and political involvement. The study explored the best practices that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) can implement in the processes of selecting the school principal. The purposes were to identify the best selection methods that can be adopted at each stage to improve fairness and transparency and to recommend policy reforms necessary to strengthen ethical practices in the appointment of school principals. The study applied System Thinking Theory by Von Bertalanffy (1968) and Multiple Ethical Paradigm Theory by Starratt (1991). The study employed a qualitative approach grounded in the interpretivist paradigm. The SBPPP was studied using a case study methodology. I selected four school principals as participants for the study from four conveniently located public schools under King Cetshwayo District using a purposive sampling approach. The data for the research were obtained through semi-structured interviews and Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document analysis. Findings showed that the transition from manual to digital application processes is a system improvement aimed at minimising human bias. It was also shown that the availability of laptops and smartphones in the interview rooms increases the probability of the panelists engaging in unethical activity by sharing the questions. The study concludes that the minimum qualifications for principals are insufficient to address the complexities of the role. Therefore, it was suggested that the minimum qualifications for principals be improved to an honours or postgraduate diploma in educational leadership and management to align with the role. The study is important to the DBE because it illustrates how technology can be used as a moral tool to combat corruption in the SBPPP of the KwaZulu-Natal province.

Keywords: Transparency, fairness, ethical leadership, selection processes, school principal

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACE:SL	Advanced Certificate in Education: School Leadership
CBE	Competency-based evaluations
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DSP	Digital Selection Procedures
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
MEPT	Multiple Ethical Paradigm Theory
NDP	National Development Plan
PAM	Personnel Administrative Measures
SACE	South African Council for Educators
SASA	South African Schools Act
SBPPP	School-Based Principal Promotion Processes
SGB	School Governing Body
SJT	Situational Judgement Tests
STT	Systems Thinking Theory

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Selecting the right school principals is one of the most important decisions in the Department of Basic Education (DBE), as it directly affects the success and stability of schools. Research indicates that school principals play a key role in shaping school culture, improving academic performance, fostering professional development, and ensuring smooth operations (Leithwood et al., 2020). In consideration of this, Mbokazi et al. (2022) emphasise that adhering to clear and fair promotion criteria is essential to maintaining integrity and social justice in the selection process. Similarly, Stronge and Xu (2021) contend that a well-structured and ethical recruitment process is vital for ensuring the appointment of capable and effective leaders. However, despite the emphasis on fair and ethical selection, the process in South Africa often faces challenges such as inconsistencies, biased appointments, and unethical practices (Rammbuda et al., 2023). To ensure fairness, transparency, ethical leadership, and quality education, it is important to regularly review and improve the criteria and processes used in the selection of school principals.

This chapter begins by introducing the background of the study and the research problem it aims to address. It then presents the rationale, explaining the reasons behind conducting the research. The significance of the study is also discussed, highlighting its contribution to existing knowledge and its relevance to various stakeholders. Furthermore, the chapter outlines the main research question along with the sub-research questions that guide the study. To ensure clarity, key concepts used in the research are explained. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a brief overview of the organisation of the study.

1.2 Background of the Study

Leading a school in the 21st century is like steering a ship through unpredictable waters. The journey involves managing multiple responsibilities, such as scheduling, reporting, and building strong relationships with parents and the community, as well as handling unexpected crises and conflicts involving both learners and teachers (Naidoo, 2019). These responsibilities often require principals to navigate complex situations and make quick yet thoughtful decisions in ever-changing conditions. Recognising the need for stronger leadership, the National

Development Plan (NDP) 2030 mapped out a strategy for improvement, focusing on three main areas. These include reforming the principal selection process to attract highly qualified and capable leaders, strengthening performance evaluation systems, and giving more powers to school principals. To support this, Bush et al. (2019) stress the need for specialised training and development for school principals as a key focus in education. For the past decade, this issue has sparked ongoing debate among educational leaders (Naidoo, 2019).

Focusing on experience rather than leadership qualifications in selecting South African principals prompts a robust discussion about their readiness for effective leadership. Current policies, such as the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM), state that a teacher needs seven years of actual teaching experience and a three or four-year teaching qualification to become a principal (Mopp, 2022). These policies do not mandate formal training in school leadership and management to advance to the role of school principal (Ramrathan et al., 2021). Khumalo and Serpa (2021) argue that principals should possess management qualifications to prepare them for the responsibilities of leading a school. Leithwood et al. (2020) agree that a teacher with many years of classroom experience may lack the leadership skills needed to run a school effectively. Mopp (2022) further asserts that a level one educator should not be considered for principal positions. Adding to this, Wills (2015) suggests that the selection process should include competency-based testing to ensure that only the most capable candidates are chosen. To refresh the process of selecting principals, it is important to rethink how we choose principals with the right skills to lead successfully.

A range of laws regulates the fairness of the promotion process. These include the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act, 108 of 1996*, which guarantees fairness in employment; the *Labour Relations Act, 66 of 1995*, which protects employees' rights; the *Employment Equity Act, 55 of 1998*, which prevents discrimination; the *South African Schools Act, 84 of 1996*, which gives School Governing Bodies (SGB) the power to recommend principals; and the *Promotion of Administrative Justice Act, 3 of 2000,* which ensures fairness in public appointments (Rammbuda & Arko-Achemfuor, 2024). Despite the availability of the laws that guide fairness, transparency, and ethical appointment, the South African system is failing. Many SGB members lack the knowledge or skills to select the best candidates, making them vulnerable for external influence (Nxumalo et al., 2021). Instead of prioritising leadership ability, some SGBs make decisions based on personal connections or political pressure

(Khumalo & Serpa, 2021). Dube and Tsotetsi (2020) argue that having an independent panel oversee the principal selection process would greatly minimise external influence.

1.3 Research problem

In South Africa, the selection processes of school principals are criticised for irregularities. Research indicates that the processes of selecting school principals are often compromised by favouritism, bias, unfairness, political influence, and inconsistency (Kanwetuu et al., 2020). Such flawed promotion practices can have serious consequences, leading to decreased staff morale, reduced productivity, disciplinary issues, and increased absenteeism as employees respond with disengagement or resistance (Heinrich, 2019). This affects not only school management but also the quality of education and fairness in the South African education system.

While research has focused extensively on school-based promotion recruitment, there is limited attention on standardised processes of selecting the school principal and criteria that promote best practices. Rammbuda and Arko-Achemfuor (2024) emphasise the need to reform promotion requirements to promote fairness, equity, and quality education. Similarly, Makhoba (2018) states that the allocation of positions should be guided by principles of fairness and transparency. Mopp (2022) recommends a secure digital system to track applications and provide instant feedback, ensuring a more equitable process.

Given the research problem above, this study focuses on identifying and analysing best practices that the Department of Basic Education can implement to ensure a transparent, fair, and ethical process of selecting school principal that leads to the appointment of competent school leaders. The purposes are to identify the best selection methods that can be integrated at each stage to improve fairness and transparency and to explore policy reforms necessary to strengthen ethical leadership in the appointment of school principals.

1.4 Rationale for the study

The rationale for this study is presented from two perspectives: theoretical and professional.

1.4.1 Theoretical justification

The process of selecting school principals in South Africa has been a long-standing issue due to challenges like bias, lack of transparency, and political interference. Internationally, Walker

and Kwan (2012) highlight that the selection of principals is heavily influenced by the composition of the interview panel, where the experience and expertise of the members are key to the effectiveness of processes. However, this call is not consistently applied in South Africa, where Nxumalo et al. (2021) point out that selection panels are often inconsistent and biased, leading to unfair appointments. Moreover, Mngomezulu et al. (2021) draw attention to a concerning gap in the awareness of SGB members regarding the qualities needed by school principals for effective leadership. Khumalo and Serpa (2021) further highlight that political interference damages the fairness of the process and affects leadership quality.

Maringe (2021) also notes that principals are often chosen for their experience rather than their ability to lead, which raises concerns about their effectiveness. Naidoo (2019) suggests that principals should receive proper training to handle the challenges of modern education. Critics, including Rammbuda and Arko-Achemfuor (2024), agree that policy reforms are needed to improve fairness and transparency in the selection process. Despite extensive research on the appointments of school principal, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the specific selection processes followed in South Africa. I have not found a study that explores best practices that the DBE can implement to ensure the appointment of transparent, fair, and ethical leaders. My study seeks to fill this important gap in the literature.

1.4.2 Professional justification

At the time of the study, the researcher was employed as an educator at a public school in KwaZulu-Natal province, which provided direct professional exposure to school-based promotion processes. The reason I am doing this study is based on increasing concerns for integrity and fairness in the selection of school principals. My observation shows that some applications disappear mysteriously at the circuit level and are not sent to the schools for sorting and interviews. There has been a rise in the number of circuit-based disputes caused by suspected irregularities within the system. There have also been instances whereby certain candidates evade the normal procedure through submitting their copy of a CV to SGB members just before the shortlisting process to allow the interview committee members to familiarise themselves with the CV of the preferred candidate, thereby influencing the decision-making process. Additionally, selecting co-opted interview panel members based on union affiliation creates bias instead of ensuring fair evaluations. There was an interview in the year 2024, and during my observation, there were leaks of interview questions, with a candidate using WhatsApp to interact with the panelists within the interview premises. Such issues affect the

selection of school principal adversely and in turn, affect school management and education standards. Through this research, I hope to develop best practices that promote greater fairness, transparency, and integrity in the selection process.

1.5 Significance of the study

This study is important for improving school leadership policies by ensuring that the selection of principals is fair and transparent. It provides recommendations for policies that prevent interference, promote ethical decision-making, and ensure that only the most qualified candidates are appointed. The study helps strengthen the education system and aligns with NDP 2030, which calls for strong and ethical leadership in schools. In practice, the study highlights how selecting the right principals improves teaching, student discipline, and academic performance. It stresses the need to train SGB members to ensure that they make informed and ethical choices. Well-trained leaders create a positive school environment, motivate teachers, and improve learning conditions for students.

1.6 Research questions

The research is guided by the following main and sub-research questions:

Main research question:

- What best practices can the Department of Basic Education implement in the process to select the school principal to ensure the appointment of transparent, fair, and ethical leaders who are effective in their roles?

Sub-research questions:

- What selection methods can the Department of Basic Education adopt as best practices at each stage of the process of selecting the school principal in order to promote fairness and transparency?
- What policy reforms are needed to ensure that the process of selecting the school principal promotes the appointment of ethical leaders?

1.7 Definition of key terms

This section will clarify the key terms that will be frequently referred to throughout the study, including school principal, selection processes, transparency and ethical leadership.

1.7.1 School principal

School principals are individuals entrusted with the responsibility of leading educational institutions. Memela and Ramrathan (2022) affirm that a school principal serves as a leader of the entire school community, overseeing administrative responsibilities and supervising both students and staff members. Similarly, Hoerr (2022) describes the principal as the "chief empathy officer," emphasising the importance of building relationships, maintaining high expectations for students, staff, and themselves, and fostering the professional development of all staff members. In this study, school principals are described as key leaders, with a focus on how they are selected through a fair, transparent, and ethical process.

1.7.2 Selection process

In South Africa, the selection process of a school principal starts when a position becomes available due to retirement, resignation, dismissal, or death. The goal of this process is to select a qualified leader who can manage the school well, improve education, and solve challenges (Swanson, 2022). According to Rut (2021), the main steps in this process include submitting applications, screening candidates, conducting interviews, checking references, and making the final appointment by education authorities. My study uses the term "selection process" to describe the steps and procedures followed when appointing a new school principal.

1.7.3 Transparency

Transparency means making information easy to access and understand, ensuring that people know how selection processes work. Greer et al. (2015) explain that transparency helps public officials take responsibility for their decisions and actions. Similarly, Ruvalcaba-Gomez and Renteria (2020) describe transparency as openness, allowing the public to access information and hold leaders accountable. In my study, "transparency" means clearly sharing information about how school principals are selected so everyone understands the criteria, process, and reasons behind the decisions, which builds trust and accountability.

1.7.4 Ethical leadership

Ethical leadership means leading by example, demonstrating moral behaviour, and encouraging others to do the same through communication and decision-making (Brown et al., 2005). Brown and Treviño (2006) highlight three key aspects: the leader's actions, their relationships with others, and their influence as a role model. Naidoo (2012) adds that ethical leadership is about guiding others based on strong values and principles. In this study, ethical leadership

means leading with honesty and fairness. It involves making good decisions, setting a good example, and creating a school environment where trust and respect are important.

1.8 Organisation of the study

This section outlines the structure of the study, explaining what each chapter covers.

Chapter One

This chapter introduces the study by explaining the background and the problem being researched. It explains why this study is important and outlines the main research question and sub-research questions that guide the research. It also defines key concepts related to the best practices in selecting school principals, helping to clarify the focus of the study.

Chapter Two

This chapter provides a detailed review of existing research on the processes of selecting school principals. It explores the main debates and issues in the field and presents the theoretical framework that supports the study, which helps to explain the approach taken in the research.

Chapter Three

This chapter outlines how the study is designed and the methods used to gather and analyse data. The study follows a qualitative approach, using the case study to examine how principals are selected. It explains the methods of data collection and analysis, as well as the ethical considerations and how the study ensures its findings are valid and reliable.

Chapter Four

This chapter focuses on analysing the collected data through semi-structured interviews and document analyses. It uses thematic analysis, following a six-step process that includes becoming familiar with the data, coding it, identifying themes, and then analysing and writing up the findings.

Chapter Five

The final chapter summarises the study, highlighting the key findings. It provides recommendations based on the results, offering practical advice for improving the process of selecting the school principal to make it more transparent, fair, and effective.

1.9 Conclusion

This chapter serves as the introduction to the study. It provides the background and rationale for the study, outlining the significance of the research. The chapter also presents the research problem and explains the main and sub-research questions. Additionally, this chapter defines important terms and outlines the structure of the study. The key learnings highlight international research that emphasises the need for trained selection panels and principal appointments based on competence. In contrast, South African practices are often inconsistent, made worse by the absence of a required leadership qualification for principal appointments.

The next chapter will review related literature on the process of selecting the school principal, the main debates and issues on the processes of selecting the school principal, and the theoretical framework guiding these processes.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter introduced this study by explaining the research problem, the background of the study, its significance, providing the main and sub-research questions, and defining the key concepts in this study. This chapter critically reviews research on best practices in school-based promotion processes, especially the selection of the principal. The purpose of the chapter is to establish what is known, identify gaps or conflicts, and justify the study's relevance to that knowledge. This chapter has two parts: Section A and Section B. In Section A, I review school principal selection best practices. I relate significant literature arguments and connect them to the focus and the purpose of this study. The theoretical background underpinning the study is in Section B. The two theories that guide this research are systems thinking theory and multiple ethical paradigm theory.

SECTION A: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.2 Best principal selection methods that promote fairness and transparency

To gain an in-depth understanding of the school-based principal promotion processes (SBPPP), this study reviewed existing literature. The recurring debates in the literature are as follows: an overview of the principal selection process, the role of the digital selection procedure in the principal selection process, best practices for principal selection, the use of assessment centres in principal selection, competency-based evaluation in the principal selection, and the application of structured and unstructured interviews. The following section presents an in-depth discussion of each theme.

2.2.1 Overview of the principal selection process

A fair and transparent principal selection process is essential for securing effective school leadership. According to Judijanto et al. (2025), the selection process is the key element of human resources, ensuring that employees who fit the strategic needs and goals are hired. Holladay et al. (2023) suggest selection steps such as workshops for panel members, thorough evaluation of candidates, structured interviews, and mentoring after appointment. However, the selection processes in the South African education system fall short of these steps, even though

Holladay et al. (2023) reveal that they promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and leadership effectiveness. With this in mind, Evarist et al. (2025) recommend taking gender into consideration when selecting talented workers and warn against favouring men. In the view of Shah et al. (2025), employees working closely with executive staff are often considered first for promotional opportunities. Khumalo and Serpa (2021) note that union interference and power structures influence school-based appointments in South Africa. To limit this, Judijanto et al. (2025) recommend open and transparent communication throughout the selection process. This process improves honesty, integrity, and infuses professionalism in the selection process.

Selection criteria is another area of concern. Sholeh et al. (2023) argue that selection tools should be grounded in professional standards to ensure objective and inclusive decision-making. In the view of Choi et al. (2024), many educational systems are still comfortable using traditional selection methods such as unstructured interviews and screenings of curriculum vitae (CV), which often fail to capture the required leadership skills from a potential candidate. According to Bazana and Reddy (2021), when formulating job requirements, person-environment fit should be considered to hire an individual with skills, abilities, and experience to match the environment. However, Van Iddekinge et al. (2023) caution against the misuse of "cultural fit" as a subjective tool that can legitimise bias. Similarly, Weiner et al. (2022) show how such vague criteria have been weaponised to exclude highly qualified candidates, particularly Black women, thereby reproducing systemic inequalities within school leadership pipelines.

Another issue concerns the emphasis placed on conventional leadership attributes during evaluation. The findings of Mukhtar et al. (2021) point out that members of the panel often fail to assess candidates fairly, the ones that bring transformation, adapt to the environment, and develop staff; instead, they reward conformity. Edwards et al. (2023) recommend leadership frameworks that support community engagement and inclusivity to promote diversity in South Africa. Khumalo and Serpa (2021) found concerns such as political interference, nepotism, and poor adherence to the policy that remain common, although provinces practice this differently. These actions do not improve education systems; instead, they discourage capable candidates from applying for senior positions. For sustainable educational reform, principal appointments must reflect both professional merit and systemic fairness.

2.2.2 The role of the digital selection procedure in the principal selection process

Digital Selection Procedures (DSPs) improve fairness, transparency, and trust in the selection processes. DSP can validate candidates' qualifications and allow candidates to track applications and plan interview sessions (Nikolaou, 2021). This frees up hiring committees to choose the best candidate. Nikolaou (2021) adds that DSP records each step of the process, which enhances accountability and reduces unfair tactics. DSP makes it easy to utilise uniform criteria and scoring, which reduces personal bias and promotes merit-based decisions (Nikolaou, 2021). Further to this, Woods et al. (2020) argue that DSP can overcome these concerns by ensuring fair assessment of all candidates. In addition, Nikolaou (2021) reveals that DSP encourages objectivity and can rebuild trust in school leader selection. Moreover, Woods et al. (2020) emphasise that effective implementation of DSP provides all candidates a fair chance.

DSP should be applied carefully in areas with limited access to the internet. Woods et al. (2020) reveal that urban areas with reliable internet and modern devices frequently use these tools. On the other hand, rural and underprivileged areas often struggle with limited internet, technological skills, and lack of equipment. These challenges give candidates in urban areas an advantage, allowing them to process applications more easily than candidates from rural or underprivileged areas. Similarly, Baule et al. (2024) also argue that technology cannot eliminate long-standing inequality; instead, lack of digital access may exclude some capable leaders. In the view of Baule et al. (2024), a hybrid strategy can be a solution, where DSP is used for screening, followed by face-to-face interviews, leadership scenarios, and community input to fully assess candidates. Furthermore, Baule et al. (2024) emphasise that numbers and digital data may overlook emotional intelligence, ethics, and experience. On the other hand, Asiimwe (2023) advocates for the human side of leadership selection, as school principals in South Africa require moral values and community engagement. To promote DSP, Baule et al. (2024) suggest improvements in digital access in rural areas, training of teachers, and reliable internet connections. Baule et al. (2024) further note that such support ensures a fair selection process and identifies leaders who understand and reflect community demands. The literature recommends a balanced strategy that harnesses technology's strengths while emphasising human connection.

2.2.3 Best practices for principal selection

Principals' functions have evolved during the past two decades. The role of the principal now demands candidates to have various leadership skills, not only administrative skills or years of teaching experience. According to Arastaman et al. (2025), principals today must be visionary, strategic, and inclusive to adapt to their community needs. In addition, Bush (2022) claims that successful leaders should possess skills such as emotional intelligence, ethics, and interpersonal skills. To locate individuals who share these principles, Van Iddekinge et al. (2023) propose including teachers, parents, school boards, and community leaders in the selection process. Bush (2022) draws inspiration from Finland and Singapore, where long-term planning and leadership development frameworks prioritise innovation and transformation over academic qualifications. Further to this, Bush (2022) stated that such systems seek equality and diversity leaders for schools.

Even good selection systems have flaws. According to Potočnik et al. (2021), unconscious prejudice can lead to decision-making that excludes qualified individuals who do not fit dominant leadership profiles. In addition, Taylor et al. (2023) claim that bias limits diversity in school leadership management and new ideas. Building on this, Baule et al. (2024) recommend combining leadership and practical simulations to assess applicants' real-world problem-solving skills. Context-specific leadership demands fairness and adaptability. Potočnik et al. (2021) suggest that rigorous evaluation systems may ignore culturally responsive or community-based school leaders. Ubuntu-based leadership promotes shared accountability, collective well-being, and human dignity in South Africa (Asiimwe, 2023). Ubuntu leadership promotes societal peace in culturally varied situations by emphasising unity over individual power. To ensure a diverse leadership staff in South Africa, Weiner et al. (2022) recommend investing in historically marginalised candidates, notably women and black professionals. This balanced approach places importance on education systems to consider culture, curriculum needs for the school, the competencies that match the environment, and the selection processes fairly to allow effective leadership.

2.2.4 Assessment centres in the principal selection

Assessment centres let applicants exhibit their skills in real-world situations. Potočnik et al. (2021) reveal that assessment centres test all candidates fairly by going through the same responsibilities, such as conducting meetings and making ethical decisions. Examiners assess candidates' practice with these tasks. Well-structured, unambiguous scoring rubrics and expert

assessors make this technique fair for all candidates (Potočnik et al., 2021). For fair and transparent principal selection, South Africa needs this to limit bias from personal connections, such as nepotism and union affiliations. In favour of this, Van Iddekinge et al. (2023) say assessment centres reduce bias by assessing applicants' behaviours above subjective evaluations. Assessment centres have considerable drawbacks. Van Iddekinge et al. (2023) reveal that assessment centres that do not reflect local school needs may be unfair. For example, a school in urban areas may evaluate rural applicants on activities that require usage of modern technology or higher budgets, which may disadvantage them. According to Van Iddekinge et al. (2023), mismatches between tasks and daily situations can lower applicants' results, showing that standardised tasks may unintentionally increase systemic differences. Therefore, non-localised assessments may miss contextually capable leaders.

Effective school leadership includes ethics and character beyond operations. Edwards et al. (2023) recommend empathy, integrity, and community involvement for school leaders. These values are important for South African principals as they face complicated socio-political concerns. Singapore and Canada evaluate principals on community participation and ethical leadership (Faruk, 2024). These systems reward ethical, efficient, and socially responsible management. Asiimwe (2023) recommends Ubuntu in leadership assessments in South Africa. Ubuntu, an African ideology of respect, collaborative accountability, and shared leadership, can measure school leadership potential. Van Iddekinge et al. (2023) recommend scenario-based assessments for assessment centres that manage staff disagreements and community protests. They believe local, culturally appropriate tests find ethical, capable, and community-connected school leaders. This research will explore whether assessment centres in South Africa, if implemented, can meet these needs and improve the selection of principals.

2.2.5 Competency-based evaluations in principal selection

Competency-based evaluations (CBE) are used in the selection process. This method evaluates instructional leadership, change management, strategic decision-making, and interpersonal collaboration (Van Iddekinge et al., 2023). Arastaman et al. (2025) claim that applying well-defined criteria routinely makes the process more professional and equitable. This systematic approach limits bias and improves openness, which is needed in the South African education system, where unions and personal interests have negatively impacted principal selections. Van Iddekinge et al. (2023) highlight that qualified assessors and uniform instruments ensure applicant fairness.

The application of CBE should consider school needs and conditions. Asiimwe (2023) found that school culture and socioeconomic issues impact effective leadership. Furthermore, the research by Edwards et al. (2023) reveals that cultural background, emotional intelligence, and kindness are important for trust and ethical school surroundings. Maringe (2021) also stresses the importance of moral purpose in leadership, which conventional measures may not reflect. Due to growing workloads, policy pressure, and weak support systems, Arastaman et al. (2025) found that experienced educators often decline leadership posts. This trend limits the pool of qualified applicants, increasing the requirement for selection systems that attract and reliably identify potential leaders. Thus, leadership is both a job and a calling to serve the school community. Potočnik et al. (2021) suggest incorporating community feedback, reflective narratives, and scenario-based leadership simulations to improve CBE. These tools examine how candidates handle complicated situations, create relationships, and handle school challenges. Maringe (2021) found that principal selection requires technical and relational knowledge due to South Africa's diverse educational contexts. Potočnik et al. (2021) advocate for various methods for thorough assessment of candidates ready for leadership roles. This balanced approach assesses competencies, cultural background, and personal experiences, which assist the school in appointing a capable candidate.

2.2.6 The application of structured and unstructured interviews in principal selection

Principal selection is vital to education. The effectiveness and fairness of the interview process are dependent on the interview design. Structured interviews increase reliability, impartiality, and validity (Van Iddekinge et al., 2023). According to Potočnik et al. (2021), job analysis should be used to develop questions and clear rating scales and a diverse panel for interviews to eliminate bias and ensure fairness. Structured interviews boost trust and selection consistency, but Van Iddekinge et al. (2023) warn against too-structured interviews, as this may hide a candidate's personality and leadership style.

Unstructured interviews expose candidates' values and experience, but they are risky. Poorly conducted unstructured interviews might lead to inconsistent results and personal bias (Van Iddekinge et al., 2023). With the help of technology, interviewing processes have improved, as Potočnik et al. (2021) discovered that pre-recorded, asynchronous video interviews offer convenience and standardisation. Many candidates feel disconnected during these interviews due to a lack of real-time connection. To improve this, Potočnik et al. (2021) propose a hybrid

interview model, a fairly designed assessment method that allows candidates to face similar questions, candidates to reflect on personal experiences, and the panel to easily capture the candidate's leadership style. In addition, Taylor et al. (2023) suggest capacity building for panel members to eliminate unconscious bias, especially when dealing with open-ended responses.

2.3 POLICY REFORMS IN THE SELECTION OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

The literature was studied for policy improvements to appoint ethical school principals. The principal selection process should be fair and consistent and pick ethical leaders in character and practice. Next, I discuss in detail the following: ethical school principal leadership, merit-based appointments, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles, gamified selection, and professionalisation of principalship in South Africa.

2.3.1 Ethical leadership in the selection of school principals

The necessity of ethical leadership in the selection of school principals is becoming increasingly pressing, as the responsibilities of principals now encompass moral guidance and also administrative responsibilities. Ethical leadership builds trust and equity in the school community through honesty and strong morals (Portillo and Mancera-Valencia, 2021). However, traditional recruitment methods often value managerial skills over ethics. Bush (2022) recommends school leaders who understand ethics, accountability, and transparency to sustain educational institutions. Portillo and Mancera-Valencia (2021) warn that unethical recruitment may lead to leaders who harm the school's reputation and well-being. Therefore, ethics must be the top priority when choosing leaders. Further to this, Khumalo and Serpa (2021) point out that panel members often rely on personal opinions, which promote favouritism and bias. In consideration of this, Taylor et al. (2023) recommend situational judgment questions to fairly capture candidate competencies and promote transparency in the process.

Ethical employment practices are a concern outside of education. According to Portillo and Mancera-Valencia (2021), several sectors still use unethical recruitment techniques, including age or appearance discrimination and psychological testing. They also state that talent should not be valued over social status or connections in hiring. Maringe (2021) also notes that implicit bias can influence decisions even when people think they are objective. This emphasises the necessity of fair and consistent methods to reduce biases and preconceptions. In endorsing this

view, Portillo and Mancera-Valencia (2021) stress the importance of ethical hiring to prevent unfair advantage. School leaders have ethical duties outside their employment. It requires mentorship, introspection, and institutional support. In the view of Portillo and Mancera-Valencia (2021), good leaders need mentorship support to maintain an ethical leadership backbone. In support, Edwards et al. (2023) agree that ethical leadership assists in creating inclusive and respectful school settings. They also claim that shared values and self-awareness underpin this leadership, which builds respectful and strong communities.

Professional development and hiring still neglect leadership ethics. Maringe (2021) notes that modern selection methods concentrate on management or technical skills. In agreement, Edwards et al. (2023) add that ethical leadership requires training and encouragement. Further to this, Edwards et al. (2023) recommend integrating ethics throughout leadership development from recruiting to training. They further recommend ethics sessions, leadership mentoring, and clear rules to help executives stay accountable. Schools must follow ethical recruitment and development practices to solve today's complex issues. Only then can education systems hire and retain leaders with honesty, impartiality, and the fortitude to follow the law.

2.3.2 Merit-based appointments

Meritocracy allows equal competition. This method maintains that leadership positions should be based on talents, credentials, and accomplishments, not gender, race, family background, or personal connections (Steed et al., 2020). School principals should be selected transparently based on teaching experience, leadership abilities, and academic success. Meritocracy supporters believe fair selection methods will produce the finest candidates through talent and hard work (Steed et al., 2020). This theory suggests that merit-based school leadership selection is the fairest and increases education leadership equity. Applying meritocracy is difficult sometimes. Transparent selection may seem fair and improve applicant performance; however, Mukhtar et al. (2021) found that not everyone benefits. Further to this, Mukhtar et al. (2021) argue that transparency assists with gender-neutral tasks like planning but disadvantages women in leadership, where stereotypes remain. Even fair systems can disguise biases, making meritocracy tougher. Moreover, Mukhtar et al. (2021) emphasise that rigid selection techniques can limit applicants' leadership and reduce their genuine talents.

Critics of meritocracy say it assumes everyone starts the same, which is impossible. Steed et al. (2020) argue that emphasising effort and talent may cause early judgment and inequity. This

can build an unfair educational system that advantages those with greater support, education, and social networks. Steed et al. (2020) say meritocracy ignores social and economic barriers to actual competitiveness. This indicates that neutral policies can benefit the wealthy, thereby undermining fairness. According to Steed et al. (2020), internal school candidates generally get leadership posts faster than equally or more competent outsiders. People who "fit" the school culture are preferred, a phenomenon called "cloning." This may appear like a continuity plan, but it goes against the idea that leadership should be meritocratic. Steed et al. (2020) suggest that social or personal-fit decision-makers may prioritise personality over competence. This shows how merit definitions can alter, making selection less objective. These findings show that meritocracy theory and practice differ. Fairness in school leadership is appealing, but social, cultural, and practical factors make it harder to implement.

2.3.3 The integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion principles

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are vital in the appointment of candidates. Equal treatment of applicants does not always lead to fairness (Van Iddekinge et al., 2023). Principal candidates from poor and rural communities generally lack leadership empowerment opportunities. Faruk (2024) points out that justice implies helping those left behind so that all candidates can succeed. Furthermore, inclusive and equitable methods strengthen and support schools. Faruk (2024) adds that diversity includes gender, age, race, and disability. Therefore, appointing school principals fairly, calls for the invitation of candidates from diverse backgrounds. Potočnik et al. (2021) recommend procedural justice, which suggests that fairness be displayed consistently in all stages of the selection process. They say transparency creates confidence in schools and communities. Potočnik et al. (2021) believe that fairness is not a waste of effort. Instead, Khumalo and Serpa (2021) claim that it prevents corruption, favouritism, and political influence, making the process more ethical.

There is a lot we can learn from other fields on how to practice fairness and diversity. Faruk (2024) found that Indonesian government-owned enterprises still struggle to place women and minorities in senior roles. In support, Weiner et al. (2022) warn that lack of diverse voices in schools can affect inclusivity. Faruk (2024) asserts that good appointments, training support, and a healthy environment can increase learner outcomes. These data show that what works in other industries can improve the selection of school principals. Asiimwe (2023) adds that strong leaders that are qualified on paper can lead change, incorporate others, and engage with communities. Faruk (2024) agrees and clarifies that all candidates should be treated equally

but recognised for their diverse strengths. Given this, South African schools must strengthen school governing body training, scoring transparency, and community engagement.

Selection panel members also matter. Taylor et al. (2023) believe that fair decisions can be made through diverse panels. On the other hand, Faruk (2024) argues that diverse panels alone are not enough without necessary training. According to Van Iddekinge et al. (2023), some panellists may have less capacity to influence judgments. Faruk (2024) suggests training panellists on fairness and cultural understanding. In conclusion, research reveals that justice, diversity, equity, and transparency are essential to inclusive primary selection. These values avoid corruption, promote representation, and help schools serve their communities.

2.3.4 Gamified selection

Gamified assessments ensure ethical practice in the selection process. These methods add narratives, interactive challenges, and simulations to Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs) and personality tests. According to Wood et al. (2020), gamified assessments include practical situations, making them more engaging and reflective of real-life experiences. In the principal selection process, abilities such as honesty, empathy, adaptability, and leadership capacity will be captured. Van Iddekinge et al. (2023) believe personality-focused and situationally grounded selection tools identify ethical and effective school leaders under pressure. They say virtual simulations teach applicants to handle difficult scenarios. The lack of "correct" answers reduces the chance of programmed or socially desired answers, making game-based solutions more dependable (Van Iddekinge et al., 2023). Gamified assessments minimise stress and boost participation. Video-based SJTs predict interpersonal skills better and are more popular with candidates (Woods et al., 2020). Van Iddekinge et al. (2023) suggest candidates' video statements are more spontaneous and genuine than written ones.

Authenticity and fairness issues exist. Gamified examinations may not assess leadership (Van Iddekinge et al., 2023), as testing cognitive reasoning may replace accountability. SJTs evaluate wide judgment, not leadership. According to Potočnik et al. (2021), gamified technology may unintentionally penalise women or rookie gamers, emphasising systemic bias. Clear policies must guide gamified assessment design and implementation to overcome these restrictions. Potočnik et al. (2021) recommend schools clarify the aim and use of these instruments for transparency. Schools can uncover ethical, emotionally intelligent, and adaptive leaders with gamified assessments, especially video-based SJTs. Van Iddekinge et al.

(2023) suggest gamifying and using traditional methods to improve forecast accuracy and candidate engagement. With smart design and inclusive practice, gamification can improve main selection.

2.3.5 The professionalisation of principalship in South Africa

Professionalising the principalship in South Africa is important to ensure that school principals match the competencies, ethical standards, and accountability criteria. This will assist in providing clear criteria for qualified candidates to lead the school, ensuring that the principal selection process is equitable and based on competencies in line with national educational goals. Intellectualisation allows critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and reflective practice for the complex and changing educational environment. Kokanović and Opić (2021) suggest that effective school principals possess talents like instructional leadership, policy interpretation, strategic planning, and ethical governance. England, the US, New Zealand, Australia, Singapore, and Canada require a license, structured training, and leadership criteria for school principals (Arastaman et al., 2025). Leadership, trust, and student performance improve with these strategies.

Professional and intellectual development for school administrators is still lacking in South Africa. Edwards et al. (2023) claim that South African school principals require systematic ethics and reflective practice training, not just teaching experience. According to Kokanović and Opić (2021), countries with required leadership certification programs have greater school governance and principal responsibility. Such developments suggest professionalising leadership can improve it. Honest, fair, helpful, and learning principals are needed. Educational professionalism requires lifelong ethical and revolutionary leadership (Jarbandhan, 2022). Principals must manage institutions, encourage staff, involve communities, and influence education as moral and intellectual leaders.

Lifelong learning and career progression are international priorities. The European Commission and Council of the EU recommend integrating professional school leadership into education policy due to its intellectual and contextual importance (Kokanović & Opić, 2021). Maringe (2021) describes leadership as the intellectual and professional pursuit of ethical purpose and inclusive vision. Research by Sepuru and Mohlakwana (2020) indicates that many principals in South Africa lack leadership and management skills. The introduction of the Advanced Certificate in Education: School Leadership (ACE:SL) was a plan to enhance

leadership and management in education, but it was only piloted for 2 years, between 2007 and 2009 (Sepuru & Mohlakwana, 2020). Further to this, Memela and Ramrathan (2022) found that culture was one of the major determinants of ACE:SL failure or success. Khanyi and Naidoo (2020) revealed that the ACE:SL program was discontinued, and it was recommended that the program be reworked to fit the criteria of the postgraduate diploma. Thus far, the end of ACE:SL remains the gap that is not addressed, as no leadership and management program has been implemented to prepare new school principals. Edwards et al. (2023) say these programs promote principal strategic leadership, instructional direction, and staff development. Beyond formal qualifications, professional development involves context-sensitive mentorship, peer cooperation, and action learning. South African educational diversity requires a flexible strategy that combines global best practices with local leadership. Jarbandhan (2022) says school principals mentor students intellectually. Principals need training, support, and school system credibility to succeed. Professionalising and intellectualising principalship reduces political and union nomination interference, improves ethical governance, and creates innovative, responsible, and equitable school environments. Remote, underfunded schools without proper training face challenges. According to Kokanović and Opić (2021), non-inclusive leadership training may exclude marginalised leaders. Given these characteristics, this study explores whether South African education policies promote principalship as a professional and intellectual discipline.

SECTION B: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of the study offers guidance for interpreting and analysing the generated data. To understand the school-based principal selection processes, this study adopted systems thinking theory by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) and multiple ethical paradigm theory by Robert Starratt (1991).

2.4 SYSTEMS THINKING THEORY (STT)

The study uses STT to review and make improvements to the school-based promotion processes, particularly principal selection. Next, I discuss the origins of the STT, a description of the STT, the core concepts of the STT, and the relevance of the STT to the study.

2.4.1 Origins of the systems thinking theory

Ludwig von Bertalanffy created General Systems Theory (GST) in 1968, giving STT its basis. Von Bertalanffy opposed mechanistic and reductionist science by arguing that biological,

social, and organisational systems cannot be comprehended by studying individual aspects (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). Instead, the author believed that the links of various components of the system combine to form the entire system. This theoretical argument changed organisational studies and inspired systemic thinking in education and other domains.

2.4.2 Description of the systems thinking theory

STT is mostly used to understand organisational issues that are complicated to solve in the working environment. STT is used in the field of education to understand schools as open systems that maintain complicated internal structures and processes while communicating consistently with their external environments (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). This point of view supports understanding the transfer of people, information, policies, and resources through schools, turning inputs into outputs using feedback loops and interdependent systems. In support, Aguilar-Fernández et al. (2024) claim that this approach focuses on how each part connects with the other and analyses the impact on the environment, instead of dealing with individual parts. To this end, STT provides an analysis of principal selection processes that both affect and are affected by other parts of the school system.

2.4.3 The core concepts of systems thinking theory

The study uses various concepts within STT that link to the study of school-based principal promotion processes. The open and closed systems are one of the key differences in the STT. According to Von Bertalanffy (1968), closed systems operate separately from their environments and maintain a constant condition inside. On the other hand, open systems are always sharing information and resources with their environments. Building on this, Lai and Lin (2017) argue that the exchange process involves acquiring resources (inputs) and exporting products (outputs). In addition, Lai and Lin (2017) add that after receiving raw material, the components of the system work together to process the final products that are then exported to the environment. In schools, the inputs such as policies, learners, teachers, funding, and the expectations from the community are received. These inputs are then converted into processes such as governance, leadership, and teaching to achieve the desired outputs, including learner outcomes, professional development, and community trust. With this in mind, Lunenburg and Ornstein (2020) reveal that the principal selection is a major step in the transformation process in the human resource component, and its success directly affects the leadership capacity that sustains the larger school system.

The idea of subsystems and interdependence is key. Systems can be made of many subsystems that carry out specific tasks and still remain connected and mutually dependent (Lai & Lin, 2017). With this view in mind, the principal selection process cannot be considered as a single component from other subsystems, which include SGB, teacher evaluation, stakeholder involvement, and policy. In addition, Dube and Tsotetsi (2020) argue that if accountability structures are not connected due to political interference, hidden power dynamics may affect fairness and the merit selection process. Therefore, the selection process of school principals is connected with other components of school functionality, and if one subsystem is weak, best practices in the school-based promotion process are compromised. A key concept in the STT is the movement of inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback loops. The nature of this circulation enables systems to self-regulate and respond to evolving environments (Aguilar-Fernández et al., 2024). In the principal selection, inputs may involve applicant experience, qualifications, South African Council for Educators (SACE) registration, policy directives, school needs, and SGB expectations. The inputs go through different stages, such as the formation of an interview committee, sifting, shortlisting, and interviews to produce the output, the appointment of a school principal. Then, the output provides feedback from learner outcomes, community feedback, teacher morale, and views of other stakeholders. According to Lai and Lin (2017), effective feedback loops include finding the errors made in the whole process, ensuring that errors are corrected, improving accountability, and making continuous improvements.

STT converts thoughts into useful instruments for dealing with complicated issues. STT helps users to go beyond specific situations and to discover the structures, trends, and attitudes that cause persistent obstacles (Lai & Lin, 2017). This approach looks at the long-term solutions of the whole system instead of quick-fix signs. For deeper assessment of the recurring events, Monat and Gannon (2015) present major questions that systems thinking asks, such as “Why am I seeing what I see?” Why do events remain the same? Why do events change? This is important to understand the challenges in the school-based promotion processes.

The iceberg model is one of the most powerful tools constructed using STT. This model provides essential terms such as “events,” “patterns,” “system structures,” and “mental model” (Monat & Gannon, 2015). To unpack these terms, Monat and Gannon (2015) describe events as things that may be seen. These may include things such as disputes due to allegations of unfairness and union interference during interviews. Additionally, Monat and Gannon (2015) described patterns as visible events that occur over and over again, and they are caused by

system structures and processes. In the principal selection, the trends that can be repeated are complaints of bias and favouring friends or union members for promotions. Furthermore, system structure refers to the layout and connection of the system (Monat & Gannon, 2015). In the principal selection, these may include unclear promotion criteria and a lack of independent panel members. Moreover, a mental model is described as a belief system that aims to simplify our understanding of the world around us (Monat & Gannon, 2015). These may include loyalty to union members and seniority over merit being accepted if it favours community interests.

2.4.4 Relevance of the systems thinking theory to the study

The STT is essential to this study because it offers an extensive viewpoint on the school-based principal promotion processes as part of the wider, adaptive school system, as opposed to a single operational system. Schools function as an open system that frequently adapts to government policies, structures of governance, and community demands, and STT indicates how visible and hidden elements in these connections, impact events related to principal promotion. The STT basic concepts, such as open systems, subsystems, interdependence, and feedback loops, indicate how decisions about selecting school principals are affected by other factors, such as employee retention, confidence from stakeholders, and learner achievement. The Iceberg Model, which is directly related to STT, demonstrates how the visible event of a promotion is based on fundamental patterns, structural laws, and cultural beliefs that are usually overlooked. This theory may assist the study to identify the main causes of improper conduct, discover systemic challenges related to informal patronage networks, and offer best practices that target the root causes. In the end, STT combines leadership selection with the vision of boosting the effectiveness of the school, long-term success, and confidence by making sure that the principal selection is in line with broader organisational goals and adaptive reform processes.

2.5 MULTIPLE ETHICAL PARADIGM THEORY (MEPT)

The study uses the MEPT to assist school administrators in evaluating multiple views while making decisions. Next, I discuss the origins of the Multiple Ethical Paradigm Theory (MEPT), the core concepts of the MEPT, and the relevance of the MEPT to the study.

2.5.1 Origins of the MEPT

Robert Starratt founded MEPT in 1991. This philosophy helps school administrators make ethical decisions with care. Starratt (1991) states that the original theory focused on three ethical lenses: care, justice, and critique. Shapiro and Stefkovich added a fourth lens, the ethic of profession, to MEPT in 2001 (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). This inclusion, they say, helps school leaders consider their professional principles and duties. Shapiro and Gross developed the idea in 2005 to provide a more thorough framework for schools to address complicated ethical issues (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). This strategy helps school administrators think thoroughly before making decisions. The ethics of the profession remind leaders to follow professional codes and act professionally. Leaders can think deeply and make balanced ethical decisions by employing all four lenses: care, justice, critique, and profession.

2.5.2 The core concepts of the MEPT

The school administrators must make tough decisions; therefore, the MEPT framework is crucial. The next sections will discuss in detail each of the four ethics, including the ethic of care, the ethic of justice, the ethic of critique, and the ethic of professionalism.

2.5.2.1 The ethic of care

The ethic of care places a strong focus on kindness, compassion, and empathy. Feminist scholars introduced it to move away from rule-based leadership. Starratt (1991) suggests that the ethic of care look at the social and emotional parts of the decisions and affect relationships. In principal selection, panel members should consider the needs of the school community and also be careful about how the appointment affects the school stakeholders. Berges Puyo (2022) suggests a fair and caring choosing procedure based on love, trust, and empowerment. Caring helps establish secure and welcoming schools. Berges Puyo (2022) adds that caring can reduce bias and improve outcomes. Therefore, a caring principal boosts school achievement. However, overemphasising care might reduce accountability. To avoid poor outcomes, care must be matched with justice and accountability. Gross and Shapiro (2004) recommend authorities to question, “Who is favoured by this decision?” Who could be hurt? The long-term effects? Concerns exist about unethical appointments in South Africa (Dube & Tsotetsi, 2020). The ethic of care can help panel members follow moral standards.

2.5.2.2 The ethic of justice

Justice emphasises fairness, equality, and law. According to Gross and Shapiro (2004), the ethic of justice involves fairness and equity for all candidates. Therefore, school administrators that adopt this strategy make judgments properly. In the principal selection, panel members need to ensure that the same criteria are used for all candidates to practice fairness and equity. Taylor et al. (2023) advocate for equal treatment by members of the panel to maintain fairness. This is important for panel members to follow correct guidelines and fair practices from the first step to the last step, the appointment step. Gross and Shapiro (2004) suggested asking these questions to ensure transparent and fair processes: Does a rule or policy apply? Is it used fairly? How should it be applied in this context? However, Potočnik et al. (2021) warn that stringent regulations can lead to unfair results. A qualified candidate may be ignored because they do not meet all paper requirements. Fairness in choosing requires both observing rules and considering how they are used. Fair processes make people more inclined to accept judgements (Potočnik et al., 2021). Justice should also be considered a tool to establish system trust, not merely as a legal duty.

2.5.2.3 The ethic of critique

The ethic of critique pushes school leaders to investigate societal injustices, power dynamics, and unfair institutions in schools and education. This perspective requires leaders to look beyond surface-level fairness to assess the justice of structures and norms (Starratt, 1991). Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) believe that the ethic of critique is crucial when previous injustices have impacted current practices. In South Africa, historical disparities still affect school management and leadership selection. According to Gross and Shapiro (2004), the ethic of critique asks selectors, “Who controls this process?” “Who's heard or ignored?” Weiner et al. (2022) found that hidden preconceptions and social biases influence leadership decisions. Critique highlights issues and encourages change. It urges leaders to fight injustice and promote equity.

This lens and the ethic of caring both preserve the dignity and rights of all people. Critique raises the question of whether current institutions are fair. Without this critical lens, ethical decision-making might become ordinary and ineffective (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Critical reflection can make leadership selection more inclusive. Taylor et al. (2023) recommend training panel members to spot prejudice and structural inequity. This perspective helps to avoid accidentally excluding qualified applicants from different backgrounds. Critical thinking

helps schools become more just and thoughtful. This lens deepens and responsively approaches ethical decision-making when paired with care and justice.

2.5.2.4 Ethics of professionalism

Moral behaviour and respect for institutional values are important in the ethics of professionalism. According to Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), the ethic of professionalism assists leaders to be role models and always serve with respect and honesty and maintain credibility in all educational activities. It emphasises the leader's obligations to the profession and the educational community, building on the other ethical lenses. The selection committee of principals should assess whether candidates comprehend professional duties. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) state that the ethics of a profession comprise loyalty to the school's mission, policy respect, and ethical behaviour under pressure. This perspective emphasises accountability to the law, individuals, and education's ideals and values. The ethic of the profession emphasizes lifelong learning, introspection, and ethical leadership (Gross and Shapiro, 2004), as professional leaders are role models for workers. According to Bush (2022), professional behaviour develops trust among parents, education departments, the community, and inside the school. Applicants must be prepared to uphold both personal and professional ethics. Professionally honest leaders create more moral school environments (Edwards et al., 2023). Unlike the other lenses, the ethic of profession might be difficult to apply. When combined with care, justice, and critique, the ethic of profession makes school principal selection balanced and thoughtful. It ensures choices are fair, considerate, and in line with education's high standards.

2.5.3 The relevance of the MEPT to the study

The MEPT is important to this study because it comprehends that the main selection is a deeply ethical process driven by conflicting values, beliefs, and principles. The idea emphasises how SGB must strike the balance between compliance with laws, credibility of the process, equitable treatment, and professionalism by including four lenses, such as the ethic of care, ethic of justice, ethic of critique, and ethic of professionalism. In the school-based promotion processes, this viewpoint emphasises how outcomes often include clashes between merit-based selection and community loyalty and hidden power structures. This theory promotes open engagements and reflection on ethical blind spots, ensuring that the selection procedures do not accidentally reproduce bias or inequality.

2.6 Theoretical framework coherence

Systems thinking and the Multiple Ethical Paradigm Theory are used to explain principal selection in this study. Systems thinking illustrates how the principal selection process is interconnected. It indicates that choosing a principal is part of a school-wide system. This method shows how decisions affect school culture, performance, and success. The Multiple Ethical Paradigm Theory emphasises selection ethics. It reminds us that choosing a principal involves fairness, care, justice, and professional ethics as well as policies and procedures. This idea highlights morals and humanity in leadership decisions. These two methods create a balanced foundation for principal selection research.

2.7 Conclusion

Best practices in school-based promotion processes for principal selection have been thoroughly reviewed in this chapter. Six themes represent the best principal selection methods for fairness and transparency. An overview of the principal selection process, digital selection procedures, best practices, assessment centres, competency-based evaluation, and structured and unstructured interviews is covered. The research on policy reforms to appoint ethical school principals has been synthesized into five core themes. Ethical school principal leadership**,** merit-based appointment, diversity, equity, and inclusion, gamified selection, and professionalisation of principalship in South Africa are major topics of debate. This study uses Systems Thinking Theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1968) and Multiple Ethical Paradigm (Robert Starratt, 1991) to analyse and interpret the school-based principal selection processes. These theories help the Department of Education evaluate effective selection methods and highlight legislative improvements needed to ethically appoint school leaders.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the review of related literature on SBPPP was articulated. Furthermore, the chapter presented the two theories underpinning the study: the systems thinking theory and the multiple ethical paradigm theory. This chapter focuses on how the research is carried out, the methodologies, instruments, and procedures used, and the purpose is to justify as well as clarify these decisions in order to guarantee that the study is organised, trustworthy, and capable of addressing the research questions. In this chapter, I present the research paradigm, research approach, research methodology, population and sampling, as well as schools and participants. Thereafter, I discuss the research methods, research instruments, and trialling of the research instruments. To conclude the chapter, I present the data analysis approach, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

3.2 Research paradigm

According to Cohen et al. (2018), a paradigm is a collection of established models and guidelines that a group of researchers adopt to examine the problem or phenomenon in an effort to discover a solution. Creswell and Creswell (2018) assert that paradigms function as worldviews, offering an essential viewpoint on the natural world and guiding the researcher's focus and method of investigation. Pretorius (2024) adds that a research paradigm outlines the researcher's values in the study, how they perceive reality, and how they think information may be comprehended.

The manner in which a researcher views epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology in order to find solutions to a phenomenon shapes their paradigm beliefs (Flick, 2022; Killam, 2013). Epistemology is based on the idea that knowledge could potentially be obtained by careful measurement and testing, and exists apart from human perception (Pretorius, 2024). This method assumes that using the correct research instruments allows researchers to accurately capture reality without bias from individual views and other factors. Axiology refers to a researcher's views about what is morally acceptable and useful (Killam, 2013). Axiology encourages researchers to consider the ethical implications of their work, including their personal viewpoints and the influence of what they find on society. Flick (2022) claims that

ontology studies the basis of truth. A realist ontology maintains that the truth is objective, external, and apart from human experience. This viewpoint emphasises that reality is flexible and affected by social, cultural, historical factors, resulting in differences among individuals or groups. Methodology refers to the process of acquiring information and understanding the world in order to allocate power fairly (Killam, 2013).

An interpretative paradigm is an appropriate choice for this study. Interpretivism acknowledges that the truth is created in people's thoughts and influenced by their own surroundings, feelings, beliefs and life experiences rather than being objective and lived histories (Killam, 2013). In the SBPPP, the school culture, district dynamics, stakeholder connections, and individual career paths are just a few of the variables that affect each principal's perspectives and may not be simplified down to statistics or generalised rules. Furthermore, Pretorius (2024) believes in the interpretivist idea that people are the specialists of their own lived experiences, and that useful information may be developed by enabling them to openly express their opinions. Therefore, to get real knowledge into what transpires during the SBPPP, it is essential to provide principals the chance to reflect on, translate and communicate what they have learnt in their own terms. Furthermore, by using an interpretative paradigm, I recognise that my task as a researcher is not independent or neutral, instead my views and knowledge of the school principal's lived experiences will certainly impact how the outcomes are organised and reported. This reflective perspective is fundamental to the interpretative tradition.

3.3 Research approach

There are three recognised methods for conducting research: quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. Mixed method research involves using both qualitative and quantitative research to gain an in-depth knowledge of an area of study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research seeks to understand participants' experiences, traditions, and opinions on a certain subject or situation (Bernard, 2017). On the other hand, quantitative research examines the link between variables, including dependent, independent, and extraneous (Bernard, 2017). A qualitative research approach was utilised in this study. This approach involves lengthy field research, including interviews and observations of individuals and their environments (Bernard, 2017). This is consistent with, Creswell and Poth's (2018) assertion that obtaining this information, requires researchers to conduct interviews with participants at home or place of work, allowing them to share their perspectives and experiences without bias from previous studies. Similarly, Creswell and Creswell (2018) contend that exploratory

procedures are the fundamental basis of qualitative research, in which researchers gradually understand the social phenomena by comparing, evaluating, reproducing, and organising the study project. In addition, Cohen et al. (2018) contend that rather than depending on surveys to acquire data, the researcher uses observation and all of the questions in order to function as an instrument in qualitative research. To extend this discussion, Creswell and Poth (2018) add that qualitative research analysis involves organising data from interviews, observations, and video recordings into themes. Qualitative research is inductive, meaning the researcher does not base their questions, data collection or analysis on prior beliefs. Instead, they allow the collected information to speak for itself and create themes without bias from existing theories (Bernard, 2017). Further to this, Cohen et al. (2018) argue that qualitative research reports are often narrative in style, with the researchers writing in first person, a focus on interpretation, and lengthy quotes from participants. For the purpose of this study, qualitative research was appropriate to gather data from school principals on their lived experiences on SBPPP.

3.4 Research methodology

To effectively implement the goals of research, it is essential to understand various research methodologies and procedures. According to Singh (2022), research methodology refers to the procedures used by researchers for data collection, evidence, analysis, and testing. In agreement, Rashid et al. (2019) emphasise that in research, methodology relates to a plan for doing research within a given paradigm. Phenomenological, ethnographic, narrative, grounded theory, and case studies are among the most utilised qualitative research methodologies (Singh, 2022). In the realm of education, interpretivist researchers have frequently employed a case study technique to get rich, broad views on processes, behaviours, and experiences as they develop in realistic settings (Harrison et al., 2017). For the purpose of this study, a case study methodology was used. A case study is a methodology used by researchers to investigate a specific event, system, procedure, action or people (Harrison et al., 2017; Yin, 2018). On the other hand, Rashid et al. (2019) argue that a case study is a detailed examination of a particular occurrence in a given setting to gather information. In addition, a case study is described as a great approach to gain deep understanding of unique events, viewpoints, or phenomena (Rashid et al., 2019; Yin, 2018).

This study uses a case study technique, which allows for a systematic, in-depth analysis of the SBPPP. A case study is characterised as a thorough examination of a single case or small number of cases in their actual environment, drawing on a variety of evidence to provide a full

understanding of a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). In this study, principal selection in the King Cetshwayo District is the case study examined using four experienced principals who have personally participated in the SBPPP. These principals were specifically chosen due to their insider expertise, having served as either a departmental official or selection panellist in the SBPPP. This insider information offers useful insight into the application of selection criteria, the negotiation of outcomes, and the variables that might affect transparency and fairness. Policy frameworks, SGBs, union involvement, departmental officials, and community settings all have an impact on the SBPPP. These interactions cannot be completely understood in isolation, they must be investigated in their natural settings (Harrison et al., 2017; Rashid et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). The application of the case study strongly connects with the research's interpretive paradigm, which tries to understand how individuals interpret, execute, debate policy and practice in everyday situations. Drawing on the personal experiences of principals, the study explores beyond policy review to discover the practical truths, obstacles, and insights that may influence best practices for fair and transparent principal selection. The case study is a good fit for this research because it offers a thorough analysis of SBPPP, enabling suggestions that are reliable, pertinent, and useful.

3.5 Population and sampling

The study adopts a non-probability purposive sampling technique, with the goal of selecting people with certain features, talents, knowledge or experience to provide rich and diverse data related to the study subject (Cohen et al., 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher identifies what they want to discover and finds people with relevant knowledge and abilities to offer data. I therefore decided to select the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, given that the final appointment of successful candidates is authorised at the provincial level, and I intended to find out how the KZN-SBPPP may be improved in order to recruit ethical leaders. Cohen et al. (2018) assert that qualitative research requires small, focused samples to provide rich, detailed data that may shed light on complicated processes. Given the time needed for multiple interviews and document analysis, four selected respondents provide unique, adequate data depth on SBPPP, having participated as either a selection pannelist or departmental official. The research sites are situated in King Cetshwayo District in the province of KZN, South Africa. The research sites were selected because they were accessible within the time and travel resources available for repeated face-to-face data generation. This is consistent with Creswell and Creswell (2018) highlighting that convenience sampling involves selecting individuals based on their ease of accessibility or geographic proximity. I selected three schools

under the Mthonjaneni circuit and one under the Stanger circuit since they are conveniently located. The schools were selected due to the fact that school principals participated in school-based promotion processes as panel members or department officials. In qualitative research, respondents get selected due to a high level of expertise and being well-informed about a topic of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the selection of four school principals was based on the minimum of a five-year professional experience in the principalship role, willingness to contribute their thoughts, and first-hand experience as a selection pannelist, or a departmental official in the SBPPP. For sampling purposes, this experience was established from the participants' reported roles in the SBPPP, namely their direct involvement as principal-selection panellists or departmental officials rather than participation only in promotion panels for other educator posts.

In this study, the Department of Basic Education's Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) (DBE, 2022) was purposely adopted for the purpose of this research since it defines the rules for the KZN province's school-based principal promotion processes. Cardno (2018) claims that document analysis, which emphasises the systematic review of official documents to better understand how policies govern professional practice, is consistent with using policies as a source of knowledge. The regulations controlling the application, screening, interview committee formation, interviewing, and appointment procedures were developed with a thorough understanding of how SBPPPs are handled in the province of KZN.

3.6 Schools and participants

The names used for the four schools and participants in this section are pseudonyms used to protect their identities and preserve confidentiality.

3.6.1 Nqoboka high school

The school is located in the semi-rural area, under the King Cetshwayo District, KZN province. It is mostly a low-income area, and many parents depend on social grants. The school is classified as quintile 2 and is a no-fee school. The school enrollment is 324 learners in 2025 from grades 8 to 12, and currently has 9 educators, 2 departmental heads, and one principal. Mr. Vumisa (school principal) is a research participant and is over 55 years old, with 17 years of experience in a principalship role. He spent 10 years as a departmental head, 4 years as a post-level 1 educator. Mr. Vumisa holds a Bachelor of Education Honours degree.

3.6.2 Zingelwayo high school

The school is situated in a semi-rural area, under the King Cetshwayo District, KZN province. The school is classified as quintile 3 and has a status of no-fee school, currently it has an enrollment of 307 learners starting from grades 8 to 12. There are nine educators, including two departmental heads and one principal. The school is under-resourced, and located in a low-income area, and the average learner:teacher ratio is approximately 34:1. The principal is a research participant and resides approximately 10 km away from the school. Mr. Phakathi (school principal) is over 55 years old, with 12 years of experience as a principal. He holds a Master of Education in Maths Education.

3.6.3 Nkomose high school

The school is in a deep rural area within the King Cetshwayo District, KZN province. It is classified as quintile 2 and is a no-fee school with an enrollment of 431 learners from grade 8 to 12. There are ten educators, two departmental heads, and one principal. Ms. Jali is a female principal, over 40 years of age, who served for 4 years as a post-level 1 educator, followed by 14 years as a departmental head and 6 years as a school principal. She holds a Bachelor of Education honours in management and leadership.

3.6.4 Khondlo combined school

The school is situated in a small town, under the King Cetshwayo District, KZN province. The school is categorised as a quintile 4, fee-paying school, and it is a well-resourced school, with an enrollment of 306 learners from grade R to grade 9. The school has 20 educators in total, which include 9 state-paid educators, 8 SGB posts, 2 departmental heads, and one principal, resulting in a learner-educator ratio of approximately 15:1. Ms Thusi is a female principal, over 40 years of age, with over 8 years' experience as a school principal. She holds a postgraduate diploma in educational management and leadership.

3.7 Research methods and trialling of the instruments

The study generated data from school principals who participated in the school-based principal promotion processes, either as a panel member or department official. The research methods, the research instruments, and the trialling of the instrument are covered in depth below. The research methods and the trialling of the instruments are covered in depth below.

3.7.1 Research methods

There are multiple ways of generating data in qualitative research. According to Hancock et al. (2021), focus groups, observations, interviews, and document reviews are examples of qualitative research methods that are utilised as data generation instruments to achieve a thorough knowledge of the phenomena in the case study. In this study, I used interviews and document analysis to understand the SBPPP. In the next paragraph, I explain how data generation was achieved.

3.7.1.1 Interviews

A popular approach to obtain data in qualitative research is the interview, and it is conducted face to face by the person conducting the study and the respondent (Bolderston, 2012). Interviews are classified into three categories, including structured, unstructured and semi-structured interviews (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Unstructured interviews involve an interviewer asking open-ended questions and responding to the participant's comments (Qu & Dumay, 2011). On the other hand, structured interviews limit the ability of the interviewer to obtain replies from participants by only asking pre-planned questions (Qu & Dumay, 2011). According to Karatsareas (2022), semi-structured interviews follow the interview schedule but allow the interviewer to ask fewer structured questions and explore themes presented by respondents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to get qualitative feedback from research participants. Interviews were an adaptive and engaging approach to gather data, enabling direct contact with respondents and follow-up on clarifying questions (Karatsareas, 2022). The interviews were conducted face to face at the participants' workplaces, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent before transcription and analysis.

A semi-structured interview was one of the two methods I used to generate data. According to Karatsareas (2022), the researcher uses an interview guide that has been predetermined for semi-structured interviews. As a result, I designed interview questions considering the research topic, and research questions ensuring that the tool being used was appropriate for the study's intended purpose. To create questions for interviews, I studied relevant literature and policies regulating the appointment of educators in the PAM document. The interviewer uses a series of questions to direct the discussion in a semi-structured interview (Adams, 2015). In addition, the participant's answers help the researcher ask more questions than those that were initially planned (Adams, 2015). A semi-structured interview was the best technique for my research,

as it gave me the opportunity to collect more detailed information from respondents. I included probes and clues to ensure that I enable the participant to elaborate further regarding each question, provide examples when appropriate, and clarify their replies. To obtain more information, I interviewed four school principals who previously participated in the SBPPP. Bolderston (2012) suggests having one-on-one interviews with each participant in order to get their perspective of their surroundings.

3.7.1.2 Document analysis

Document analysis is a qualitative research method in which researchers assess and interpret document sources to better understand the phenomena under study and verify research findings (Morgan, 2022). Before conducting the interviews, the researcher analysed the DBE's Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) (2022) to understand the SBPPP. These processes include the application process, screening, shortlisting, interviewing, and appointments of candidates. According to Morgan (2022), researchers should be aware of any knowledge gaps in the documents they are reviewing. Based on this overview, I assembled the data extraction for the sections of the PAM document to be studied, specifically on SBPPP.

The second method of data generation was document analysis. Morgan (2022) suggests that document review might help researchers obtain a better understanding and new perspectives on the issue under investigation. For a thorough understanding of the SBPPP, I examined the PAM document's policy regulating the application procedure, applicant screening, shortlisting, interviewing, and selection of successful applicants. I then created questions that probed the policy to determine if there were any possibilities to improve the policy in order to re-examine the selection of school principals. I left the questions open-ended so that participants could express themselves.

3.7.2 Pilot/Trialing of the instruments

A school principal who was not part of my research study participated in a pilot interview to see if my interview schedule was suitable for the focus and purpose of the research. Pilot interviews are crucial for evaluating the appropriateness of the instruments selected for data gathering in qualitative research (Malmqvist et al., 2019). In addition, Malmqvist et al. (2019) say that the pilot phase allows the researchers to modify their data generating tools as needed before heading out into the field. Furthermore, Malmqvist et al. (2019) state that the first 30 minutes of a face-to-face interview should be spent asking questions and it should not be more

than an hour. However, Bolderston (2012) hinted that the entire procedure, including the introductory phase, providing the participant with the consent document, and summarizing the interview, should take 45 minutes to 1.5 hours. The interview lasted forty-seven (47) minutes, which is rather less than the ninety-minute limit. Through pilot study, I was able to get a sense of how the interviews would proceed and how much time each interview would take. With regard to interpretation of the questions, probes, and cues, the respondent showed that they understood the main questions.

The questions posed were organised well, beginning with basic information about the candidate's duties and history before moving on to more specific questions about the appointment process. While the flow made it easier for the participant to get started, the final question might have been better organised to prevent repetition. The opinion of the respondent appeared to be of a high standard. The participant provided full responses with examples, in keeping with the objective of semi-structured interviews, which is to produce rich, descriptive data (Adams, 2015). However, I came to the realisation that certain follow-up questions are unavoidable and cannot be prepared ahead of time, therefore it would be crucial to listen to the participant and attempt to guide further questions based on their answers. The final question in the document analysis was eliminated since the participant chose not to respond to it, including its probing questions, there was no other question that needed to be modified. In the final interviews I made a few further modifications. To make the probes more understandable and avoid misunderstandings, I utilised more simple probing terminology. Second, I consolidated comparable items to reduce duplication. Finally, I used a more conversational style, including more active listening and follow-up signals, to encourage participants to explain more (Adams, 2015). These changes improved the overall quality and completeness of the data acquired while keeping the participants friendly and following accepted guidelines for qualitative research.

3.8 Data analysis

Once the data has been collected for the study, it should be analysed to see how it relates to the questions being investigated. According to Rashid et al. (2019), research questions serve as a crucial roadmap for examining the data obtained for a case study. Rashid et al. (2019) add that data analysis strategy should be adopted prior to data collection, and knowing the steps in the data analysis process is vital since it raises the quality of the study. There are three ways for analysing data: content analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis (Jaspal, 2020). In

this study, I used a thematic analysis. According to Castleberry and Nolen (2018), thematic analysis entails an in-depth examination of certain themes that share similar concepts. In agreement, Joffe (2011) says thematic analysis identifies patterns in data related to participants' life experiences, attitudes, and viewpoints, allowing for a better understanding of their emotions and behaviour. The six steps that comprise a thematic analysis guide include, getting to know your data; creating preliminary codes; looking for themes; reviewing themes; identifying and characterising themes; creating the report (Joffe, 2011). I began by transcribing the recorded interviews and information gathered from the document for the study's theme analysis. To construct initial codes, I looked for relevant views about school-based principal promotion processes. Thereafter, the codes were broken down into smaller groups, from which new themes were produced. The theoretical framework, literature review, and study goals and objectives specified the topics and concepts, allowing for the indirect development of new perspectives based on the knowledge obtained. Following identification, the themes were evaluated and refined for accuracy and consistency. They were then given particular descriptions and titles that outlined their key points. Finally, participant quotes and analytical discussion were utilised to express the findings, ensuring that the analysis was thorough, credible, and up to the highest standards of qualitative research.

3.9 Trustworthiness

Validating the worth of the data collected is a crucial phase in the research process. Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the quality, credibility, and reliability of the study for readers and users (Alexander, 2019). Adler (2022) emphasised the importance of monitoring and recording research data in a way that ensures its reliability. In addition, Adler (2022) says that the tools and methodologies employed are critical to the reliability of data. On the other hand, Alexander (2019) asserts that human researchers are likely to make mistakes in their interpretations as qualitative research involves interpreting participants' meanings. Therefore, procedures to determine data dependability must be taken to ensure that the meaning is correctly understood. When evaluating the dependability of qualitative research, four factors must be considered: credibility, transferability, reliability, and confirmability (Alexander, 2019).

Credibility refers to how one interacts with study data, such as transcripts and notes (Merriam, 2015). In agreement, Alexander (2019) claims that credibility refers to the validity of study conclusions based on participants' initial responses. In order for the school principals to provide

trustworthy answers, I simplified the questions and made them easier to understand during the interview sessions. Transferability refers to the extent to which the results of qualitative research may be used in different contexts (Alexander, 2019). I took notes while I asked questions, and the information obtained throughout the interview was recorded. The transcribing process was then used to turn the data into text. The researcher may conduct a similar study on the participants and obtain comparable findings to determine whether the data is dependable (Alexander, 2019). Securely storing all documents, including records of interviews that were collected and notes for verification, ensured dependability throughout the data generation process. Confirmability refers to the ability of the researcher to establish that the data represent the participants' opinions and not the researcher's beliefs and viewpoints (Alexander, 2019). In order to make sure my study was confirmable; I checked the transcripts of the recorded conversations with the participants and used direct quotes from them to share my findings. I performed this study four times, involving four different school principals as participants in various schools who had similar experiences and generated related results. These concepts were used in this study to make sure the data collected satisfies the trustworthiness standards set by qualitative research.

3.10 Ethics considerations

There are procedures to follow to guarantee that ethics are maintained because ethical issues are an important issue in qualitative research. According to Israel (2014), research ethics are sets of guiding principles aimed at helping researchers carry out ethically acceptable studies. In addition, Israel (2014) asserts that before, during, and after the study, researchers should abide by the regulations and standards that organisations and institutions specify. In order to conduct research, I obtained ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (see Appendix A, page 76) and permission from the KZN Department of Education (see Appendix B, page 77). I sent a letter to the school principals being interviewed explaining the purpose of the study and requesting them to take part; they agreed to participating in the interviews. I collected data in the field while adhering to ethical procedures. At this step, I utilised approved informed consent letters (see Appendix D, page 79) from the University of KwaZulu-Natal ethics committee to seek people for written approval to participate in my study. The permission letters advised participants that their participation was purely voluntary, their names would be safeguarded, and they would not be rewarded. I returned from the field and considered ethics to complete my research report. In conclusion, I stored data records in a password protected file and wrote reports using pseudonyms.

3.11 Limitation of the study

Rashid et al. (2019) claim that the researcher should provide limits to help readers understand how the conclusion was attained. To understand the SBPPP, I selected school principals with five years of experience in the principalship role, located in the King Cetshwayo District, who also served as either a departmental official or panel member in these processes. The principals selected cannot represent the entire district, therefore the findings of this research cannot represent all school principals in the district. On the other hand, Creswell and Creswell (2018) add that researchers may face problems when completing their work, which are out of their control. Moreover, Cohen et al. (2018) claim that qualitative research aims to give thorough knowledge of human experiences, rather than generalising findings (Cohen et al., 2018). As a result, this research focused on the issues, thoughts, and findings of a restricted number of four school principals as well as their approaches to contribute to improving SBPPP. A further limitation is that no current district official, including a district representative of the employer, participated in the study. Consequently, the findings primarily reflect the perspectives of principals with prior panel or departmental experience and do not capture the current institutional perspective of district officials who participate in principal appointment decisions.

3.12 Conclusion

This chapter has explained the methodology of the study. The data generated is qualitative, consisting of human experiences and information extracted from documents. This study aligns with the interpretivist paradigm and uses the case study to collect data. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis are useful data collecting methods due to their adaptability and richness. This chapter demonstrated to me that a well-considered methodology is required to obtain trustworthy findings on SBPPP. I had no trouble understanding how research questions guide methods for gathering data and how each result must be supported by literature and policy frameworks like PAM. More importantly, I saw that the methodology provides a well-structured process of action, guaranteeing that the final results accurately reflect the viewpoints and ideas. The next chapter discusses the data obtained through interviews and document analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the research paradigm, approach, and methodology used. Next, it unpacked the population and sampling methods, as well as the schools and participants. Then, it presented the research methods, instruments, and trialling. It then discussed data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical issues, and limitations in the study.

This study is guided by two research questions that seek to improve our understanding of the events during the SBPPP. The first question seeks to understand what selection methods the Department of Basic Education can adopt as best practices at each stage of the principal selection process to promote fairness and transparency. The second question intends to identify what policy reforms are needed to ensure that the principal selection process promotes the appointment of ethical leaders.

This chapter summarises what emerged from the semi-structured interviews with four school principals. This chapter begins with a brief summary of the study site and the participants involved. Next, I proceed to look at the thematic components of each topic.

4.2 Profiles of research sites and participants

This study used information from four different public schools in the King Cetshwayo District of KZN. Pseudonyms were employed in this study to safeguard the privacy of participants and the educational institution. The table below shows the biographical information, such as their years of experience, age group, gender, and highest academic degree.

Table 4.2.1 Biographical details of participants

Name of participant	**Gender**	**Age group**	**Years in the role**	**Highest Academic degree**
Mr Phakathi	Male	50-60	12	Master of Education in Maths Education
Mr Vumisa	Male	50-60	17	B.Ed. Hons.

Ms Jali	Female	40-50	06	B.Ed. Hons. in educational management and leadership.
Ms Thusi	Female	40-50	08	Postgraduate diploma in educational management and leadership

4.3 Data presentation, analysis and discussion of findings

In this section, I present, analyse, and discuss the themes and subthemes generated by each research question.

4.3.1 What selection methods can the Department of Education adopt as best practices at each stage of the principal selection process to promote fairness and transparency?

To understand the experiences of school principals regarding their involvement in the SBPPP, four themes emerged. These themes include the implementation of a digital application process, initiatives to promote equality and fairness in the sifting process, methods to enhance the effectiveness of the interview committee, and strategies to improve the shortlisting and interview procedures.

4.3.1.1 Implementation of a digital application process

This section presents the findings of implementing a digital application process in the SBPPP. This is divided into three sub-themes: data integrity in the application process, efficiency and accessibility in the application process, and transparency and accountability in the application process.

4.3.1.1.1 Data integrity in the application process

The DoE in the KZN province uses the manual application process for all school-based promotion positions. Mopp (2022) states that this process includes putting your application forms in a designated box. The Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM), Chapter B, is the policy that governs the promotion and appointment of all school-based educators (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2022). The PAM policy, section 5.3.2, states that “the employing department must handle the process of eliminating applications of those candidates who do not comply with the requirements for the post(s) as stated in the advertisement” (DBE, 2022).

However, participant data reveals the operational failure of DBE's manual screening process in the KZN province. Here is what Ms Thusi said:

> *The process that we are currently using is where a lot of temptation occurs because you discover that some applications are misplaced, some are discarded, some are tampered with, and sometimes you discover that a page is missing.*

The concern by Ms Thusi indicates that there is a system failure of input control, data integrity, and feedback loops. It is also worth noting that the competence and profile of the individuals who carry out this process are not clearly stated in the above provision. Therefore, the DBE's continued reliance on the manual screening process introduces errors into the selection processes, as the PAM provisions are treated as system inputs. To allow flow in the selection process, Von Bertalanffy (1968) states that beneficial feedback loops include finding mistakes at every step of the process, fixing them, making people more responsible, and encouraging people to keep getting better. Furthermore, Starratt (1991) emphasises equal treatment of candidates in the ethic of justice. In this case, the data show a violation of procedural fairness because other candidates' applications are removed before merit assessment. Applied through the Iceberg Model, the missing or tampered applications are the visible events; repeated reports of manipulation constitute patterns; the manual handling arrangements and weak accountability mechanisms represent underlying system structures; and the willingness of some actors to interfere with applications reflects mental models that place personal influence above procedural fairness (Monat & Gannon, 2015). As a result, participant views indicate that the issue is not in PAM policy itself but in the manual application system used to operationalise it, which fails to support the accountability and fairness requirements. Ms Jali, on the other hand, makes suggestions for how to resolve the issue. Here is what she said:

> *First, I believe that if the posts can be advertised online, it will be easy to help applicants in such a way that they can apply online, and no one will be involved in the application process.*

Ms Thusi expressed similar sentiments:

> *If everything is done online and everything gets recorded, then it's not like envelopes moving from one hand to the next one. If it is uploaded in the system, I think it works*

better, because a person can simply enter their login details and access the information on the computer without other people interfering and attempting to manipulate it.

The views of participants align with Nikolaou (2021), who states that the online application system enhances the selection process by improving consistency, accuracy, and transparency. As a result, the transition from a manual to digital application process supports the ethic of care by ensuring consistent treatment of all applicants (Starratt, 1991). Therefore, the endorsement of digital applications by participants aligns with the PAM document, serving as a systemic upgrade intended to strengthen the execution of PAM provisions, especially those concerning transparency, accountability, and procedural fairness.

4.3.1.1.2 Efficiency and accessibility in the application process

The ability to submit applications quickly is one example of application efficiency. On the other hand, accessibility refers to implementing an application process that is simple to use for all interested candidates. The PAM policy, section 5.2.1.2, stipulates that "the advertisement of vacant posts for educators must be accessible to all who may qualify or are interested in applying for such post(s)" (DBE, 2022). However, participant data suggests that full accessibility may be dependent on the availability of the internet and smart devices, which is a mismatch between what policy requires and the reality of technology. Here is what Ms Jali said:

I believe most people nowadays have access to Wi-Fi and internet cafes all over the world. There are numerous platforms that allow people to access the internet. I believe that can be based on people going there and locating a location with a good or sufficient network for their own benefit.

In a similar vein, Ms Thusi held the following opinions:

In terms of network coverage, I believe most people own cellphones. If it can be used on handheld devices as well as the system, I believe it will be more effective, as most people are now accustomed to keeping their cellphones. If it is accessible via tablets and cellphones rather than only the PC or desktop, that will help people.

The above participants' accounts are supported by Woods et al. (2020), who reveal that the urban areas and individuals with smart devices are mostly in touch with a number of digital and social platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, WhatsApp, and many more.

Additionally, Nikolaou (2021) claims that digital platforms increase system efficiency through real-time tracking, automated notifications, and quicker submission. The above PAM provision ensures that recruitment processes are fair and consistent, which aligns with the care ethic (Starratt, 1991). However, if full accessibility is not guaranteed, the DBE may be concerned about inconsistency with policy requirements. On the positive side, if the DBE can collaborate with stakeholders to offer complete internet access in schools, the online platforms have the potential to improve efficiency and accessibility. The participants also reveal the advantage of the digital application system for employers. Mr Phakathi had this to say:

> *You can manage thousands of applications in a short amount of time with a digital application platform.*

Mr Vumisa continued by stating the following:

> *In fact, it reduces the workload. Additionally, there is no interference between the applicant and the individual currently interested in this position*.

The viewpoints expressed by the participants align with the findings of Arman (2023), which indicate that digital platforms enhance productivity through the automation of recordkeeping, sorting, and filtering processes. This reduces the burden of administrative tasks and minimises errors that can occur during the handling of extensive applications. As noted by Von Bertalanffy (1968), the application stage functions as a subsystem within the broader selection process, where the individual components collaborate to reach the intended goal of appointing a school principal. This viewpoint expressed by participants suggests that the digital application process is capable of managing numerous applications while ensuring fairness for all applicants.

4.3.1.1.3 Transparency and accountability in the application process

It is important to keep updating the applicants about the progress of their applications. The PAM policy, section 5.3.1, mandates that "the employing department must acknowledge receipt of all applications by informing all applicants in writing of receipt, clearly indicating whether the application is complete or not, indicating whether the applicant meets the minimum requirements for the post, and indicating that such applications have been referred to the institutions concerned" (DBE, 2022). However, the data from participants reveal the failure by

the DBE in the KZN province to make this mandate operational, which breaches the transparency and accountability of the administrative selection subsystem. Ms Thusi said:

> *I believe it is only now that the Department of Education is not informing candidates, because I recall when we first started with this HRM application, they used to write for every candidate. An acknowledgement letter would be sent to you.*

Ms Jali expressed a similar viewpoint, saying:

> *Applicants used to receive feedback only at the circuit level. After the application is forwarded to the school, the applicant receives no information about its status. I believe that after each process or stage of the application process, the candidate should be notified about their status.*

The Constitution requires those who participate in the decision-making process to keep in mind that accountability and transparency must be the guiding principles when making appointments (Mopp, 2022). The views of the participants show that the staff members tasked with carrying out the PAM policies are failing, which undermines the entire selection procedure. In addition, Von Bertalanffy (1968) asserts that accountability is achieved through effective feedback mechanisms, as transparent information flows enable organisations to monitor procedures, identify deviations, and uphold responsibility for system results. Therefore, systems thinking indicates that ethical failures arise when feedback mechanisms break down, such as in the absence of notifications regarding application progress. The data also shows that employees believe online platforms have the potential to improve communication between employers and applicants. Ms Jali had this to say:

> *The applicants can easily monitor the application's progress and even the feedback; if it is online, they can get the feedback after completing the application.*

This is consistent with Chavan et al. (2024), who emphasise that the features that include keywords for search, parsing resumes, and notification alerts to applicants make the application process much easier. From the multiple ethical paradigm theory of Starratt (1991), it is stated that the ethic of justice involves fairness and equity. The above PAM provision demonstrates how the DBE established a standard for transparency in the selection processes to ensure that all applicants receive equal treatment. As a result, the findings suggest that the ethical

objectives of PAM can solely be realised through system-supported enforcement mechanisms, such as an application tracking system and maintained records of applications.

4.3.1.2 Initiatives to promote equality and fairness in the sifting process

This section summarises the findings of initiatives to promote equality and fairness in the sifting process. The data is divided into two sub-themes: review of stakeholder involvement and pre-assessment test.

4.3.1.2.1 Review of stakeholder involvement

According to Mopp (2022), the sifting process is conducted by the district clerks in the presence of unions for all school-based promotion processes. The PAM policy, section 5.3.2, states that "The employing department must handle the process of eliminating applications of those candidates who do not comply with the requirements for the post(s) as stated in the advertisement" (DBE, 2022), but it says very little about the positions, competencies, and makeup of those who carry it out. The participants brought attention to this procedural gap. Mr Phakathi recommended the following:

> *If they can form a district team so that all of the DCES can fit on the panel. They may also adopt a few other DCES from other districts. The main members could be DCES or the circuit manager or even the unions.*

Ms Jali suggested the following:

> *I believe the Department of Education could review the sifting process because, in most cases, it does not promote fairness. Sometimes the people involved in the sifting process are the ones who remove some of the applicant's information from their profile and set it aside. If you try to follow up, they can even tell you that a page was missing. I wish the HR department could observe the sifting process.*

The above statements by participants are consistent with the study by Dwangu and Mahlangu (2022), who concur that the independent panels are needed to manage promotional processes. The data also reveal that the people in the current setup are the same people who sometimes remove the profiles of other candidates in the sifting process. This activity is described by Von Bertalanffy (1968) as the human activity system within systems thinking, which is conducted on purpose by some of the stakeholders, such as politicians and social systems. The

perspectives of participants that advocate for the inclusion of HR in the panel are consistent with the ethics of professionalism, which promote competence, responsibility, integrity, and adherence to established standards in professional practice (Starratt, 1991). Therefore, the views of the participants are important. A well-organised team with clearly defined roles, such as HR, district officials, and circuit managers, ensures that the PAM policy improves the processes for verifying information, which promotes fairness and equity.

4.3.1.2.2 Pre-assessment tests

Employers often utilise pre-assessment tests to efficiently reduce the pool of candidates they are considering for hire, particularly when faced with a substantial volume of resumes to evaluate (Van Iddekinge et al., 2023). The PAM policy does not mandate the implementation of pre-assessment tests in all school-based promotion processes. However, Mr Phakathi believes that pre-assessments may be used at this stage. Here is what he said:

> *Yes, it was once referred to as an aptitude test; now it is known as a competency test. Yes, there is a need. We're talking about someone who will be responsible for leading the school. And that individual must be an effective leader. Therefore, the district will benefit far more from writing that competency or aptitude test.*

Ms Thusi expresses similar opinions as follows:

> *Pre-assessment tests can be used, and I believe that will help the department find out what skills that specific individual possesses, since it's not the same as writing a CV.*

Van Iddekinge et al. (2023) concur with the aforementioned participants that pre-assessments are essential for employers to ensure that candidates' skills align with job requirements. According to Townes et al. (2025), the EEA in South Africa places strict limitations on the use of psychometric testing in selection processes and prohibits employers from using tests not approved by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). In light of the above, the feedback from the participants is considered for improvement at this stage. The participants' preference should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that any pre-assessment automatically improves fairness. A defensible competency assessment would need to be directly related to the principalship role, standardised across candidates and legally compliant so that an additional selection hurdle does not create a new source of arbitrary exclusion. From the Multiple Ethical Paradigm Theory, these safeguards strengthen the ethics of justice and

professionalism by requiring both equal treatment and professionally defensible assessment decisions (Starratt, 1991).

4.3.1.3 Methods to enhance the effectiveness of the interview panel

This section summarises the findings of methods to enhance the effectiveness of the interview panel. This is divided into two subthemes: redesigning the interview committee and training of panel members.

4.3.1.3.1 Redesigning the interview committee

The interview committee is a key part of the SBPPP. It is responsible for narrowing down the list of candidates, interviewing them, and recommending the best ones for the job. The PAM policy, section 5.4.2, provides that "the interview committee must have SGB members, one departmental official, and union representatives, and each interview committee must appoint from amongst its members a chairperson and a secretary" (DBE, 2022). However, the participant had a different opinion, recommending the addition of one human resources employee to ensure fairness. Here is what Ms Jali said:

> *If one member of the HR department observes the fairness of the process that will take place during the shortlisting and interviewing process, it may be fair. They can really strengthen that interview committee because, right now, some of the people in the SGB are illiterate; they can't even understand the candidates' questions and answers.*

The view of the participant is supported by Khumalo and Serpa (2021), who say that independent panels should be set up during the selection process to assist with SGB's lack of skills. As per systems thinking theory by Von Bertalanffy (1968), the interview committee structure is an input aimed at producing a fair outcome; however, without specialist oversight, there is a risk of making procedural errors that may result in disputes and unfairness. It is also important to note that the PAM policy, section 5.4.6, provides that "where the principal of the institution is an applicant, a departmental official may assist the SGB" (DBE, 2022). Similarly, Mopp (2022) explains that the South African Schools Act (SASA) mandates the SGB to elect co-opted members to serve as advisors. However, the data show that, despite being regarded as specialists, the co-opted principals engage in unethical behaviour during the selection processes. Mr Phakathi expressed the following concerns about co-opted principals elected from other schools:

I believe the district's involvement can be beneficial. I'm not sure because of the number of personnel; they used to appoint the principal of another school as a department official. That person may have their own agenda as well. As a result, the entire procedure will be rendered ineffective. So, the best way is for the district to get involved, and the circuit manager must participate.

Rammbuda and Arko-Achemfuor (2024) supported this viewpoint by highlighting that co-opted school principals can impact the SBPPP process by applying pressure on the panel concerning the selection procedures. In light of this, Dwangu and Mahlangu (2022) advocate for the inclusion of circuit managers in the selection process, acting as line managers alongside the independent panels. From the multiple ethical paradigms, Starratt (1991) states the ethic of justice, which seeks equal treatment and decisions to be made based on merit. Participants believe that the issue is with how PAM interview provisions are implemented rather than with the PAM policy itself. Therefore, the findings suggest that the interview committee would be more equitable, professional, accountable, and in line with PAM's ethical goals if HR, district, and circuit officials were added. However, the participants' criticism should not be generalised to all co-opted principals; rather, it identifies a governance risk where specialist participation is not matched by clear accountability and conflict-of-interest safeguards. The finding therefore supports stronger oversight of panel roles rather than the assumption that a particular stakeholder category is inherently unethical.

4.3.1.3.2 Training of panel members

Training the members of the interview committee is crucial. The panel members that are trained will bring consistency and accuracy throughout the interview processes. The PAM policy, section 5.4.7, stipulates that "in considering the applications, the Interview Committee must ensure that the principles of equity, redress, and representivity are complied with and they must adhere to" (DBE, 2022). However, the data generated reveals a gap between the intent of the PAM policy and the interview committee's ability to implement the principles outlined above, as panel members lack training. Ms Jali stated the following regarding panel training:

The interview committee may go through training so that they become aware of what exactly is expected of the candidates when they are responding to the questions.

Ms Thusi expressed similar sentiments as follows:

> *I believe that guidance should come from the department, specifically from the circuit office. It requires a lot of training. It requires a person that will be honest.*

The statements above are in line with the view of Rammbuda and Arko-Achemfuor (2024), who concur that the training designed to empower SGBs for selection processes is not enough. The ability of the individuals involved to make decisions is a critical factor in determining the success of complex organisational procedures. When subsystems are not adequately prepared, they have the potential to disrupt the overall system and prevent it from functioning as intended (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). The PAM policy is silent about the training of interview committee members. However, the workshops or training of this committee ensure that all panel members understand scoring criteria and adherence to regulations. This reduces errors, bias, and disputes. Starratt (1991) concurs with this perspective, asserting that professional ethics ensure individuals maintain honesty in the workplace, adhere to regulations, and achieve defensible outcomes. As a result, the findings suggest that conducting training will help the interview committee make informed decisions based on the information they received.

4.3.1.4 Strategies to improve the shortlisting and interview procedures

This section summarizes the findings of strategies to improve the shortlisting and interview procedures in the SBPPP. This is divided into three subthemes: standardised interviews, integrity and confidentiality, and leadership skills.

4.3.1.4.1 Standardised interviews

Bergelson et al. (2022) state that once key attributes and questions have been identified, the interviewing panel is able to develop a scoring rubric. After establishing a scoring system, interviewers can be instructed on how to evaluate the questions, assess applicant responses, and maintain consistency during the interviews (Bergelson et al., 2022). The PAM policy, section 5.4.11, states that “all interviewees must receive similar treatment during the interviews” (DBE, 2022). This provision ensures that all procedures are fair to all applicants and indicates that the appointment processes are of equal quality. The results show that using the same tool to assess candidates is useful. Ms Jali had this to say:

Yes, scenario-based questions are used, and they are intended to assist in some way. Because there are some issues that the principal will face once appointed to the position, the candidate must demonstrate how these issues will be addressed.

Ms Thusi also expressed a similar opinion; she stated:

When conducting an interview with a potential principal, you should use scenarios that they will encounter on a daily basis. They must be realistic.

The statements of the participants are consistent with Van Iddekinge et al. (2023), who revealed that scenario-based questions are standardised and equitable, as all candidates answer consistent, structured questions. According to Von Bertalanffy's (1968) systems thinking theory, using the same tool to assess candidate function consistently serves as a control variable within the selection subsystem. As a result, when performance differs from that of other candidates, it demonstrates each candidate's competence. According to Starratt (1991), the ethic of justice maintains that there must be fairness and equity for all. As a result, participant opinions align with PAM policy and raise the standard for professionalism, equity, and selection process dependability.

4.3.1.4.2 Integrity and confidentiality

Huberts (2024) asserts that the interview committee must be honest, fair, and ethical, and they must follow the rules that have been set for the process in order for the selection process to be fair. The PAM policy, section 5.4.10, provides that "the interviews will be conducted according to agreed-upon guidelines and procedures. These are to be jointly agreed upon by the parties to the provincial chamber" (DBE, 2022). However, the data collected from the participants indicate that smart devices pose a potential threat to the integrity and confidentiality of the interviews. Mr Phakathi is against panel members using smart devices inside the interview venue. He said:

We used to allow all members to switch on phones but not use them. If a member goes outside, he or she should be accompanied by another union member. If there are two or more members, they are not permitted to leave in order to prevent questions from being leaked, which happens. The only way to improve it is for panel members to refrain from using their cell phones and other devices throughout the entire process.

Mr Vumisa shared the same sentiments. He said:

> *Once we have crafted the question or everything, turn off the phones or put all of the cell phones away. However, it depends on the circumstances. We try to enforce it, but you'll find that you're the only one who came up with the idea.*

In keeping with this perspective, Ms Jali stated:

> *I believe that cell phones are currently causing a lot of issues. Because they used to collect interview questions and send them to candidates before they entered the interview. Therefore, I believe that in order for the process to maintain confidentiality, it should be made clear in some of the ground rules that cell phones and laptops are prohibited.*

Similar to this, Ms Thusi stated:

> *According to what the department prescribes, there is a confidentiality form, but we all know that it does not always work. Because it needs people of integrity to be able to keep that confidentiality. I think these devices should be prohibited during the interview because they can mess up the whole process. Even if it's a phone vibrating and someone is on the chair ready to answer the question, it does give you a little bit of interruption.*

The views by participants are supported by Huberts (2024), who submits that prior access to the interview proceedings undermines the integrity, fairness, and validity of the decisions made by the panel. As per systems thinking theory by Von Bertalanffy (1968), the interview committee should operate as a closed and secure subsystem during discussions, with strict measures in place to prevent both input leakages (interview questions) and output leakages (candidates' scores). The ethic of care says that breaking confidentiality hurts deserving candidates (Starratt, 1991). The ethic of critique also shows that some people can break the rules because of their status or influence (Starratt, 1991). The findings show that the perspectives of participants who want DoE to prohibit the use of smart devices do not go against the PAM policy but rather make it easier to carry out.

4.3.2 What policy reforms are needed to ensure that the principal selection process promotes the appointment of ethical leaders?

Two important themes were identified through the research data in relation to how the selection process of principals could be reformed to promote ethical leadership. The themes include policy revisions regarding ethics and professionalism in the selection process and introduce new policy to support post-principal appointment induction**.**

4.3.2.1 Policy revisions regarding ethics and professionalism in the selection process

To ensure the selection of ethical leaders, it is vital to adopt appropriate policy reforms aimed at developing criteria for evaluating potential candidates regarding ethical leadership competencies. The sub-themes identified through the research data are as follows: Review the policy to align the standard of qualification with the principalship role; make policy amendments to the PAM document to indicate school-specific principal requirements in posts and advertisements; revise the policy to consider leadership experience as key criteria for principalship appointment; and review the policy to consider principalship succession planning through leadership distribution in schools.

4.3.2.1.1 Review the policy to align the standard of qualifications with the principalship role

The PAM policy, section 3.2.1, stipulates that an individual should possess at least a recognised three- or four-year degree that incorporates teacher education training (DBE, 2022). In addition, the candidate must be registered with SACE and possess skills such as people management, administrative skills, and knowledge of educator legislation (DBE, 2022). However, the data generated suggests that the current minimum qualification is not aligned with the demands and complexity of the principal position. Here is what Mr Phakathi said:

> *I believe there should be a minimum standard of qualifications. If they could say, "You must have an honours degree," the principal would feel more confident.*

Similarly, Mr Vumisa emphasised:

> *The minimum qualifications for principalship should be a B.Ed. honours or higher. The honours degree must be in leadership and management.*

Ms Jali also shared a similar sentiment:

I believe that in order to appoint a quality principal capable of properly leading a school, the Department of Education should establish a minimum standard of qualifications needed. Perhaps they could say a candidate must have an honours-level degree in leadership or management.

Ms Thusi further supported the idea, suggesting the following:

The Department of Education can require an honours degree or a postgraduate diploma in educational leadership and management and make it a norm that you don't apply for a principal position if you don't have that specific degree.

From the analysis conducted among the respondents, there is a clear indication of the necessity to review the qualification standards to match the complexity of the principal role. The importance attached to obtaining an honours degree in leadership and management is viewed as an important requirement in ensuring that the principals operate effectively and efficiently. The PAM policy does not require individuals to hold any postgraduate degree for the principal role. However, the international standards, for example, school leaders in Finland require a master's degree (Mbokazi et al., 2022), indicating that obtaining high-level qualifications is crucial in enhancing the effectiveness of leadership. In addition, the systems theory by Von Bertalanffy (1968) indicates that enhancement of inputs, such as qualifications, improves the functionality of the system.

Considering the South African situation, it is imperative to note that Base and Abad (2025) propose the need for upgrading the qualifications of school principals based on the changing needs. On the other hand, Starratt (1991) notes that leaders must have the competencies and knowledge to meet the ethical and professional challenges involved in leadership positions. Based on the findings from the participants' responses and theory, policy reform should be directed towards upgrading the qualifications of school principals to enable them to address various leadership challenges. This strategy will ensure effective leadership and also promote ethical leadership. The finding nevertheless does not establish that a postgraduate qualification alone produces an ethical or effective principal. Its significance lies in aligning formal preparation with the competencies required for the role, while leadership experience, ethical judgement and contextual suitability remain necessary considerations in selection.

4.3.2.1.2 Make policy amendments to the PAM document to indicate school-specific principal requirements in post advertisements.

The selection of principals is a complex process whereby a wide range of issues regarding qualifications of the candidates is looked at, such as their academic credentials, experience, and suitability to the environment of the schools. The abilities of candidates in dealing with people, working with computers, and knowing what is required educationally are also important criteria in the selection process. While the PAM policy, section 5.2.1.2, stipulates that "the advertisement of vacant posts for educators must be accessible to all who may qualify or be interested," it says nothing about the school-specific requirements for the principal they want, which leaves the gap at the recruitment stage (input) of the selection process. Here is what Mr Phakathi stated:

> *Principal posts are advertised in a similar way, regardless of the situation in a particular school. This way, you find a panel formulating their own strategy. For example, the principal must be a mathematics teacher. Now, they form this as a criterion.*

Ms Jali added that:

> *The advert must include minimum requirements. So that the person who can apply understands that I must have the following knowledge or requirements. If the Department of Education can make changes so that the advertisement includes those requirements. I believe SA-SAMS should be a mandatory requirement.*

The results indicate that the advertisements for the posts are not clear on what the schools require, thus causing bias and inconsistency in selecting individuals. It is important to note that the participants agree that the job advertisements should state the qualities that the individuals must have to cater for the requirements of each individual school. The failure to state school-specific requirements in principal advertisements reveals a major flaw in the system. According to Von Bertalanffy (1968), organisational success is determined by inputs, processes, and feedback in the organisation. In failing to describe the true needs of the school, there is a disruption of the equilibrium of these factors, and bad decisions will be made regarding the school management. In the study of Mopp (2022), it is stated that advertisements with complete and accurate information about the job position would help to enhance the recruitment and selection process since such advertisements provide fair recruitment and ensure alignment between the applicant's qualifications and requirements in the school. Similarly, Taole (2022)

states that principals in low-enrollment schools have a wide range of duties to fulfil, and this requires that the advertisement include all these aspects. Therefore, policymakers need to formulate policies for advertisements with relevant information concerning curricula needs and other school-based needs.

4.3.2.1.3 Revise the policy to consider leadership experience as a key criterion for principalship appointments

The appointment of a principal can also be guided by good leadership qualities each of the candidates has. It is contended that positions of leaders should be awarded to those candidates who have enough experience in leadership. The candidate must rise through the ranks as a leader to accumulate more experience along the way. This will ensure that the candidate receives training with how administration works. The PAM policy, section 3.2.1, mandates that an educator with at least 7 years of teaching experience be eligible to apply for a principalship position (DBE, 2022). However, the data collected from participants show that this is insufficient for the role of principal; they recommend at least someone who has held a leadership position before applying for this position. Here is what Ms Thusi said:

> *I firmly believe that people should advance through the ranks of leadership. Even if it hasn't been for a long time, you've at least led in each leadership position before progressing to the next one, rather than simply jumping stages. Not everyone is born to be a leader.*

In a similar view, Mr Vumisa stated:

> *The principal position should be contested by the people who have the experience of 10 years in an administrative position, as an HOD or as a departmental head.*

The participants pointed out that candidates must progress through the various levels of leadership, and it is important to have previous experience within other administrative roles such as departmental head and deputy principal. Although teaching experience is regarded as an essential element, the ability to exhibit the skills of leadership at various levels in the education sector has been highlighted as being important. According to Khumalo and Serpa (2021), it is suggested to establish criteria that would evaluate leaders' administrative experience rather than their teaching experience. This is supported by Von Bertalanffy (1968), who claims that the efficiency of a system is defined by the correct combination of all the

system elements, which include members' experience. In addition, Mopp (2022) highlights the necessity of having some prior management experience as one of the criteria required in order to ensure efficiency of the system of leadership. Therefore, policymakers need to formulate policies that prioritize leaders with experience in administration to ensure effective leadership in schools.

4.3.2.1.4 Review policy to consider principalship succession planning through leadership distribution in schools

It is very important for any school to have effective plans for leadership succession, which guarantee that the transfer of leadership responsibility will be smooth. Effective plans will ensure that people who assume the leadership positions have the appropriate skills and experience needed. Mr Phakathi is supportive of the succession plan. Here is what he stated:

> *There is a possibility of a succession plan because mostly, if you are the principal, you could have three or more junior members under you. Sometimes you have two deputy principals. Now, your responsibility as the principal is to train these two deputy principals or departmental heads.*

In a similar view, Mr Vumisa stated:

> *Yes, we are practicing succession planning. When I know that I will be absent tomorrow, I simply delegate my responsibilities to my department head. I do this because our school has no deputy principal.*

From these findings, it is evident that the concept of succession planning is more than just a theoretical exercise but a process that is practiced actively by the respondents. According to the opinions expressed, the school principals engage in the processes of delegating responsibilities and mentorship as part of their succession planning activities. In training the departmental heads and deputy principals, the school principals are assured of continuity in the leadership structure of their institutions even during periods of change. These results are supported by Leithwood et al. (2020), who claim that succession planning plays an essential role in ensuring the effectiveness of transition processes among the leaders of the organisation. Principals' active engagements in mentoring activities, which are recommended by Hile et al. (2023), can be viewed as a great method of preparing emerging leaders for their future tasks. According to the systems approach by Von Bertalanffy (1968), such organisations as schools

require shared leadership because schools as complex social systems should be governed in this manner. In addition, according to Starratt (1991), task delegation may be helpful in this situation because it will allow the continuity of management and effective knowledge transfer.

4.3.2.2 Introduce a new policy to support post-principal appointment induction

To ensure that new principals transition smoothly into the principal role, it is important to provide guidance to them until they are fully settled in the position. The sub-themes are as follows: Introduce a new policy to offer novice principal mentoring and amend the policy to add monitoring and evaluation of newly appointed principals.

4.3.2.2.1 Introduce a new policy to offer novice principal mentoring

The first year as a school principal is difficult, and you will often feel lonely and isolated. This is why it is important for new principals to have mentorship and support. This way, they will be provided with the support and guidance that is essential for their success. With mentoring, new principals will have someone from whom they can learn about school management techniques. Mr Phakathi believes that the DoE should work more closely with new principals. He had this to say:

> *During the first year as principal, the Department of Education must work closely with the new principal to ensure that they have all the necessary resources.*

In a similar view, Mr Vumisa stated:

> *The Department of Education must assign an experienced principal from another school to visit and mentor the newly appointed principal at his or her school.*

In support of the views above, Ms Thusi stated:

> *If you have a professional learning community (PLC) for principals that meets on a regular basis until a new principal finds their feet. PLC would be effective, but in order to integrate the new principal, you also need an experienced principal from other schools who you refer to as a mentor.*

Mentoring is one of the practices that the participants consider crucial in assisting the new principal appointments. The participants pointed out the need for professional support by way of mentoring and the creation of collaborative learning spaces like Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Such methods enable the new leaders to get used to their jobs and

develop their leadership skills. In addition, it is important to involve experienced principals in the mentoring process to facilitate knowledge transfer. As per Hayes and Mahfouz (2020), mentorship becomes very important during the early years of serving as a principal because it serves as emotional and professional support to a new principal. Furthermore, as noted by Leithwood et al. (2020), the need for mentoring comes from the fact that distributed leadership requires having many good leaders rather than relying on one individual. According to Von Bertalanffy (1968), the success of an organisation like a school would require the successful functioning of all its subsystems; therefore, mentorship becomes important. In this way, the mentorship and induction initiatives taken by the DBE reflect the importance of a good support system in developing effective leaders for schools. Finally, as stated by Starratt (1991), mentorship is important because it helps in the professional development of leadership and ensures that the leaders understand responsibilities.

4.3.2.2.2 Amend the policy to add monitoring and evaluation of newly appointed principals

Monitoring and evaluation play an important role in the development and improvement of newly appointed school principals. The key reason why monitoring and evaluation is carried out is to ensure that school principals get all the help they need in their job. Through monitoring, it is easier to determine where assistance or guidance is needed by principals. With the creation of a feedback mechanism, monitoring and evaluation will help the new school principal adapt and learn from their mistakes. In addition, monitoring and evaluation serve as an accountability mechanism that will help ensure that school principals meet certain requirements in discharging their responsibilities. Mr Vumisa believes that physical monitoring and evaluation are not feasible within the DoE. He stated the following:

> *Although it is not physically possible to do that, once they are doing paperwork for planning and making the decision or calling the parents' meeting, you have the evidence for that, and you can say now the principal is on the line.*

Ms Thusi suggests the following:

> *Monitoring and evaluation are the roles of the circuit manager. There should be a program that they are going to follow, something written, like every single report submitted to the circuit manager: 'On this day, we met; this is what we discussed; these*

are the findings,' and it should be formalised, and they should keep those minutes. Up until then, the other principal is comfortable in the role.

According to the findings of the study, the respondents feel the need to monitor and evaluate the performance of recently appointed principals because they need to transition smoothly and uphold standards of leadership in the school. Although it would be difficult to engage in physical monitoring, respondents provide alternatives like documenting discussions and decisions as evidence in assessing how far the principal has gone in their performance. The position of the circuit manager in monitoring and evaluating the performance is highlighted, together with ideas on how to enhance reporting procedures. In summary, monitoring and evaluation is part and parcel of the process that should not be ignored because it enables new principals to perform effectively. The importance of monitoring and evaluation within the process of the principalship has been emphasized through the views shared by the participants because it offers continuous support for the recently appointed principals. As noted by Watts (2023), structured evaluations are very effective in improving leadership, especially during the first year. Similarly, Leithwood et al. (2020) state that continuous evaluations of performances play a role in developing effective leadership practices. Additionally, systems theory proposed by Von Bertalanffy (1968) holds that efficient operation of the organisation depends on the continuous evaluation of the subsystems of that organisation, which includes leadership. The same idea has been presented by Starratt (1991), who states that ethical leadership requires constant assessment in order for the principal to conduct themselves in line with the organisation's goals.

4.4 Conclusion

The chapter has presented the data generated through the semi-structured interview responses from four school principals and PAM document analysis. The data were presented thematically; key findings that emerged from the data were discussed and located within the systems thinking theory and the multiple ethical paradigms theory. To sum up, the findings indicated that moving from a paper-based to a digital application process serves as an upgrade of the system that strengthens the implementation of PAM provisions. In addition, post-principal appointment programmes such as mentoring, monitoring, and evaluation were found to assist newly appointed principals in bringing stability to the school environment, which helps their leadership subsystem become stronger. The following chapter presents the summary of the study, the recommendations in relation to the findings, and the conclusion of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the findings generated from participant interview responses and PAM document analysis were presented, discussed, and analysed thematically. This chapter provides a summary of the study, my reflections on conducting the study, conclusions based on the findings, and recommendations to address the main question. This study sought to answer the following main research question and sub-research questions:

Main research question:

- What best practices can the Department of Education implement in the process to select the school principal to ensure the appointment of transparent, fair, and ethical leaders who are effective in their roles?

Sub-research questions:

- What selection methods can the Department of Education adopt as best practices at each stage of the process of selecting the school principal in order to promote fairness and transparency?
- What policy reforms are needed to ensure that the process of selecting the school principal promotes the appointment of ethical leaders?

This chapter begins with a summary of the study, then discusses my reflections on conducting the study, presents the conclusions of the study, and concludes with recommendations.

5.2 Summary of the study

In Chapter One, I provided an introduction and background to the study. I also provided a historical overview of the current process of selecting the school principal, as well as an analysis of the failure of the school-based promotion processes, despite the existence of laws governing the selection of school principal. I also articulated the research problem, which guided the focus of the study, which sought to identify best practices that the DoE can implement in the SBPPP to ensure a transparent, fair, and ethical principal selection. Then, it presented the purpose of the study, which included identifying the best selection methods that

the DoE can adopt at each stage to improve fairness and transparency, as well as identifying policy reforms needed to promote ethical leadership selection. It then discussed the theoretical and professional rationale for the study, followed by an explanation of its significance. Further, it addressed the main and sub-questions and key terms related to the study. This chapter highlights the need to reconsider how school principals with the necessary skills to lead successful schools are appointed.

In chapter two, I presented a review of relevant literature on the two sub-research questions. The review of related literature included international and South African studies published within the last five years that addressed current debates about the SBPPP. The most common methods of selection worldwide are digital selection procedures, assessment centres, competency-based evaluations, gamified selection, and merit-based appointments. Furthermore, the literature discusses how professionalising principals can benefit the South African education system. The systems thinking theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1968) and the multiple ethical paradigms theory (Starratt, 1991) were discussed and justified as the theoretical foundations for the study.

In chapter three the research strategy and methods of the study were provided. The research was qualitative in technique and interpretivist in paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm was the most appropriate paradigm to acquire actual knowledge of the four school principals of what transpired in the SBPPP. This research is designed as a case study methodology, concentrating on one occurrence, system, process, activity, or person in the SBPPP. The generation of data for the research was through semi-structured interviews and PAM document analysis. I used a purposive sampling approach to select four schools in the King Cetshwayo District that were conveniently located. The school principals were selected based on their engagement in the SBPPP for a minimum of 5 years, either as the departmental official or as the panel members. The data produced was audio-recorded, listened to, and transcribed before being used for analysis. Finally, ethical considerations were applied throughout the data generation and handling process.

In chapter four, I presented the data, discussed it, and analysed the findings. Thematic analysis used exact quotes from semi-structured interviews and PAM document analysis as supporting data. With regard to the first sub-research question based on the best selection methods for fairness and transparency, the data generated showed that the current manual application and

screening process is failing the school-based promotion process. Participants' accounts revealed that DBE's reliance on manual application processing consistently leads to errors in the selection process, including lost or removed applications. To improve system flow and efficiency, participants supported the digital system as a secure way to process applications and automatically notify applicants. The literature also mentioned that digital systems can help the DBE sort applications by district, circuit, school, and position applied for. It was also clear that co-opted principals engage in unethical behaviour during these processes, despite being recognised as specialists. As a result, the participants' request to restructure the interview committee to include HR officials and require mandatory training for all panel members was deemed urgent. It was also noted that the availability of smartphones and laptops in the interview venue poses a risk that unethical panel members may leak developed interview questions.

The second sub-research question concerned the policy changes for ethical leadership selection. The participants proposed that the minimum qualification should be raised at least to an honours degree or postgraduate diploma in educational leadership and management. Participants saw this as an upgrade that would raise qualifications to meet the demands of the principal role. The data also suggested that the DBE should consider applicants for principal positions with leadership experience as a department head or deputy principal. The findings also indicated that school principals should mentor or delegate tasks to department heads or deputy principals as part of distributed leadership practice. Therefore, it was argued that DBE should incorporate this as a principal succession plan in the strategy to assure continuity. The research also indicated that new principals need support in adapting to their new positions. Mentoring was identified as useful assistance for newly appointed school leadership and implementation of monitoring or evaluation mechanisms to maintain standards.

5.3 My reflections on doing the study

To conduct this study, I needed to understand how school-based promotion processes work, consult the PAM policy that governs them, and understand how ethics are applied throughout the selection process. The subheadings below provide a detailed reflection on the study.

5.3.1 Theoretical

The systems thinking theory by Von Bertalanffy (1968) and the multiple ethical paradigm theory by Starratt (1991) were the two theories used in the study. These theories worked well

in this study because they helped me understand how the principal selection system works and the moral values involved in the KZN-DoE. The systems thinking enabled me to see the principal selection process as a single connected system. As stated by Von Bertalanffy (1968), one part of the system influences how the other parts of the system function. This helped me understand that if there is an injustice in one stage of the selection process, such as removed applications or favouritism, it affects the entire process. Furthermore, Starratt's (1991) ideas on ethics of justice and ethics of care enabled me to evaluate the moral basis for the rules. However, if I were to conduct this research again, I would also use DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) institutional theory to better understand why the DBE or unions resist change, even when it is necessary.

DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) institutional theory would prove useful to a study on this topic because it demonstrates how PAM guidelines can be used to hide political loyalty appointments. This theory will demonstrate that, despite following PAM guidelines, such as having union representatives participate in the interviews, schools may engage in this practice to gain social legitimacy. This framework contributes to the study by demonstrating how the SBPPP can become a form of symbolic compliance. In this study, unions or schools can use the PAM guidelines as a professional shield to appear fair when selecting school principals who meet their specifications.

5.3.2 Methodological

The research employed a qualitative approach, an interpretivist paradigm, and a case study methodology. This methodology was extremely effective in understanding the SBPPP within the King Cetshwayo District. I created a safe environment for participants by scheduling interviews at their workplaces. Yin (2018) asserts that a case study approach is suitable for examining circumstances in which the environment and the event are connected. This enabled participants to freely discuss the sensitive issues surrounding this important topic. I made sure that each participant signed a consent form before the interview process began, which took about 60 minutes. Since Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasised that the final report should match the information shared by participants, I would advise future researchers to maintain objectivity when conducting research. Furthermore, the SBPPP is political in nature and can be highly sensitive at times. I made certain that I established trust in a comfortable environment, which is consistent with Creswell and Creswell's (2018) belief that participants must be treated with respect in order to receive honest responses. Furthermore, future researchers should focus

on gathering more trustworthy information by extracting transcripts from audio recordings. This is consistent with Singh's (2022) statement that having evidence of data demonstrates that a study is fair and reliable. Semi-structured interviews were flexible, allowing me to ask more probing questions to learn the truth about school-based promotion processes for principals. As noted by Brinkmann (2022), conducting the interviews is a way to construct knowledge together.

5.4 Conclusions

This study sought to identify best practices that the Department of Education can implement in the principal selection process to ensure the appointment of transparent, fair, and ethical leaders who are effective in their roles. The conclusions are drawn based on the findings presented in chapter four, and they are organised according to the two sub-research questions that guided the study.

5.4.1 What selection methods can the Department of Education adopt as best practices at each stage of the process of selecting the school principal in order to promote fairness and transparency?

The study revealed that transparency and fairness in SBPPP can be achieved through the implementation of technology in the selection process. Technology reduces the amount of human intervention in the selection process, which promotes trust from the beginning. For educators and the DBE, this means transparency and fairness depend on the limitation of powers for stakeholders involved in the application process and sifting processes as technology automatically sorts applications as per district, circuit, school, and position. Furthermore, the study discovered that some SGBs are illiterate; thus, their powers should be limited because they lack the knowledge and training to assess candidates fairly in accordance with the scoring rubric. A pre-condition for their participation in the interview process must be that they agree to participate in intensive training programmes. Further, this study makes the most significant contribution to DBE because it demonstrates how technology can be a moral guiding tool in the fight against corruption in the KZN province. In practice, all interview panel members must be required to attend workshops or receive training in order to improve their ability to assess candidates fairly. The study had limitations because it was conducted in the King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu-Natal and only included a small group. As a result, the findings of this study may not be applicable to all districts of KZN. However, this study is significant because

it demonstrates that including independent officials and pre-assessment tests is the most effective way to limit personal interest in the selection process for school principals.

5.4.2 What policy reforms are needed to ensure that the principal selection process promotes the appointment of ethical leaders?

This study concludes that the DBE should increase the minimum qualification requirements and make sure school principals receive assistance during their first year of employment in order to attract ethical leaders. The results made it clear that the current minimum qualification requirement is insufficient to fulfill the principalship's role. As a result, it was suggested that a principalship position require both an honours degree and demonstrated leadership experience. This suggests that being a great teacher is not sufficient to be a good school principal in the field of education. This study makes a significant contribution by demonstrating how early training by the current principal instills organisational culture and values in department heads or deputy principals before they begin applying for positions. This is the first study to highlight the "support gap," in which newly appointed principals are not mentored during their first year of service. In practice, the DBE should amend the PAM policy to make mentoring mandatory, with senior principals and line managers (circuit managers) advising new school principals. Even though this study was conducted in a single district, the approach was appropriate because it allowed us to hear about the real-life challenges faced by schools in the King Cetshwayo district. Future research should focus on developing a structured training program for newly appointed principals to ensure a smooth transition into their new roles.

5.5 Recommendations

The recommendations are solution-oriented and address the systemic, procedural, and policy gaps identified in the findings. Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed for the DBE in KZN province. They are presented under the two sub-research questions.

5.5.1 Recommendations for selection methods to promote fairness and transparency

The recommendation includes introducing digital systems with equity safeguards and strengthening the capacity of the interviewing panel.

5.5.1.1 Introducing a digital application system with equity safeguards

The results showed that lost or eliminated applications from the pool of possible candidates during the application stage caused the manual DBE system for SBPPP to fail. It was also noted that the digital systems improve efficiency, but their implementation will be dependent on the availability of internet or Wi-Fi or data access. The study recommends that the DBE phase in a centralised e-recruitment portal for principal posts that allows online submission, automated tracking, and real-time status notification to applicants. To address digital inequality, the DBE must establish assisted application centres at district offices and circuit offices with free internet access, as well as HR staff to support applicants without personal access. This creates integrity without excluding rural applicants.

There are expenses associated with implementing the digital application systems. However, the KZN-DoE province already has an HR app and website where qualified unemployed teachers can sign up, apply online, and be listed in the database. This indicates that they are able to apply a comparable approach for SBPPP that improves equity and transparency. In addition, the KZN province should initiate an online e-recruitment system that enables any public organization in the province to post job openings and take online applications. Therefore, the DBE can use www.kznonline.gov.za to post job openings if they are unable to pay for the online implementation project for school-based promotion processes.

5.5.1.2 Strengthening the capacity of the interviewing panel

The data demonstrated the necessity of mandatory intensive training for panel members to lessen bias and disputes, as well as the inclusion of HR officials to enhance fairness. It was also found that co-opted principals are regarded as specialists but are frequently involved in unethical behaviour. In addition, scenario-based questions were found to be more equitable, but the use of smart devices by unethical panel members enabled leaks of interview questions. Therefore, the study recommends the following:

- Introduce a PAM policy that restricts the use of smart devices inside the interview venues to prevent leakage of interview questions.
- Conduct at least a two-day mandatory workshop for all interview committee members that will participate in the school-based promotion process per circuit management.

All these measures treat interviews as formal assessments with enforceable integrity standards.

5.5.2 Recommendations for policy reforms to promote ethical leadership

The recommendations for policy reforms are to revise the minimum qualification requirements and experience of principals in PAM policy to match principalship demands and establish a Principalship-In-Training (PIP) programme to support newly appointed principals.

5.5.2.1 Revise the minimum qualifications requirements and experience of principals in the PAM policy to match principalship demands.

The findings highlighted that an honours degree in educational leadership and management and leadership experience as a deputy principal or DH were considered important. In addition, it was proposed that school-specific criteria should be included in job advertisements. The study therefore recommends that the DBE revise PAM policy to require a minimum of NQF level 8 certification in education leadership/management as a prerequisite for principalship and to include experience in leadership at the departmental head or deputy principal level as a formal preference factor. Require school context profiles for all job advertisements, especially for low-enrollment schools. These profiles should include information about the subjects offered, SA-SAMS skills, and many other things. This indicates that candidates are qualified academically, have relevant experience, and fit the situation.

5.5.2.2 Establish a Principalship-In-Training (PIP) programme to support newly appointed principals.

The findings suggested that mentoring can be an effective support for newly appointed leadership, as well as the implementation of monitoring or evaluation tools to maintain standards. The study therefore recommends that the DBE create a one-year (12 months) PIP with two components:

- Structured mentoring: Each novice principal is assigned a trained mentor or experienced principal within the circuit for 12 months, with monthly sessions and quarterly reports.
- Developmental monitoring: Circuit managers conduct formal support visits quarterly, using a standardised leadership standards tool focusing on support.

The completion of a PIP becomes a requirement for permanent appointment. This makes induction an ethical obligation of the system.

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the summary of the study and reflected on the experiences of conducting the study. The conclusions drawn from the research findings from the previous chapter were discussed, and recommendations were made and justified. The study concludes that transparent, fair, and ethical appointments necessitate systematic coherence between three domains: technological systems that promote integrity, professionalised processes that promote fairness, and policies that promote leadership as a developed profession with pre-service and in-service dimensions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Certificate from the University of KwaZulu-Natal



UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

31 July 2025

Sibonelo Mthiyane (224024338)
School of Education (Prior Restructuring)
Edgewood Campus

Dear S Mthiyane,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00008945/2025
Project title: Towards best practices in school-based promotion processes: A case study of principal selection
Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 04 July 2025 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 31 July 2026.
To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]

Doctor Shamila Naidoo (Interim Chair)

/nng

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa
Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 **Email:** hssrec@ukzn.ac.za **Website:** http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics
Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix B: Permission Letter to Conduct Research in KwaZulu-Natal School



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X 9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201 **Ref**: 2/4/8/449
Enquiries : Ms Phindile Duma **Email** : phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za **Tel** : 033 392 1051

Mr. Sibonelo Mthiyane
[redacted]

Dear Mr. Mthiyane

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DOE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"TOWARDS BEST PRACTICES IN SCHOOL-BASED PROMOTION PROCESSESS: A CASE STUDY OF PRINCIPAL SELECTION"**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 10 March 2025 to 31 October 2027.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

KING CETSHWAYO DISTRICT
ZULULAND DISTRICT

[redacted]

Mr. GN Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 10 March 2025

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

Appendix C: Permission Letter to Conduct Research to the School

[redacted]

19 March 2025

Dear Sir/Madam

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I am Sibonelo Mthiyane (Student No: 224024338), enrolled for a Master's degree in Educational Leadership, Management and Policy at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am seeking permission to conduct research at your school.

My study is titled ***"Towards Best Practices in School-Based Promotion Processes: A Case Study for Principal Selection."*** The purpose of this research is to explore and identify the best methods that the Department of Education can use to ensure a fair, transparent, and ethical process for selecting school principals.

School principals play an important role in this study because they have direct experience with the selection and appointment process. Their insights will help improve how principals are recruited, assessed, and appointed. This research aims to strengthen leadership selection processes to ensure that schools are led by qualified and capable individuals.

I will follow all school rules and schedules to avoid disrupting daily activities. The interview will follow a semi-structured format, allowing for flexibility in responses. The entire process is expected to take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. To ensure confidentiality, your name will not be revealed during or after the study. Pseudonyms will be used to protect both your identity and the school's name. Your responses will be kept private and used only for research purposes. There will be no monetary compensation for participating in this study.

I kindly request written permission to conduct my research at your organisation. The permission should be on your organisation's letterhead, signed, dated, and stamped with the official school stamp. It should also specifically refer to my name and the tittle of my study.

Yours Faithfully

[redacted]

Sibonelo Mthiyane
Cell: [redacted]
[redacted]

Supervisor's Details
Prof. Inba Naicker
Email: Naickeri1@ukzn.ac.za
Tel No: 031 260 3461

Appendix D: Informed Consent for each Participant

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Date: 23 September 2025

Dear [redacted]

My name is Sibonelo Mthiyane, a postgraduate student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). I am currently conducting a research study titled, **"Towards Best Practices in School-Based Promotion Processes: A Case Study of Principal Selection."**

You are respectfully invited to consider participating in this study.

Purpose of the Study:

The purposes of research are to identify the best selection methods that can be integrated at each stage to improve fairness and transparency and to explore policy reforms necessary to strengthen ethical leadership in principal appointments.

Participant Involvement:

Should you agree to take part in this study, your participation will involve:

- A semi-structured interview, designed to guide conversation while giving you the freedom to express your thoughts and experiences.
- Sharing your insights, opinions, and personal experiences related to the principal selection process.
- An estimated time commitment of 30 to 60 minutes.

Potential Risks and Discomforts:

This study presents minimal risk. However, should any question cause discomfort, you may choose not to respond. You are under no obligation to answer any question you find sensitive or intrusive.

Potential Benefits:

While there may be no direct benefits to you, your participation will contribute significantly to:

- The development of more transparent and accountable principal selection practices.
- Informing policy and practice for school-based promotions in South Africa.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:

All information you provide will be treated with the strictest confidentiality. Your identity will not be disclosed in any research reports, presentations, or publications arising from this study.

- Interview data will be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher and academic supervisor.
- If you consent to audio-recorded interviews, the recordings will solely be used for academic analysis and will be deleted after transcription and verification.

Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw:

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Withdrawing from the study will not affect any benefits or services to which you are entitled.

Contact Information

Should you require further information or have any queries, please feel free to contact:

Researcher: Sibonelo Mthiyane
Cell: [redacted]
Email: 224024338@ukzn.ac.za

Supervisor: Prof. Inbanathan Naicker
Tel. No.: 031-260 3461
Email: Naickeri1@ukzn.ac.za

For ethical concerns or complaints, kindly contact:

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC)
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Research Office, Govan Mbeki Building, Westville Campus
Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 4557

Fax: +27 31 260 4609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Consent Declaration:

I, [redacted], hereby confirm that I have been fully informed about the nature, purpose, and procedures of the research study titled: **"Towards Best Practices in School-Based Promotion Processes: A Case Study of Principal Selection"**, conducted by Sibonelo Mthiyane.

I understand that:

- My participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw at any stage without penalty.
- My identity and responses will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous.
- I am free to decline to answer any question I am uncomfortable with.
- The findings of this study may be used for academic publication or presentation but will not reveal my identity.

I willingly give my informed consent to participate in this study.

Consent for Audio Recording (if applicable):

Please tick:

☒ I agree to have the interview audio-recorded

☐ I do not agree to have the interview audio-recorded

Participant's Signature: [redacted] Date: 23/09/2025

Researcher's Signature: [redacted] Date: 23/09/2025

Witness (if applicable): [redacted] Date: _____

Thank you for your time, trust, and valuable contribution to this research.

Appendix E: Permission Letter to Conduct Research from each School

[redacted]

22 April 2025

Mr Sibonelo Mthiyane

[redacted]

Mr S Mthiyane

Re-REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I [redacted] wish to indicate to Mr Sibonelo Mthiyane (Student No: 224 024 338) that I will be available or I will provide assistance on the research of his study.

Mr Mthiyane is enrolled for a Master's degree in Educational Leadership and Policy at University of KwaZulu-Natal. The title of his study; ***'Towards Best Practices in School-Based Promotion Processes: A Case Study for Principal Selection"*** He is therefore requesting a permission to conduct his research in my institution [redacted]

I wish Mr Mthiyane good luck on his study.

Yours Faithfully

[redacted]

Appendix F: Turnitin Report



5/26/26, 7:33 AM Turnitin Originality Report

Turnitin Originality Report

Full Draft 1 - Sibonelo.docx by Sibonelo Mthiyane

From Thesis Dissertation (MEd and PhD Thesis)

Processed on 26-May-2026 7:28 AM CAT
ID: 2969641663
Word Count: 26975

Similarity Index	Similarity by Source
10%	Internet Sources: 8% Publications: 0% Student Papers: 3%

sources:

1 1% match (student papers from 18-Oct-2024)
Submitted to University of KwaZulu-Natal on 2024-10-18

2 < 1% match (Internet from 24-Sep-2022)
https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/20811/Mthiyane_Herman_Goina_2017.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1

3 < 1% match (Internet from 28-Jun-2024)
https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/def35746-261a-4871-9070-1af22dd5b5cd/content

4 < 1% match (Internet from 15-Dec-2022)
https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/12891/Cele_Lucky_Goodman_Mabutho_2013.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1

5 < 1% match (Internet from 15-Dec-2022)
https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/13443/Zuma_Phindile_Nokuthula_Pearl_2015.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1

6 < 1% match (Internet from 15-Dec-2022)
https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/13894/Ngcobo_Fikile_Bongi_Hope_2015.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1

7 < 1% match ()
Hlongwa, Hazel Ndumiso. "Negotiating between two competing leadership roles: narratives of principals serving as trade union executive members ", 2021

8 < 1% match (Internet from 10-Sep-2023)
https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/22208/Oyawo_Adetola_Elizabeth_2022.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1

9 < 1% match (Internet from 24-Sep-2022)
https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/20002/Nyubane_Sthabile_Lucia_2021.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1

10 < 1% match (Internet from 31-Mar-2022)
https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/20108/Ndwalane_Thembelihle_2021.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1

11 < 1% match (Internet from 26-Feb-2026)
https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/03f327ba-be9f-4d83-8912-19fb4f8aa393/content

12 < 1% match (Internet from 08-Oct-2025)
https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/59da042a-ddbb-47a0-8a4e-d7937285f192/content

13 < 1% match ()
Bivela, Bonakele Ntombivomusa. "Leading teaching and learning in an overcrowded classroom: experiences of four teachers in two secondary schools.", 2019

14 < 1% match (Internet from 15-Jan-2023)
https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/15783/Pakati_Nokuthula_Thembeka_2016.pdf?sequence=1

https://www.turnitin.com/newreport_printview.asp?eq=1&eb=1&esm=0&oid=2969641663&sid=0&n=0&m=0&svr=37&r=59.038985314413836&la... 1/44

Appendix G: Interview Schedule

Data generation instrument

Participant's Name…… Date: ……

Section A: Semi-Structured Interview schedule for school principals

1. Brief explanation of the purpose, rationale, significance, confidentiality of the processes, expectations and use of voice recorder.
2. Ask if there are any questions from participant.
3. Consent form- read, complete, sign and collect.

Background Information:

Briefly tell me about yourself personally and professionally.

- (Probe) What is the highest qualification?
- (Probe) How many years have you been teaching?
- (Probe) How long have you worked at this school?
- (Probe) How long have you been a school principal?
- (Probe) Have you held any other leadership positions before becoming a principal?
- (Probe) Have you ever participated in school-based promotion processes, either as a department official or as panel member?

Research Topic: Towards best practices in school-based promotion processes: A case study of principal selection

Main Research question:

- What best practices can the Department of Education implement in the principal selection process to ensure the appointment of transparent, fair, and ethical leaders who are effective in their roles?

Sub-Research questions 1:

What selection methods can the Department of Education adopt as best practices at each stage of the principal selection process to promote fairness and transparency?

1.1. How can the **application process** be improved to ensure transparency and help principal candidates track the progress of their application status?

- (Probe) How can technology be leveraged to provide real-time updates on application progress?
- (Probe) Let us assume the Department of Education considers online applications to replace paper applications. How can they ensure that candidates are empowered to apply and how can they track their applications independently?
- (Probe) what factors would you consider when designing an online application system to ensure it is accessible and user-friendly for all users?
- (Probe) what is the benefit of the online application system for both the candidate and the Department of Education?
- (Probe) What communication channels can be established to address candidates' queries and concerns regarding the application process?

1.2. What strategies can the Department of Education employ to redesign the sifting process to promote fairness?

- (Probe)What pre-assessment tools can be utilized to assess candidates' leadership skills and potential?
- (Probe) what leadership skills/competencies can be tested, if pre-assessments are introduced at this stage?
- (Probe) How can you redesign and enhance stakeholder involvement in the selection process to ensure fairness?

1.3. How can the Department of Education improve the Interview Committee to give preference to appointments based on merit?

- (Probe) How can the Department of Education guarantee that there are no biases or conflicts of interest on the selection committee?
- (Probe) How can the independent and openness of the selection process be guaranteed by an independent panel or observer?
- (Probe) How would you train and develop members of the interview committee to improve their ability to evaluate and lessen bias?
- (Probe) How can the interview committee be redesigned with stakeholders to guarantee impartiality and openness?

1.4. How can the Department of Education enhance the interview and shortlisting processes that facilitate the appointment of merit-based principals?

- (Probe) Would selecting deputy principals over other applicants during the principalship shortlisting process guarantee a more efficient and excellent selection? If not, why not?
- (Probe) How do scenario-based or case study interview questions assess candidates' leadership abilities?
- (Probe) How can the interview and shortlisting processes maintain confidentiality?
- (Probe) What steps can be taken to guarantee integrity during the shortlisting and interview process by preventing laptops, cell phones, and other recording devices from entering the interview space?

Sub-research question 2:

What policy reforms are needed to ensure that the principal selection process promotes the appointment of ethical leaders?

2.1. In order to guarantee moral leadership selection, how can the Department of Education strengthen the minimum qualifications for principalship positions?

- Should post-graduate qualifications like an honours or master's degree be required for principalship positions? What possible impacts might these have on the quality of school leadership?
- What impacts could professionalise principalship through accreditation or licensing have on the level of competence and responsibility of school principals?
- Should SACE create initiatives to support licensing or accreditations? Why not?

2.2. What strategies could the Department of Education use to help teachers develop and become ready for principal positions, so they are prepared to run schools successfully?

- What evidence need to be presented to teachers as evidence of participating in a training program?
- Should educators be empowered through online professional development programs?

2.3. What support systems can be put in place to help newly appointed principals succeed in their roles?

- What role should mentorship programs play in supporting newly appointed principals?
- How can the Department of Education evaluate the effectiveness of the principal selection process?

2.4. What strategies can school, and districts employ to identify and develop potential future principals, ensuring a strong pipeline of leadership talent?

- What role should succession planning play in the principal selection process, and how can it be integrated into the overall leadership development strategy?

- What criteria should be used to evaluate the effectiveness of principalship succession planning, and how can its impact on school performance and learner results be measured?

Section B: Document Analysis

1. **According to Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) 2022, Section B.5.2.1, job advertisements for vacant educator posts must be clear and include essential details such as the minimum requirements, application process, contact person, preferred appointment date, and application deadline. Mopp (2022) emphasizes that fair promotion practices require job advertisements to specify both minimum and preferred requirements for the role. Additionally, once a position has been advertised, the selection criteria should remain unchanged to ensure a fair and consistent hiring process.**

   1.1. How can the policy be improved to ensure that preferred requirements are clearly defined, relevant to the role, and fairly used in the selection process?
   - (Probe) How can the policy be updated to include competency-based testing in a way that gives all qualifying candidates an equal opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills and potential for the principal role?

2. **According to Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) 2022, Section B.5.3 (Sifting process), the employing department must acknowledge all received applications by: providing written confirmation to applicants, specifying whether their application is complete, and indicating whether the applicant meets the minimum requirements for the post. Additionally, the department must inform applicants if their application has been forwarded to the relevant institution.**

   2.1. The policy says that all applicants must be informed in writing about their application status, but some circuits do not do this. How does this lack of communication affect fairness, transparency and accountability when handling educator job applications?
   - (Probe) What systematic improvements can be introduced to ensure that every applicant, successful or not, gets notifications or proper feedback throughout the selection process?

3. **Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) 2022- Section B.3.2.1.1 (b) provides that a school principal must have recognised three-or-four-year qualification, which includes professional teacher education, registration with SACE as a professional educator, and 7 years of actual teaching experience**.

3.1. The policy currently allows a level one educator with seven years of actual teaching experience to qualify for a principal position. In your opinion, does teaching experience alone sufficiently prepare candidates for school leadership, or should additional management experience be required? Why?

- (Probe) How should the selection process balance different factors such as academic qualifications, teaching experience, leadership ability, and management expertise to ensure the appointment of competent and ethical principal?
- (Probe) What policies or incentives could be introduced to ensure that educators who invest in further studies and leadership training are recognised and given meaningful opportunities for career progression?

4. According to Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) 2022, Section B.5.4.2, the interview committee must include one representative from the department, members of the school governing body (SGB), excluding any educator members who have applied for the position, and one representative from each union. Additionally, the committee must select a chairperson and a secretary.

4.1. If you were to redesign the interview committee to promote ethical leadership and fairness, what changes would you make in terms of its composition?

- (Probe) How would these changes improve transparency and professionalism in principal appointments?

THANK YOU

Appendix H: Language Editor's Certificate

[redacted]
[redacted]g
[redacted]
AMANZIMTOTI
4126

Phone:
[redacted]2
E-mail:
s[redacted]
ail.com

Dr Saths Govender

8 JUNE 2026

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

LANGUAGE CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

This serves to inform that I have read the final version of the dissertation titled:

Towards best practices in school-based promotion processes: A case study of principal selection, by Sibonelo Mthiyane, student no. 224024338.

To the best of my knowledge, all the proposed amendments have been effected and the work is free of spelling and grammatical errors. I am of the view that the quality of language used meets generally accepted academic standards.

Yours faithfully

[redacted]

DR S. GOVENDER

B Paed. (Arts), B.A. (Hons), B Ed.
Cambridge Certificate for English Medium Teachers
MPA, D. Admin. (2003)