



Challenges of School Leave Policy Implementation in Northern Gauteng: Voices of School Principals

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Abstract

Implementing education policy is a dynamic and multifaceted process involving numerous stakeholders, and several factors can hamper its effectiveness. School principals, as the most crucial figure in leading the implementation of policies in schools, often face multiple challenges when applying the policy in practice. This study explored the principals challenges of implementing school leave policy in public South African schools. A qualitative methodology was employed, utilising a case study design. Five public primary school principals and five secondary school principals were purposively selected. Semi-structured interviews and document review were used to gather data from school principals, and data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that the challenges in implementing the school leave policy were primarily due to educators' lack of knowledge about the policy and its entitlements. There were delays in submitting leave forms, educators' failure to report absences, and their refusal to complete leave forms. Some educators extended leave of absence, which affected teaching and learning. In conclusion, the study recommends the need for stricter enforcement, increased educator awareness, and enhanced district-level support to prevent administrative inefficiencies and ensure the smooth operation of schools.

Keywords: Implementation, Leave policy, Challenges, Monitoring, Public schools

Introduction

Effective education policy implementation is often constrained by systemic challenges, such as inadequate planning, weak stakeholder engagement, and rigid strategies that fail to respond to complex, evolving educational contexts (Viennet & Pont, 2017). In South Africa, despite the introduction of progressive education policies following the democratic transition in 1994, implementation has remained uneven, particularly regarding the school leave policy (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018). The Department of Basic Education (DBE), through regulatory frameworks such as the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM, 2016), Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) agreements, Public Service Coordinating Bargaining Council (PSCBC) resolutions, and the Employment of Educators Act (No. 76 of 1998), has established clear guidelines governing educator leave. However, implementation at the school level remain ineffective. This is primarily attributed to weak management practices, non-adherence to procedural requirements such as the eight-week rule, and inefficiencies within the Policy and Procedure on Incapacity Leave and Ill-Health Retirement (PILIR) system (Mashaba & Maile, 2018).

Studies further highlight barriers such as weak accountability mechanisms, competing stakeholder interests, frequent policy shifts, poor communication, and limited institutional capacity as significant impediments to the effective implementation of school leave policies (Gabuza, 2015; Nkuna, 2020). Internationally, policy implementation is affected by political instability and administrative discontinuities. Frequent changes in government often result in new administrations prioritising their own agendas, leading to resistance to or neglect of existing policies (Ahmed & Dantata, 2016; Jahn, 2019; Ogunode et al., 2021). Such dynamics contribute to inconsistencies in policy enforcement over time. The European Commission (2015), reports that countries such as Italy and Greece continue to experience difficulties in implementing school leave policies due to high levels of teacher absenteeism and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Similarly, the Canadian Teachers' Federation report, *Teacher Absenteeism in Canada*, underscores the importance of effective leave management systems in maintaining school functionality.

Despite the availability of policy frameworks, many schools struggle to manage educator leave effectively and lack coherent strategies to control absenteeism (Bipath et al., 2019). Moletsane et al. (2015) notes that under-resourced schools are disproportionately affected, as educator absenteeism places additional strain on remaining staff and often generates negative perceptions towards those who take leave. Although this body of global and national literature provides valuable insights, a notable gap remains regarding the lived experiences and challenges South African school principals face in implementing the school leave policy. International scholarship similarly attributes implementation failures to poor policy design, inadequate planning, and weak oversight mechanisms (Farooqi & Forbes, 2020; Anderson & McKenzie, 2022). Regional studies from Nigeria, Namibia, Tanzania, and Pakistan further reveal the role of corruption, political interference, and administrative inefficiencies in undermining policy implementation (Ogunode et al., 2021; Hipondoka, 2017; Naviwala, 2016).

The effective implementation of the educator leave policy is critical to the smooth functioning of schools. School principals, as the primary agents responsible for implementing policy at the institutional level, often face significant challenges in translating policy provisions into practice. These challenges are rooted, in part, in shortcomings within the educator preparation process at tertiary institutions. Ayenalem et al. (2023) argue that educator training programmes frequently place insufficient emphasis on professional ethics, legal frameworks, and the practical realities of the teaching profession. This gap contributes to a culture of unprofessional conduct, including chronic absenteeism and disregard for established workplace protocols (Kontagora et al., 2018). Although Ferguson et al. (2022) found that educators generally understand leave procedures, many perceive the requirement to continuously provide supporting documentation as burdensome, which may influence compliance behaviours.

Outdated administrative systems further exacerbate these challenges. In many contexts, leave management continues to rely heavily on manual, paper-based processes, requiring educators to complete physical forms, locate approving officials, and personally ensure that leave is processed (Afsana, 2018). Wallace (2020) found that schools where educator unions successfully negotiated additional leave days recorded significantly higher rates of absenteeism. While such negotiations are intended to enhance educator welfare, they may inadvertently weaken accountability mechanisms and reduce work ethic among some educators. Gardner (2020) similarly reports higher absenteeism among unionised educators than their non-unionised counterparts. In Canadian schools, poor communication between educators and school management has also been identified as a challenge, with some educators failing to notify administrators timeously of their absence (Gibbs, 2024). Comparable patterns have been observed in South African schools, where employees frequently fail to report for duty as expected (Mgandi, 2017). Such absenteeism disrupts teaching and learning, places additional pressure on school management teams, and necessitates last-minute adjustments to timetables, duty allocations, or substitute arrangements.

Although this body of global and national literature provides valuable insights, a notable gap remains regarding the lived experiences and challenges South African school principals face in implementing the school leave policy. This study is guided by the following research question:

RQ 1: “What challenges do school principals experience in implementing the educator leave policy?” was the research question posed by this study.

Literature Review

Policy Implementation Globally

Effective policy implementation is crucial to achieving the intended goals of any policy. Inadequate implementation may lead to unintended consequences, inefficiencies, or even harm to the intended beneficiaries of the policy (Aminu & Aisha, 2025). The success of any policy ultimately depends on how well it is implemented. The effectiveness of leave policy implementation is integral to maintaining institutional efficiency, minimising disruptions, and ensuring compliance with established policies (Afsana, 2018).

The importance of effective implementation is reflected internationally, where personnel leave management policies have received considerable attention in efforts to reduce teacher absenteeism. Various measures have been introduced to regulate sick leave usage, establish sick leave banks, create income protection plans, formalise absence reporting procedures, and introduce incentive programmes to promote consistent educator attendance (Eagle, 2017). These policies encourage responsible use of leave entitlements while ensuring that educational institutions are not adversely affected by excessive absenteeism. There has been a shift in perception, with sick leave increasingly being viewed as a resource that should be accessed only when necessary instead of an automatic entitlement (Chamblee, 2015). Despite these international efforts, effective implementation remains dependent on institutional leadership and administrative capacity.

Strong leadership plays a key role in successful policy implementation, which can play a crucial behind-the-scenes political role in aligning diverse competing interests to support policy execution (Tezera, 2019). Nkuna (2020) stated that poor policy implementation in South African schools is often attributed to several interrelated challenges. These challenges include conflicts between policy formulation and the interests of various stakeholders, frequent high-level policy reviews that disrupt consistency, a lack of administrative capacity to enforce policies, ineffective communication strategies, and inadequate involvement of key personnel in policy execution. This challenges suggests a disconnect between policymakers and school-level implementers may result in policies that are impractical or inconsistently implemented.

School principals' perspectives on the implementation of educator leave policy in schools

Maintaining educator discipline is one of the principal's perspectives regarding the implementation of an educator leave policy. Regarding the implementation of the educator leave policy in schools, the principal is of the view that educators should be disciplined professionals who follow rules and guidelines that regulate attendance and conduct within the institutions (Mgonja, 2017). These policy pressures indirectly affected educator discipline through an emphasis on student outcomes and accountability of school leadership for educator performance (James, 2018).

One of the major aspects of school principals' perspectives on the implementation of educator leave policy in schools is controlling educator leave of absence. As Mashaba and Maile (2018) state the primary purpose of the educator leave policy in South Africa, is to manage educator absences systematically and transparently from the perspective of the school principal. Similarly, countries such as Papua have put in place strict control mechanisms over teacher absenteeism such that district education offices require teachers to present a valid medical certificate after an absence, and failure to do so makes the absence an unexcused absence (Werang et al., 2019). School leaders believe that absenteeism can be significantly reduced when policies are effectively communicated and enforced so

effective rules are critical for managing educator absenteeism (Karppinen et al., 2021). According to Akom et al. (2021), the leave of absence policy is designed to manage different types of leave entitlements available to teachers and put in place processes and procedures for applying for and approving these leaves.

The importance of strict and consistent implementation of the Educator Leave Policy. The aim is to prevent abuse of leave days and entitlements (Mashaba & Maile, 2018). Werang et al. (2019), also found a relationship between educator attendance, learner academic performance, and learning outcomes. The more frequently educators are absent, the more badly learners' basic skills of reading, writing, arithmetic, and critical thinking are impaired. Jackson (2018) indicated that educator absenteeism is a major hindrance to learners' academic progress. When educators are absent, students experience disruptions such as reduced teaching time, less feedback, and inconsistent academic support, which ultimately hinders their learning trajectory. These disruptions often result in confusion, poor academic performance, and disengagement of learners (Bonsu et al., 2023).

Strategies employed by principals in the implementation of the educator leave policy in schools

Chanda et al. (2022) recommend continued engagement through different platforms of professional development such as training sessions, awareness meetings, conferences, and regular supervision. Mothibeli (2017) states that district officials are key in providing continuous support, mentorship, and follow-up to help principals manage leave policies effectively. In addition to ongoing professional development and district support, effective implementation of leave policies start with the induction of the newly appointed educators. Msosa (2020) stresses the importance of changing mindsets at an early stage in the career of an educator. New educators need to be trained to take their work seriously, to understand the broader implications of absenteeism, and to appreciate how absenteeism affects school reputation, learner performance, and overall institutional effectiveness. Without such orientation, new educators may struggle with the complexity of certification and registration processes, and institutional expectations, including attendance requirements (Ferguson et al., 2022). When explained clearly during induction, these systems enhance transparency and help track attendance trends while promoting educator accountability (Karppinen et al., 2021).

While professional development and induction strengthen educators' understanding of leave policies, schools also require effective monitoring systems to support policy implementation and promote accountability. Regular staff meetings and briefings should continue to reinforce these expectations, with school leaders emphasising the importance of responsible leave-taking and the need to avoid unnecessary absences (Chanda et al., 2022). The shift from manual attendance systems to digital platforms has gained international traction due to the increasing need for accuracy, accountability, and transparency in employee attendance management. Biometric fingerprint registers, in particular, offer a highly secure and efficient means of recording attendance, as they rely on unique individual identifiers that are virtually impossible to forge (Alam et al., 2024). These systems capture exact arrival and departure times and facilitate monitoring punctuality and adherence to official working hours. Their reliability lies in their capacity to authenticate attendance using personal biometric data, thereby reducing opportunities for fraudulent sign-ins or proxy attendance (Sogoni, 2023; Yang et al., 2019). However, despite their benefits, such technologies have not been uniformly adopted across all countries. In South Africa, for example, the Department of Basic Education proposed implementing an electronic clocking-in system. Yet, the teacher unions opposed this initiative, arguing that the root causes of absenteeism should be addressed instead of relying on digital enforcement tools (Msosa, 2020). Beyond fingerprint systems, newer technologies such as facial recognition, powered by artificial intelligence and machine learning, offer even greater precision and have been identified as among the most advanced forms of biometric verification (Abdulrahman & Alhayani, 2023).

The result significantly improves educator punctuality, attendance accuracy, and overall institutional discipline (Yang et al., 2019). In the South African context, adopting the South African

School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS) marks a significant development in educational data management. Unlike traditional systems focused on aggregated statistics, SA-SAMS provides a longitudinal view of learner and educator attendance. It allows principals, district officials, and policymakers to track absenteeism trends and make data-informed decisions (Van der Berg et al., 2025). Developers have introduced methods such as liveness verification and encryption to address these vulnerabilities and protect biometric templates (Alam et al., 2024). These measures are essential for ensuring the integrity of attendance systems and protecting sensitive personal data. These security measures have become increasingly important within the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) where educational institutions rely heavily on digital information systems. It has transformed how information is treated within institutions, positioning it as a vital asset that must be digitised, organised, and protected (Nkambule & Ngubane, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Van Meter and Van Horn's (1975) Policy Implementation Model, which conceptualises implementation as a dynamic and interactive process involving multiple actors, including public and private stakeholders, who undertake deliberate actions to achieve policy objectives (Devi & Yulianandra, 2023). The model is particularly relevant to the context of school leadership, where principals serve as frontline implementers of government policies. Olin et al. (2021) describe policy implementation as the translation of policy intentions into concrete actions that ensure effective execution. According to Van Meter and Van Horn's (1975) the success of policy implementation is influenced by six interrelated variables: policy standards and objectives; resources; inter-organisational communication and enforcement activities; characteristics of implementing agencies; the economic, social, and political environment; and the dispositions or attitudes of implementers (Bempah & Kanmiki, 2017; Yesrahmatulah et al., 2021; Ningsih et al., 2023). The challenges experienced by school principals in implementing leave policy are closely linked to these variables, particularly the broader economic, social, and political environment in which policy implementation occurs. Van Meter & Van Horn's (1975) Policy Implementation Model offers a suitable theoretical framework for analysing this study. The six variables are used to analyse and comprehend the challenges that school principals encounter in implementing the educator leave policy.

Methodology

This study is situated within the constructivist paradigm, which prioritises participants' subjective meanings and seeks to understand social phenomena through individuals' lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The constructivist paradigm was considered appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of school principals' experiences in implementing the school leave policy within their specific contexts. A qualitative research approach was employed to examine how principals interpret, apply, and experience the implementation of the educator leave policy in their schools (Kamal, 2019). Leedy et al. (2021) state that a qualitative approach is particularly useful for generating insights into underexplored phenomena and for uncovering the complex layers of relationships, processes, and contextual influences that shape human behaviour.

Research design

Consistent with a qualitative approach, data were collected in the natural settings where principals experience the phenomenon under study, with direct, face-to-face engagement forming a central component of the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). A case study design was adopted to facilitate an intensive and systematic investigation of multiple units, including individuals and institutional contexts (Heale & Twycross, 2018). The study focused on 10 schools in Northern Gauteng, five primary and five secondary schools to capture variation in the implementation of school leave policies across educational phases. This approach enabled the generation of rich, context-specific insights into each school's practices and experiences on implementing of leave policy.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select 10 school principals – 5 from primary schools and 5 from secondary schools – from a total population of 161 principals in Northern Gauteng. Participants were selected based on their direct responsibility for implementing the school leave policy within their respective schools (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Data collection

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexible, open-ended engagement while ensuring that key issues related to policy implementation were explored consistently across participants (Patil & Aditya, 2020). In addition, document analysis was conducted, with particular attention given to the official educator leave policy. The review of policy documents provided essential contextual understanding, supplemented interview data, and strengthened the credibility of the findings through triangulation (Dalglish et al., 2020; Billups, 2020). This strategic utilisation of the policy document helped to corroborate the interview findings, allowing cross-reference and corroborate the perspectives and experiences shared by the participants.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, which enabled the identification, interpretation, and organisation of recurring patterns and themes within the dataset. This approach offers a systematic yet flexible framework for detailed description and theoretical understanding of qualitative data (Myers, 2020; Saunders et al., 2023). Through thematic analysis, the study generated nuanced insights into the challenges school principals face in implementing the school leave policy.

Ethical consideration

Trustworthiness in the study was ensured through four key criteria, such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was achieved by allowing participants to openly share their experiences and by giving them opportunities to review and verify the data and findings. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and procedures so that others can judge the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was ensured through thorough documentation of all research processes, making the study transparent, consistent, and traceable. Confirmability was maintained by minimising researcher bias through reflection, using a clear coding process, and keeping an audit trail to ensure that findings were derived directly from the data.

Trustworthiness

In this study, formal permission was obtained from the University of Pretoria, the Gauteng Department of Education, the Tshwane West District, and participating school principals who signed consent forms. Anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms like Principal A-J. Overall, ethical standards were upheld by safeguarding participants' rights, avoiding coercion, and ensuring responsible and transparent research practices.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study. Analysis of the interview data revealed five key themes related to the challenges school principals face in implementing the educator leave policy. These themes include: educators' lack of knowledge of the leave policy and their entitlements; refusal by some educators to complete leave application forms; delays in submitting leave forms; failure by educators to report their absences timeously; and prolonged or extended periods of leave. Together, these themes illustrate systemic and behavioural challenges that undermine effective implementation of leave policy at the school level.

Lack of Knowledge on Leave Policy and Entitlements

School principals reported that one of the most significant challenges in implementing the educator leave policy is educators' limited knowledge and understanding of the policy and its associated

entitlements. Principals emphasised that many educators are unfamiliar with the different categories of leave and the specific number of days allocated to each. This lack of knowledge often results in confusion, miscommunication, and tension between educators and school management, thereby complicating the leave management process.

Participants further noted that some educators are unaware of the procedural requirements for applying for leave, including completing the required leave forms and adhering to the prescribed processes. One participant had the following to say in this regard:

“The challenges are that most of the educators, when a person takes leave, do not know the kind of leave, then he says, Principal, I do have challenges, I will not come to work. When he or she is supposed to fill in a leave form, he or she comes to me and asks me, What type of leave should I write?” (Principal A)

“The issue of the leave register is for us to be able to control and also, you know, enable the employee to track his or her days, you know. But some teachers would not want to sign it. So those are challenges that sometimes when you hire people who are from another school or province, they would not be used to signing a leave register, and they would not be used to such. And when you implement it, they become surprised, and they would like you to understand and to sympathise with them.” (Principal H)

“I have a challenge with teachers who would go on leave, not knowing how many leaves are left for a particular type of leave. Now, I have an example of a teacher who is on leave, and never knew how many days she got, and now she is supposed to be on the PILIR. I think it will be proper for each educator to know the number of days before going on leave; then, it will be easier to implement.” (Principal F)

Collectively, these findings suggest that educators frequently make errors in their leave applications due to insufficient knowledge of leave policies and procedures. This observation is consistent with Sabarwal et al. (2022), who identify inadequate awareness of leave requirements as a global challenge, with educators often misunderstanding or disregarding policy provisions. These challenges resonate with Van Meter and Van Horn's (1975) Policy Implementation Model, which emphasises the importance of clear communication and shared understanding among implementers for effective policy execution. In the context of educator leave policy, effective and unambiguous communication is essential to ensure correct implementation. Where communication is inadequate or inconsistent, educators are more likely to misapply the policy, thereby undermining its effectiveness at the school level.

Refusal to Complete Leave Forms

Participants reported that some educators deliberately refuse to complete the required leave documentation, despite being aware that this constitutes a mandatory administrative procedure. Principals expressed frustration that such refusals undermine their ability to maintain accurate records and to comply with the Department of Education's regulatory requirements. This behaviour was described as particularly challenging in cases of frequent absenteeism, where educators fail to submit leave forms unless explicitly reminded or compelled to do so. Principal A had the following to say in this regard:

“I said, where were you? What were you doing? Another challenge is for those educators who are frequently absent but do not want to fill out the leave forms. If you forget to give them leave forms, they will not fill in the leave forms.” (Principal A)

Regarding the refusal to fill in the leave forms, Principal C said the following:

“Except for those who would say, ‘I am not filling out the form,’ the challenge we normally face is when educators have exhausted their sick leave days and are expected to submit the PILIR forms. So, we struggle to get the PILIR forms from the educators, who are supposed to be filled in by doctors, and without the PILIR forms, the department will not allow the school to hire a substitute educator.” (Principal C)

In this regard, Principal J reported that:

“ One of the challenges is that in the past, I used to have educators who refused to fill in forms, claiming that in some schools, there is no filling in of forms. So, I had to take them to the district; unfortunately, the issue was never resolved, maybe because one of those educators had a friend in that unit. So, they only came and told the educator to fill in the forms; however, there was no consequence management for their actions.” (Principal J)

These findings align with Ferguson et al. (2022), who report that although educators generally understand leave processes, many perceive the requirement to continuously provide supporting documentation as onerous. Nevertheless, without accurate and complete leave records, school principals are unable to monitor absenteeism patterns effectively or enforce policy compliance. This undermines both administrative efficiency and instructional continuity. In line with Van Meter and Van Horn's (1975) Policy Implementation Model, the disposition and attitudes of policy implementers – both educators and school leaders – play a critical role in determining the success or failure of policy implementation. In this context, educators' resistance to administrative procedures significantly weakens the effective implementation of the school leave policy.

Extension of Leave of Absence

Participants reported that some educators extend their leave of absence without prior consultation or formal approval from school principals. Such extensions were often initiated unilaterally and without a clear understanding of the regulatory implications of increasing leave days without authorisation. Principals indicated that this practice undermines formal leave procedures and places school management in a reactive position. This is what the participants said:

“Educators would come to the office to negotiate for an extra number of days, even though the extra days were not covered by the regulation on leaves. But it is a regulation.” (Principal B)

Another recurring challenge identified by principals involved educators extending their leave telephonically. As far as leave extension, Principal C stated the following:

“Another problem is the extension of leave of absence telephonically by educators. The educators will phone you to say they have extended their leave by another month. But he or she takes time to submit the medical certificate. And most probably, if you do not monitor their leave days thoroughly, they will always take advantage of the leave application process.” (Principal C)

Principal F assert the following in this regard:

“And some of our educators have a tendency to extend their leaves, not knowing the implications. Especially after the holidays, they will extend by one day, not knowing the implications thereof.” (Principal F).

Principals emphasised that extending leave immediately after school holidays has become a recurring pattern, which they interpreted as an indirect strategy to lengthen time away from work without official approval. Such practices place considerable strain on school operations, as remaining educators are required to cover for absent colleagues, resulting in increased workloads and disruptions to teaching and learning. These findings resonate with Van Meter and Van Horn's (1975) Policy Implementation Model, which underscores the importance of clear communication among departments and stakeholders to ensure that policy standards and objectives are consistently understood and enforced. In the absence of effective communication and monitoring mechanisms, informal practices such as unauthorised leave extensions become normalised, thereby weakening the implementation of the educator leave policy and compromising school functionality.

Delays in the Submission of Leave Forms

Participants identified delays in submitting leave forms as a persistent challenge in implementing the educator leave policy, particularly in cases involving extended sick leave managed under the PILIR. Principals indicated that these delays have serious operational consequences, as they prevent the timely appointment of substitute educators to assume the responsibilities of staff members

on leave. When leave documentation is not submitted within prescribed timeframes, schools are left without replacement educators, resulting in disruptions to teaching and learning and, ultimately, adverse effects on learners' academic progress. Principal C's account in this regard was as follows:

"The challenge that we normally have is when educators have exhausted their sick leave days, and they are expected to submit the PILIR forms. So, we struggle to get the PILIR forms from the educators, who are supposed to be filled in by doctors, and without the PILIR forms, the department will not allow the school to hire a substitute educator." (Principal C)

Regarding the late submission of the PILIR application forms, Principal D said the following:

"As a principal, you do not know whether you are going or coming, and then others will stay for the 21-day leave. Educators do not submit the leave forms or PILIR forms in time, which affects the implementation of the leave policy." (Principal D)

Principal B had the following to say:

"One of the issues that affects the proper implementation of leave policy is the delay by the doctor to fill in the PILIR forms for the educators, which disrupts the entire process of leave management". (Principal B)

The findings indicate that the delayed submission of leave forms creates significant administrative challenges for both school management and district offices, as leave documentation must be processed before substitute educators can be appointed. Morifi (2015) similarly observes that employees frequently delay the completion and submission of leave applications to provincial offices. Chanda et al. (2022) emphasise that early and clear communication regarding leave enables principals to make timely arrangements that minimise disruptions to school schedules. In the South African context, Mothibeli (2017) further notes that delays in submitting leave forms hinder the timely capture of leave data on the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS). The failure to capture leave information promptly contributes to administrative inefficiencies and increases the risk of inaccuracies in leave records, thereby weakening the overall implementation of the educator leave policy.

Educators' Failure to Report Absences

Participants shared that educators' failure to report their absences timeously constitutes a significant challenge in the implementation of the educator leave policy. Principals indicated that poor communication regarding absences disrupts school operations and delays efforts to safeguard teaching and learning time. When educators do not notify school management in advance or at the onset of their absence, principals are unable to make timely arrangements for substitute teaching or internal cover, thereby negatively affecting learners' academic progress. Principal D shared the following about their experiences regarding this challenge:

"At some point, I had a teacher who did not report, though she knew that she was supposed to report; she was absent for 8 days without reporting, and I would call her." (Principal D)

About reporting absence by educators, Principal C said the following:

"At times, we have situations where one can become sick while he or she is at home. That person will simply visit the doctor. If possible, inform the immediate superior telephonically that I am admitted to the hospital or I have been booked off from this day until this day." (Principal C)

Principal D said the following in this regard:

"The other challenge is when people are not reporting their absenteeism. In my school, educators report before 7:00 through a call to indicate whether they are running late or have any other absenteeism; no SMS or WhatsApp is accepted as a form of reporting." (Principal D)

The findings suggest that educators' failure to report absences to their immediate supervisors remains a significant obstacle to the effective implementation of the educator leave policy. Mgema (2022)

similarly notes that educators are expected to seek formal permission before being absent from duty. Ndung'u (2017) further argues that some educators deliberately fail to notify their supervisors, fabricate illnesses, or neglect to submit the required documentation. Such practices create operational and logistical difficulties for school principals, who are tasked with implementing the policy under constrained conditions. When educators fail to communicate planned or unplanned absences timeously, confusion arises, substitute arrangements are delayed, and learning time is lost, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of the educator leave policy and the functioning of schools.

Discussions

This study examined school principals' experiences with the challenges they encounter in implementing the school leave policy. Principals operate within complex and constrained environments characterised by weak accountability mechanisms, poorly managed leave systems, limited managerial capacity, and inconsistent enforcement of policy provisions. These challenges are consistent with previous studies that identify policy implementation in schools as being undermined by inadequate leadership support, limited administrative skills, and systemic inefficiencies (Gabuza, 2015; Kloppers & Roods, 2017; Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018; Beckmann & Jacobs, 2018; Mashaba & Maile, 2018; Nhlapo, 2018; Jahan, 2019; Tezera, 2019; Nkuna, 2020; Gibbs, 2024). These limitations severely impair principals' capacity to successfully implement the educator leave policy effectively. The engagements with the principals revealed five interrelated challenges that impede effective policy implementation. First, educators' lack of knowledge regarding leave policies and entitlements emerged as a fundamental barrier. Many educators demonstrated limited understanding of leave categories, procedural requirements, and entitlement limits.

This lack of awareness often led to confusion, incorrect leave applications, and the assumption that absence from work is an entitlement rather than a regulated condition of service. Such attitudes contribute to high levels of absenteeism and place principals in a position where they must continuously clarify policy provisions, rather than enforce them. Asiyai (2017) asserts that in many African countries there is a challenge in the lack of relevant training to implement leave policies effectively. This finding reinforces concerns in the literature about educators' inadequate policy literacy and its implications for accountability and compliance. Second, educators' refusal to complete leave forms reflects a deeper challenge related to compliance and professional responsibility. The findings show that some educators deliberately avoid submitting required documentation, particularly after exhausting their leave entitlements. Educators often felt burdened by the continuous expectation to provide evidence to validate their requests (Ferguson et al., 2022).

The absence of consistent consequence management, particularly when cases are escalated to district offices appears to reinforce non-compliance and foster a culture of impunity. This finding aligns with earlier studies that highlight weak enforcement mechanisms and inconsistent disciplinary practices as significant obstacles to policy implementation in schools. Third, the extension of educators' leave of absence beyond approved limits further illustrates the vulnerability of the leave management system to exploitation. Educators were reported to negotiate additional leave days outside policy provisions, extend leave telephonically, or prolong absences following school holidays. These practices suggest a normalisation of informal arrangements that undermine the integrity of the leave policy. When leave extensions are not closely monitored, principals struggle to assert authority, and policy standards become negotiable rather than enforceable. This finding highlights the importance of effective monitoring systems and clear communication of policy boundaries. Fourth, delays in submitting leave forms emerged as a significant operational challenge.

Late submission of forms prevents the timely appointment of substitute educators, as departmental regulations require completed documentation before replacements can be approved. As a result, schools experience prolonged staffing gaps, which disrupt teaching and learning and compromise learners' academic progress. This finding underscores how administrative inefficiencies at multiple levels of the system collectively weaken policy implementation. Lastly, educators' failure to report absences timeously significantly disrupts school operations. Principals often become aware of absences only after discovering unattended classrooms, by which point learning time has already been lost. Although some principals have

introduced internal communication protocols to mitigate this challenge, persistent non-compliance limits their effectiveness. The failure to report absences not only undermines leave management but also reflects broader issues of professional accountability and communication within schools. This demonstrates that school principals face substantial challenges in implementing the educator leave policy, despite being formally positioned as its primary implementers. The non-compliance with leave procedures, combined with weak district-level enforcement and limited administrative support, undermines principals' authority and the overall effectiveness of the policy. It highlights the urgent need for stricter enforcement of leave regulations, improved educator awareness of policy requirements, and stronger district-level support mechanisms. Without these interventions, administrative inefficiencies will persist, and the smooth operation of schools and the protection of teaching and learning time will remain compromised.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study highlights a significant issue that educator absenteeism is still a major roadblock for effective school management. Principals are struggling to implement leave policy, mainly because of gaps in how policy is enforced, along with communication and support from the district. To address these challenges, the study suggests key actions such as providing targeted training for educators, raising awareness about the leave policy, enforcing regulations more strictly and enhancing support from the district level. These efforts aim to make the policy work better, streamline administration, and ultimately protect the quality of teaching and learning. Additionally, this research adds to the limited existing literature on how school leadership perceives educator leave policy implementation and it calls for some studies to strengthen the effectiveness of these policies.

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