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A systematic review of key contextual challenges facing school principals: Research-informed coping solutions

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Abstract

The function of school leadership has been significantly changed by the multi-layered school context to meet the demands of stakeholders. Increasing autonomy and accountability pressures have made it difficult to maintain the balance of principals' tasks, which gives rise to a variety of challenges. This study adopted a descriptive quantitative form of a systematic review to analyse 169 related studies about the challenges faced principals and research-informed coping solutions for such challenges published in the international journals indexed by the WoS, SCOPUS, and ERIC databases between 2001 and 2020. This analysis identified 734 contextual challenges, including challenges related to principals' roles and actions (31%) influenced by institutional contexts (24%), socio-cultural contexts (11%), stakeholders (3.4%), and parents (5.2%). Additional contextual challenges were related to the leading staff (6%) and teachers (7.9%). Finally, 11.2% of the contextual challenges corresponded with concerns about student performance. This research highlights the need for modifying leadership preparation programs in a context sensitive manner, active participation of all stakeholders in setting school targets and methods for achieving them, and creating a supportive culture that encourages mutual progressive trust between governments, local communities, and school principals.

Keywords

principal leadership, principals' challenges, research-informed coping solutions, systematic review

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Introduction

The growing emphasis on school autonomy and accountability policies has increased the intensity and complexity of school principals' work (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Pont, 2020; Pont et al., 2008; Tan et al., 2020). Principals are now expected to be an 'instructional leader, human resource manager, financial planner, strategic advisor, counselor, staff and parent mediator, mentor, [and] coach' (Wicher, 2017 p. 24), and each of these roles must be sensitive to the context (Hallinger, 2018a). For instance, principals need to develop leaders' understanding of stakeholders expectations in different contexts (Brauckmann et al., 2020; Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2016; Wieczorek and Manard, 2018) and ensure that the ever-growing and changing demands both within and outside of school are met (Earley, 2016; Gumus et al., 2018; Pan and Chen, 2011). The changing expectations around principals' attitudes, values, norms, behaviours, and practices in different educational and cultural contexts has created challenges for maintaining the balance of principals' tasks —challenges that could hinder school functioning and day-to-day operations (Huber, 2004; Oplatka, 2004).

With these increasing expectations following the growing complexity of the job of principal, scholars have developed an interest in understanding the challenges facing principals in a wide variety of roles. For instance, research has provided empirical evidence clarifying the challenges facing novice principals (e.g. Karakose et al., 2014; Pineda-Báez et al., 2019; Spillane and Lee, 2014; Tahir et al., 2021), public school principals (e.g. Hallinger et al., 2017a, 2017b; Mansor et al., 2020; Maxcy et al., 2010), and female principals (e.g. Altinkurt and Yilmaz, 2011; Cruz-González et al., 2020; Ndebele, 2018), as well as challenges that emerged due to their role as instructional leader in rural schools (Wieczorek and Manard, 2018) and varying demands and expectations from diverse stakeholders (Wong and Liu, 2018). In response to such a large body of literature, there has been an increasing enthusiasm among educational scholars to systematically review studies on the problems faced by school principals (Tintoré et al., 2020; Wise, 2015).

However, the available meta-analytic literature on the challenges facing principals is lacking on two main fronts. First, while there is considerable evidence of the challenges situated in specific
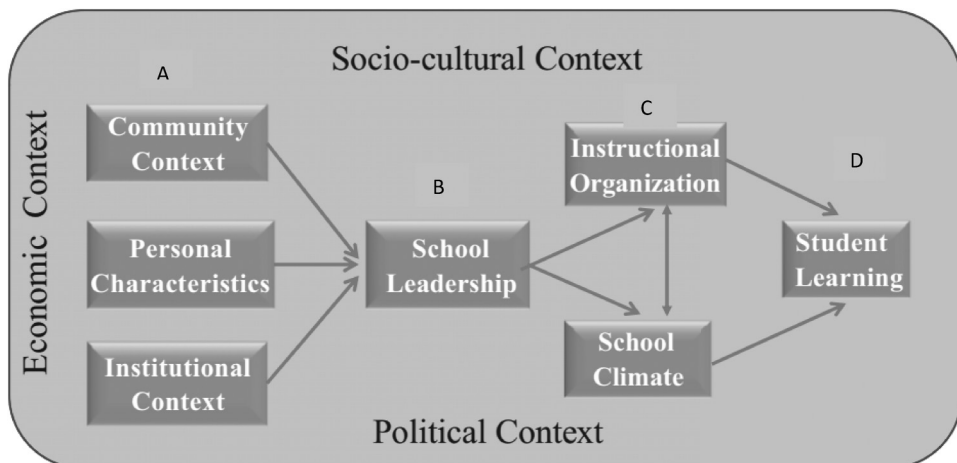
Figure 1. Conceptual framework (from Hallinger, 2018a).

national contexts (often with relatively small samples), far less is known about the problems and challenges facing school leaders in different contexts (Tintoré et al., 2020). Second, despite the considerable endeavour among scholars to identify challenges, there is a substantial literature gap regarding responses to these challenges. That is, we are aware of various problems facing principals but we do not have much knowledge about what researchers offer as coping solutions to these problems. Thus, the key contribution of this review is to synthesise a range of contextual challenges alongside research-informed coping solutions. We believe this study could contribute to the work of school principals by enabling them to compare the challenges they face with other principals working in different contexts, as well as to benefit from solutions posed by researchers. It also bears potential to provide evidence for future researchers to focus on solutions tailored to the challenges of different, multi-layered school contexts, as well as to aid policymakers in enhancing the capacity of school leaders through preparation and training (Pont et al., 2008). The following research questions guided the review:

RQ1. What are the volume, geographic description, and methods included in studies on the challenges facing school principals?

RQ2. What are the major challenges facing school principals, as outlined in these studies?

RQ3. What are the research-informed coping solutions to the challenges facing school principals, as proposed in these studies?

Conceptual framework

Consistent with scholars in the field of education, we use 'challenge' interchangeably with 'problem' (e.g. Brauckmann et al., 2020; Spillane and Lowenhaupt, 2019; Tintoré et al., 2020), however, these terms are not semantically the same. Spillane and Lowenhaupt (2019) argue that defining problems is a difficult job because problems are not tangible things that lurk under the floorboards of the schoolhouse, awaiting discovery by a new principal. Problems are social constructions built on the subjective interpretations of those who encounter them; thus, a problem emerges in the 'gap between desired and actual state', which leads to a challenging situation (Tintoré et al., 2020). In line with Spillane and Lowenhaupt (2019), we believe that many of the challenges that principals confront can be solved, while others should be managed. Therefore, in this study, we use the term 'challenges' mean problems that, when clearly identified, can be effectively addressed by policymakers and principals.

To provide a proper structure to categorize the identified challenges facing principals, this review adapted a conceptual framework developed by Hallinger (2018a), originally based on the Far West Lab instructional management model (Bossert et al., 1982). This framework highlights context and personal antecedents (labelled A); leadership/management roles and actions (B); the features of school organization, teachers, curriculum, and instruction (C); and school outcomes and student learning (D). Based on this framework, the challenges facing principals can arise from numerous factors associated with the context, leadership background, leadership/administrative practices and behaviours, features of school organization, curriculum, and teachers, as well as students and the interplay among them.

Contextual factors here are the key to understanding challenges since they are strongly linked to the nature, quality, and effectiveness of school leadership practices, as well as their outcomes (e.g. school structure, processes, and student learning) (Hallinger, 2018a; Harris and Jones, 2018; Pashiardis et al., 2018). The literature highlights that the contextual elements in these different

levels have tremendously altered the nature of school leadership practices and redefined the responsibilities of principals over time (Earley, 2016; Pont, 2020). This context manifests itself through the macro-social, political, institutional, economic, cultural (Hallinger, 2018a), and national and local levels (Brauckmann et al., 2020; Harris and Jones, 2018). Other contextual factors might include the 'socio-economic, educational, and family context' (Pashiardis et al., 2018, P. 6), as well as 'situated, professional, material, and external conditions' (Braun et al., 2011; Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2016). At the micro level, the differences between schools (e.g. primary/secondary, urban/rural, public/private, etc.) might indicate the school context factors (Hallinger, 2018a). This conceptual framework implies that these macro- and micro-dimensions of the context shape and challenge the practices of school leaders to influence school structures, resources, processes, and teachers and to improve teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2018a).

Methodology

In this study, we employed a descriptive quantitative form of a systematic review of research (Hallinger, 2013) to identify, analyse, and synthesise the results of previous studies on the challenges faced by school principals and the coping solutions they employed, based on global experiences. In this section, we describe the methods used to identify the sources in the databases used for this review, extract information from the individual documents, and analyse the findings drawn from the documents.

Identifying sources for the review

We conducted an extensive internet search to find relevant peer-reviewed studies published between 2001–2020 by searching the Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) databases, which have been recognized as the main respected sources that publish high-quality research and were used by in the majority of previous reviews in this area (e.g. Hallinger, 2019; Kılınç and Gümüş, 2021; Tintoré et al., 2020). We selected this period because concerns around successful school leadership and management were initially attributed to the International Successful School Principal Project in 2001, which remains ongoing (Gurr, 2015). The review selection process, adapted from Moher et al. (2009), is illustrated in the PRISMA flow chart in Figure 2. According to our analysis, the Scopus database covers 62% of the total articles (105 peer-reviewed articles), demonstrating the richness of this database for our study. To ensure that the current research covered all relevant studies, we extended our search to the Web of Science and ERIC databases as well. The Web of Science and ERIC databases each provided 19% (32 peer-reviewed articles) of the total papers. It is worthy to note that 31 of the studies (14%) in our sample were common across all three of the databases.

A keyword search, which is the most preferred strategy for identifying relevant sources within a database, was conducted in the international English-language journals indexed in the three databases using the following terms:

> '*problems or challenges of school principals*', '*issues in educational management and leadership*', '*challenges of principal leadership and school management/administration*', '*challenges of school leadership and management and administration*', '*issues in school leadership and management*', '*educational leadership's issues and challenges*', '*challenges of school leadership*', '*issues and challenges of principalship*', '*management and leadership issues for school*', '*issues and challenges of school*
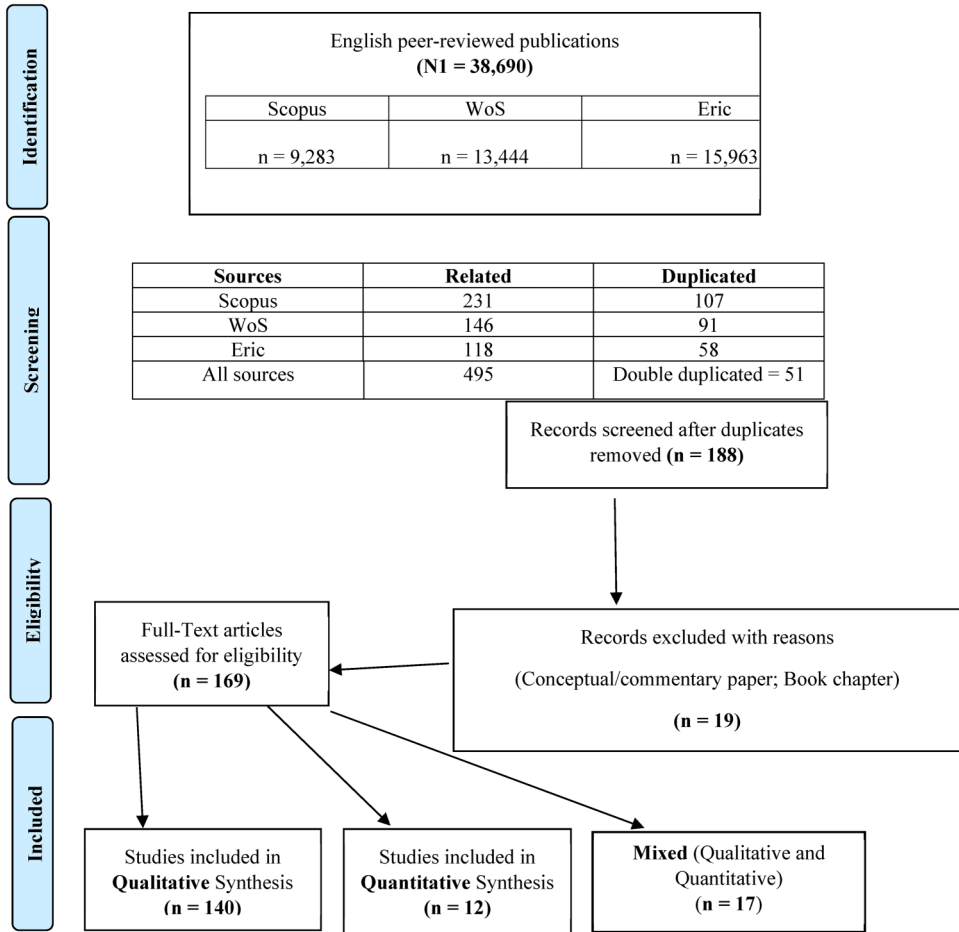
Figure 2. The review selection process is based on PRISMA flow chart.

leaders', 'challenges of school principal management and leadership', 'current issues in school leadership and school principal', 'barriers and obstacles to school leadership and school principal', and 'international successful school principals project (ISSPP)'

Data extraction and analysis

After identifying the relevant articles, their data were extracted into an Excel spreadsheet. In addition to extracting demographic information (title of the article, the author(s), journal, study year, publication volume, country, and subject area), the theoretical and methodological details relating to each paper—including research foci, variables, research questions, conceptual model, research method (i.e. qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method), sample, data analysis methods, and findings—were extracted and coded immediately. Initial codes were used to describe the publication

patterns over time and across different regions of the world. Additionally, a research approach employing descriptive statistics was used to code the tables and graphs.

In the second phase of analysing data, content analysis methods were applied to identify the challenges and solutions mentioned in the studies. In the first step, the researchers engaged in line by line coding of the study findings to classify the challenges they outlined. Then, the themes that emerged were categorized according to Hallinger's (2018a) framework into four domains: contextual antecedents, leadership roles and actions, features of school organization, and student outcomes. Finally, the themes based on the four domains of the conceptual model were coded and categorized according to the educational systems of the developing and developed countries, because principals operate under different role sets in highly centralised versus more decentralised systems. According to the conceptual framework of this study, the contextual antecedents included institutional, community, and political factors. Institutional context referred to the education system and the state, regional, or district units that comprise it. The community context that emerges out of features, such as the area's socio-economic status and whether schools are urban and rural, are linked to differences in the allocation of physical and financial resources. The political context shapes the beliefs, attitudes, and normative practices of school leaders. Moreover, a country or region's level of economic development shapes many of the conditions that impact a principal's work, including teacher quality, class size, per-pupil expenditures, parental education and involvement, school facilities, size and quality of libraries, and access to technology. Finally, leaders must adapt their leadership styles in ways that conform to the prevailing values and norms in their different socio-cultural contexts. The solutions were also coded based on the implications and suggestions proposed by the scholars in each paper.

Limitations

The current review was limited in several ways, and these limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. The first limitation can be attributed to the scope of the reviewed studies. Since we conducted our search based on peer-reviewed publications in international journals, we could have missed peer-reviewed non-English publications from national and/or regional databases. Second, because this review involved analysis of a large number of documents, we are only able to provide a general view of the challenges and associated coping solutions. Thus, we are unable to reflect a deeper understanding of the challenges of each individual study's context —a typical limitation of this type of systematic review of literature. A final limitation involves the variety of the keywords under investigation. Although we conducted an extensive search of three comprehensive databases in the field of education, there were still instances where we were unable to retrieve the full text of articles.

Results

This section details the results of our analyses by first describing the general characteristics of the publications in the study sample. Then, we present an analysis of the themes that emerged from the principals' challenges and researched-informed coping solutions, considering the theoretical framework of the study. For each theme, we first list the most frequent challenges, before outlining the solutions proposed by the researchers.

General description of the studies

Here we provide a general description of the reviewed studies, including their volume, geographical distribution, and research methods employed.

The volume of publications. The analysis of the year of publication indicated a sharp and consistent uptick in the publication volume over the 20-year period from 2001 to 2020. Notably, the number of publications gradually increased after 2010. While only 32 articles were published between 2001–2010, after 2010 this number increased to 137 articles (81%). The number of articles in this area continued to rise to 106 published articles (63%) since 2014 onwards, demonstrating an overall increase among scholars in the challenges faced by school principals (see Figure 3).

Geographical distribution. The results of the review indicated that more than 40 countries, from across all continents, had publications concerning this topic. Asian countries had the greatest number of publications, with 40 total (see Figure 4). The single country with the highest volume of publications in this field was the USA (n = 24). Notably, 23 articles in the sample involved multinational studies (13%). Further analyses revealed that 91% of the studies were conducted in urban school environments, while only 9% were situated in rural schools.

Research methods employed. Our analysis also sought to track the research methods employed by the scholars authoring empirical papers within this dataset. The results revealed that most of the studies (83%) involved qualitative research approaches. Mixed methods approaches comprised 10% of the reviewed articles, while only 7% of the articles were based on a quantitative research approach (see Figure 5)

Challenges and solutions

This section categorizes the challenges faced by principles, as well as their coping solutions, based on the conceptual framework of the study. The content analysis of the reviewed articles identified 734 challenges that were categorized into four main domains: contextual antecedents (*institutional* [24%], *socio-cultural* [11%], *stakeholder* [3.4%], and *parent* [5.2%] *challenges*), leadership/management roles and actions (31%), the school organization (*teacher* [7.9%] *and staff* [6%] *challenges*), and student performance challenges (11.2%) (Table 1). As indicated in Table 1, most of the challenges centred around principal roles and practices (31%) and institutional contexts (24%).
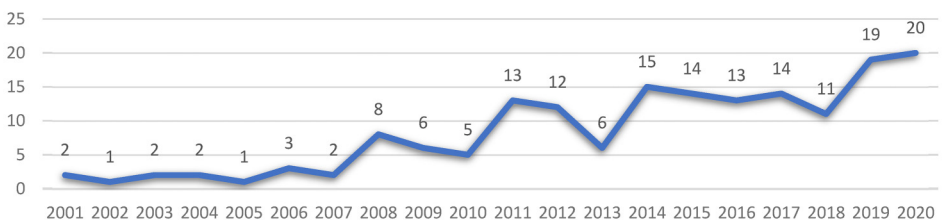

Figure 3. The publication volume over time, 2001–2020.
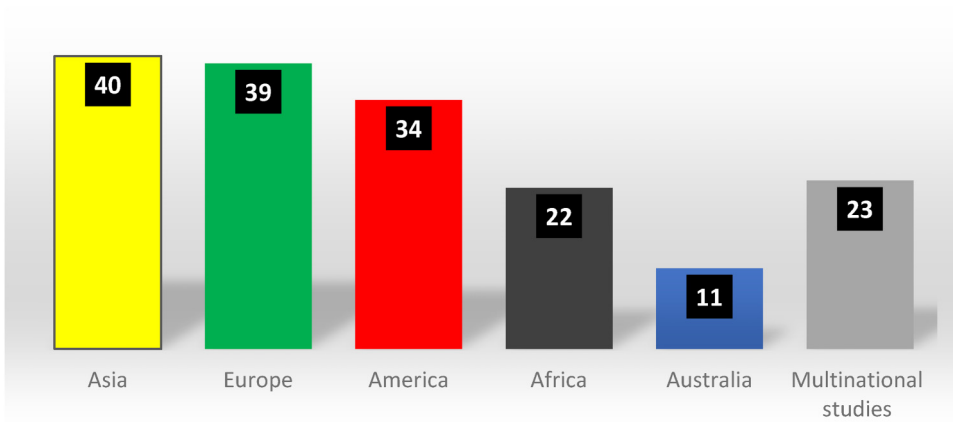
Figure 4. Number of articles by continent.

Contextual antecedents

Challenges and solutions in the institutional context. In this context, system centralisation or decentral-isation represents the most dominant force shaping the task environment of principals. According to the results, an autocratic outlook on the educational system, bureaucratisation, and political orders functioned as the main challenges that principals faced in centralised systems (Akkary, 2014; Bailey and Gibson, 2019; DeMatthews et al., 2020). Our review revealed that constant change from one program to another and lack of attention to the consequences of the program made principals confused, especially in decentralised education systems (Davies, 2002; Garza et al., 2014). Moreover, inadequate and insufficient educational equipment resulting from low school funding,
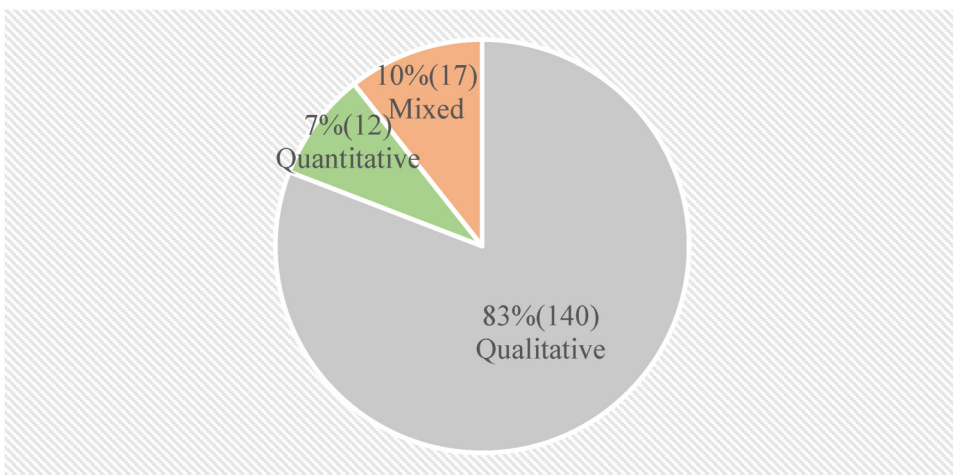
Figure 5. Distribution of studies by research approach.

Table 1. The categorization of the challenges facing principals influenced by the school context.

Domains	Subdomains	Challenges	n articles
Contextual antecedents (A)	**Institutional**	Bureaucracy and limited autonomy	42
		Ambiguity in educational policies	26
		Financial constraints	40
		Poor governmental support	11
		Lack of adequate facilities	45
		Political pressures	15
	Total		*179*
	Socio-Cultural	Cultural diversity	23
		Cultural gaps	6
		Ideological tensions	19
		Social injustice	11
		Gender inequalities	22
	Total		*81*
	Stakeholders (communities)	Conflicting interests of stakeholders	9
		Poor working relationships	16
	Total		25
	Parents	Demotivation	7
		Low involvement	22
		Limited(parents-school) relationships	9
	Total		*38*
Leadership/management roles and actions (B)	**Principals**	Demotivation	19
		Low performing	20
		Poor working relationships	13
		Workload pressures	59
		Role conflict	40
		Poor professional development	74
	Total		*225*
Features of the school organization (C)	**Teachers**	Demotivation	15
		Low-performing	10
		The shortage of teachers	5
		Poor professional development	18
		Poor relationships	11
	Total		*59*
	Staff	Demotivation	7
		Poor participation	9
		Poor professional development	10
		Poor relationships	10
		The shortage of school staff	8
	Total		44
Student learning (D)	**Students Performance**	Indiscipline	16
		Physical and mental health problems	7
		Limited student-student relationships	17

Table 1. (continued)

Domains	Subdomains	Challenges	n articles
		Poor learning and academic achievement	22
		Unhealthy learning climate	21
	Total		*83*

lack of financial investment, and even governmental budgeting were among the challenges that concerned principals in this area (Table 2) (Karakose et al., 2014; Sandoval-Estupiñán et al., 2020).

Whether operating in a centralised or decentralised educational system, it is essential that administrators and policymakers account for contextual factors while planning, in order to cope with institutional challenges (Gurr et al., 2006; Huong, 2020). Researchers have suggested that the relationships between educational policymakers and school leaders must be based on mutual trust and the power should be distributed, particularly in developing countries (Forfang, 2020; Poon-McBrayer, 2017). Such scholars contend that schools should enhance their collaboration by developing interdependency with each other, and that principals must persuade different stakeholders as well as the government to allocate grants for improving infrastructure (Brauckmann and Schwarz, 2014; Noman et al., 2016; Ozen, 2019).

Socio-cultural context. Our analysis revealed that some key challenges for principals may arise from socio-cultural norms (Table 2). The differences between national and local cultures, especially in multicultural countries (see Gillett et al., 2016 [Australia]; Lumby and Foskett, 2011 [South Africa]; Pisapia et al., 2013 [USA, China, and Hong Kong]); gender bias, particularly against women (Altinkurt and Yilmaz, 2011; Shah, 2009); and stereotypes and religious bias (Camarero-Figuerola et al., 2020; Nehring and Lohmeier, 2010; Romanowski et al., 2018) were reported as the common socio-cultural challenges within South American, Asian, and African countries in the reviewed studies.

The reviewed studies explained that principals can manage and resolve socio-cultural challenges by recognising cultural diversity, appealing to local values (Pisapia and Pang, 2013), rebalancing religious opinions (Arar et al., 2018), representing gender-neutral viewpoints (DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003), and promoting social justice (Johnson et al., 2008).

Stakeholders and parents. Dealing with diverging perspectives and managing the demands of various groups are arduous tasks for the principals of developed countries like the USA, England, and Spain (Table 2). Meanwhile, in other contexts, principals face problems due to the low commitment and participation of stakeholders and local communities (Forfang, 2020; Karakose et al., 2014; Klar and Brewer, 2013). When talking about parents, this case is even more complicated. The results showed that low parental participation and differences between family cultures are important challenges for the principals of developing countries such as Turkey, the UAE, and Qatar (Litz et al., 2020; Romanowski et al., 2018).

Table 2. The challenges facing principals on contextual antecedents.

Challenges Institutional	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
Lack of adequate facilities	Inadequate infrastructure; poor facilities and a lack of resources; poor facilities of the school; physical unsafety of school; the remoteness of small rural schools; unequal allocation of resources between schools; inadequate and insufficient educational equipment; poor curriculum development	n=45 (e.g. Drago-Severson et al., 2014; García-Garnica, 2018; Garner and Forbes, 2013; Litz et al., 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2020)	Improving infrastructure (enough laboratories, classrooms, gymnasiums, and space for social activities such as theatre, painting and carpeting the plant, purchasing equipment, and new furniture); using new technologies by preparing appropriate facilities and equipment (hardware and software)	n=45 (e.g. Forfang, 2020; Karakose et al., 2014; Mulford et al., 2008; DeMatthews et al., 2020)
Ambiguity in educational policies	Constant change from one program to another; lack of attention to the consequences of the program; new policies and few clear guidelines; too much reformation; rhetorical, elusive, and contradictory policies; the dearth of functional and transparent policies; the old and new paradigms duality; lack of multiple planning; predominance of management and no room for leadership implementation; no clear	n=26 (e.g. Litz et al., 2020; Mestry et al., 2013; Mistry and Sood, 2012; Mulford et al., 2008; Szeto, 2020)	Creating clear vision developing joint educational goals; modifying goals and programs continuously; concerning the quality of education; holding long term planning and counseling; noticing for contextual factors while planning. Paying equal attention to all lessons, developing a distinctive curriculum for local schools, having a review of textbooks	n=19 (e.g. Ahumada et al., 2015; Leithwood, 2001; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Ordóñez-Sierra et al., 2020; Szeto et al., 2015) n=7 (e.g. Brauckmann and Schwarz, 2014; Bush and Glover, 2016; Slater et al., 2008)

Table 2. (continued)

Challenges Institutional	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
	policies for students' enrolment; low contextualize policymaking			
Bureaucracy and limited autonomy	Autocratic outlook on the educational system; bureaucratization; imposition of policies; autocratic initial decisions and the lack of independent decision-making; the numerous sub-divisions and departments; hierarchical education system; strict policy regulations; unequal power distribution; centralized schools; failure to delegate appropriate authority to school principals	n = 42 (e.g. Brinia, 2011; Davies, 2002; Ordóñez-Sierra et al., 2020; Stynes and McNamara, 2019; DeMatthews et al., 2020)	Giving more autonomy and empowerment to schools; distributing power; developing the interdependency of schools to each other	n = 42 (e.g. Brauckmann and Schwarz, 2014; Bush and Glover, 2016; Jones et al., 2015; Slater et al., 2008; DeMatthews et al., 2020)
Financial constraints	Economic deprivation; low-income families; low funds of schools; poor fee; lack of budget; lack of financial investment; low salaries of staff, teachers, & principals; lack of income-generating projects in schools	n=40 (e.g. Costa et al., 2019; Lumby and Azaola, 2011; Karakose et al., 2014)	Acquiring grants to gain resources; creating a new payment system by performance; holding timely fee collection; allocating sufficient budget for education	n = 40 (e.g. Çevik, 2019; DeMatthews, 2014; Karakose et al., 2014; Mulford et al., 2007)
Poor governmental support	Constraints in supporting all schools by the government; ambiguity in the rules; inadequate support from the	n = 11 (e.g. Abaya, 2015; Brinia, 2011; Maxcy et al., 2010)	Avoiding politics; complying with the government; being open to ideas & suggestions;	n = 26 (e.g. Brauckmann and Schwarz, 2014; Costa et al., 2019; Shapira et al., 2011)

Table 2. (continued)

Challenges Institutional	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
	system; unsupportive environment; insecurity in the community; inadequate finances by the government		making mutual trust between education policymakers & school leaders; holding a positive working environment	
Political pressures	Political resistance to change; political conflicts; overwhelming mandates from governments; political orders, and interference	n = 15 (e.g. Cruz-González et al., 2020; Lumby and Foskett, 2011; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Shapira et al., 2011)		
Socio-Cultural				
Cultural diversity	Multi-cultural difficulties; international cultural differences; national/local differences; the unfamiliarity of culture within educational leadership; deficient learning support for heterogeneous groups; cultural dissonance; different school cultural contexts	n=23 (e.g. Van Jaarsveld et al., 2015; Lumby and Foskett, 2011; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Maxcy et al., 2010)	Recognition of cultural diversity; local cultural influences; cross-cultural comparisons; culturally coherent education	n=29 (e.g. Lumby and Foskett, 2011; Slater et al., 2008; Szeto et al., 2015; Wong and Liu, 2018)
Cultural gaps	Cultural gaps between urban and rural; power distance; geographical isolation	n=6 (e.g. Johnson et al., 2008; Lumby and Foskett, 2011; Madsen and Mabokela, 2014)		
Ideological tensions	Religious bias and faith identity; racially stratified education system; deeply embedded culture; cultural effects on principals' professional development; students'	n=19 (e.g. Irvine and Brundrett, 2016; Bush and Glover, 2016; Nthontho, 2018)	Rebalancing religious opinion; appealing to local values; investigating popular misconceptions; positive attitude towards issues of	n=19 (e.g. Camarero-Figuerola et al., 2020; Madsen and Mabokela, 2014; Merchant et al., 2012)

Table 2. (continued)

Challenges Institutional	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
	religious beliefs; the resistance of traditional culture; negative perception of public school education; pressures of hidden' social norms		difference; local values consideration	
Social injustice	The manifestation of social tensions in schools; illiteracy, poverty, and social background; marginalization; media negative effect; inequitable circumstances; constant social interactions; inadequate social infrastructure; socio-political disturbance	n=11 (e.g. Costa et al., 2019; Cruz-González et al., 2020; Lopez and Rugano, 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2020)	Representing gender-neutral viewpoint; promoting social justice by principals' simple actions; having workshops about gender equity; legislation on gender equality in education	n = 33 (e.g. Arar et al., 2018; Lopez and Rugano, 2018; Mai and Brundrett, 2019; Pineda-Báez et al., 2019; DeMatthews et al., 2020)
Gender inequalities	Discrimination and prejudice against women; gender bias; patriarchal hierarchy; stereotypes ideas; negative beliefs	n=22 (e.g. Brinia, 2011; Camarero-Figuerola et al., 2020; Cruz-González et al., 2020; Lumby, 2015)		
Stakeholders (Communities)				
Conflicting interests of stakeholders	Stakeholders disagreement; diverging perspectives of stakeholders; demands of various pressure groups; variety of stakeholders; just focus on the interests of a group	n = 9 (e.g. Ahumada et al., 2015; Cobb, 2015; Meyer and Patuawa, 2020; Zulu et al., 2019)	Redefining the roles of all stakeholders; building powerful learning communities; more accountability demands; shared and supported the vision of learning	n = 9 (e.g. Bush and Glover, 2016; Camarero-Figuerola et al., 2020; Maxcy et al., 2010)
	Lack of trust for stakeholders;	n = 16 (e.g.	Increasing participation	n = 16 (e.g. Hajisoteriou and

Table 2. (continued)

Challenges Institutional	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
Poor working relationships	full of conflict relationships; the lack of support of stakeholders; lack of appreciation of stakeholders; lack of connection between the local community and the school; the low commitment of stakeholders; low participating of stakeholders	Camarero-Figuerola et al., 2020; Day, 2004; Karakose et al., 2014; Moos et al., 2008; Service and Thornton, 2019)	and cooperation of the community in the educational sector; fully engaged in professional networks	Angelides, 2013; Mestry and Schmidt, 2011; Moswela and Kgosidialwa, 2017; Slater et al., 2008; Varela et al., 2019)
Parents				
Low involvement	Lack of family support; low parental engagement and participation; biased attitudes of the parents; pessimistic parents about positive change	n=**22** (e.g. Alsharija and Watters, 2020; Drago-Severson et al., 2014; Ordóñez-Sierra et al., 2020; Varela et al., 2019)	Developing training activities for parents; balancing family and school responsibilities; transmitting values to the families; the collaboration of schools with parents	n = **29** (e.g. Çevik, 2019; González-Falcón et al., 2019; Klar and Brewer, 2014; Pineda-Báez et al., 2019)
Demotivation	The constant change of parental expectations; family problems(separation); low-income families; the hopelessness of families	n=**7** (e.g. Abaya, 2015; Carr, 2016; Irvine and Brundrett, 2016; Merchant et al., 2012)		
Limited(parents-school) relationships	A hostile parents' association; loss of close relationships; the distance between the families; parents interference; language barriers and prejudice for families; differences between family cultures	n=**9** (e.g. Abaya, 2015; Litz et al., 2020; Pashiardis et al., 2018; Styron and Styron, 2011)	Creating a supportive environment at home; home visits to parents; trusting in families; effective parent-school communication	n=**9** (e.g. Arar et al., 2018; Medina et al., 2014; Mulford et al., 2008; Shapira et al., 2011)

To manage these challenges, it appears that the roles of all stakeholders, especially those within local communities, should be redefined to increase their participation and cooperation, and to build a powerful learning community in both developed and developing countries (Bailey and Gibson, 2019; Camarero-Figuerola et al., 2020; Nehring and Lohmeier, 2010; Webb et al., 2012). Some scholars suggest considering and being sensitive to parents' cultural backgrounds and norms, which may differ from those of the school faculty and staff. Specifically, effective collaboration between schools and parents in the developing countries of Asia and Africa could be enhanced by balancing family and school responsibilities (Zulu et al., 2019), giving home visits to parents, and trusting in families (Ghazali et al., 2020; Pineda-Báez et al., 2019).

Leadership roles and actions. Principals, especially those who are novice school leaders, often find themselves confronted by responsibility shock. These administrators' challenges arise in large part due to a glut of managerial responsibilities, such as balancing between everyday task management and handling unexpected contingencies (Chu and Cravens, 2012; Cruz-González et al., 2020; Hernández-Castilla et al., 2017) Furthermore, the lack of adequate context-based leadership preparation programmes leads to poor professional development for principals in both centralised and decentralised education systems (Cravens et al., 2012; Service and Thornton, 2019; Tian and Huber, 2019). Ineffective communication resulting from low support and trust, a duality between work and home tasks, low expectations, and lack of confidence due to a stressful climate pose additional challenges that concern principals (Table 3) (Davies, 2002; Tahir et al., 2019).

The top priority for solving principals' leadership challenges, in both centralised and decentralised education systems, involves improving their professional development and preparation programs. Interventions in this area must be progressive and continuous, with professional development ideally taking place before an individual assumes a new principalship, so that they know how to lead and manage different responsibilities (Mestry and Schmidt, 2012; Sepuru and Mohlakwana, 2020). Principals must build a sense of community and cohesion and establish a trusting climate in schools through simple actions, such as accepting new ideas and listening to others (Ndebele, 2018; Spillane and Lee, 2014); likewise, they must handle their work/life balance and pay attention to the context in which they are working (Notman and Henry, 2011; Shah, 2009).

Teachers and staff. Our review revealed that principals sometimes could not achieve their goals due to shortages of certified teachers, principals' reluctance to take on new functions, and their excess teaching workload, particularly in Asian and African countries (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Mai and Brundrett, 2019; Mansoor, 2015). Also, when investigating non-teaching school staff, the results showed that a lack of creative and innovative staff, resistance to change, unskilled staff, and conflicts of interest between school staff created different problems, mainly for principals working in developing countries (see Table 4) (Alsharija and Watters, 2020; Styron and Styron, 2011).

To cope with faculty and staff challenges, the studies in the literature suggested increasing teachers' involvement in school decision-making and monitoring their progress regularly. Moreover, principals should hire interested and diligent teachers, enhance their knowledge and practice through continuous training, and support all teachers equally in both centralised and decentralised education systems (Cobb, 2015; Fink and Brayman, 2006; Hammad and Shah, 2018). Evidence has shown that when principals consider non-teaching staff by providing academic training for their preparation and professional growth and involving them in setting the school's objectives, they

create a culture of support and mutual respect (DeMatthews, 2014; Gurr-Mark et al., 2010; Stynes and McNamara, 2019).

Student performance. Principals believe that student truancy and absences, disobedience regarding school and classroom rules, and violence against peers were shared challenges of centralised education systems (Table 5). Based on our analysis, additional problems related to students in both centralised and decentralised education systems included communication difficulties due to language barriers and cultural diversity, the weight of many expectations placed upon students, and low academic achievement (Bailey and Gibson, 2019; Drysdale and Gurr, 2011; González-Falcón et al., 2019; Szeto, 2020).

No matter how centralised or decentralised education systems manage the challenges related to student learning and performance, the analysis indicated that students need safe, supportive, and equitable school environments for continuous learning (Bush and Glover, 2016; Medina et al., 2014). Furthermore, such learning should be collaborative and co-constructive to support students' holistic development (Chu and Cravens, 2012; Tahir et al., 2019).

Discussion

This review aimed to analyse and synthesise 169 peer-reviewed studies on principals' challenges and coping solutions. The findings were structured based on the conceptual framework proposed by Hallinger (2018a), considering four domains of challenges: contextual antecedents, leadership/management roles and actions, features of school organization, and student learning. Research-informed coping solutions are provided in the following implications section.

The review showed that school principals inevitably confronted major challenges in both centralised and decentralised educational systems. Although the evidence highlights differing impacts of the various institutional contexts on principals' role definition and behaviour in strictly centralised and decentralised systems, some similarities were also identified. Challenges such as the poor professional development of principals, teachers, and staff, alongside low performance and poor working relationships were traced in both centralised (e.g. USA, Belgium, Finland, England, and Spain) and decentralised (e.g. Mexico, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and South Africa) educational systems. On the other hand, challenges such as the demotivation and low involvement of parents and stakeholders, bureaucracy, limited autonomy, ambiguity in educational policies, poor governmental support, and ideological tensions were more prevalent in the centralised systems (e.g. Chile, Qatar, Botswana, and Saudi Arabia) than decentralised systems (e.g. Sweden, Canada, Iceland, and Norway). For example, the principals in centralised systems were strictly controlled by central authorities and had little role in setting school targets. In contrast to the principals that felt the heavy burden of rules mingled with bureaucratisation (Raihani, 2008; Saiti, 2009), the principals in more decentralised systems often blamed their problems on the constant changing of their national educational systems (Earley, 2016; Hallinger, 2019; Irvine and Brundrett, 2016). This finding is consistent with the results of Tintoré et al. (2020), who explained that the more governments talk about autonomy, the more aspects of national systems are controlled, and the greater the necessity to achieve standards.

In both developed and developing countries, principals faced accountability pressures to balance both stakeholder and parent expectations when communicating with their local communities (González-Falcón et al., 2019; Service and Thornton, 2019). Consistent with Tintoré et al. (2020), a growing lack of respect for school leaders coincides with the increasing demands and

Table 3. The challenges facing principals on leadership roles and actions.

Challenges Principals	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
Demotivation	Low expectations; the lack of confidence; low work ethic; principals' resistance to the diversity of students; no positive recognition for their work; fear of failure; the stressful climate on principals; novice principals' lack of credibility between staff and stakeholders; intrapersonal dilemmas, and psychological problems of principals; negative attitude towards feedback by new principals; senior principal insistence on not moving to a new school; lack of foresight	n=19 (e.g. Mahfouz et al., 2019; Medina et al., 2014; Nthontho, 2018; Pashiardis et al., 2018; Tahir et al., 2019)	Supporting novice principals; maintaining the positive achievements of previous principals; establishing a trusting climate in school by simple actions such as accepting new ideas; protecting freedoms of followers(staff-teachers-student-parents-stakeholders)	n=19 (e.g. Al-Jaradat, 2014; Brinia, 2011; Mansor et al., 2020; Nthontho, 2018; Ordóñez-Sierra et al., 2020)
Low performing	Lack of transparency in the performance of principals; lack of ability to make big decisions; difficulties in leading improvement efforts; discipline tensions; poor staffing, and negligence in managing affairs; wrong goals setting; inability to implementation of new models; too much pride on success; inequitable schooling	n = 20 (e.g. Arar et al., 2018; Gurr et al., 2010; Meyer and Patuawa, 2020; Mulford et al., 2008)	Using context-based leadership styles; knowing how to lead; having work/life balance; spending less time on administrative tasks and more time developing others; establishing joint decision-making; managing tensions and dilemmas by analytical and strategic skills; holding high-performance expectations for staff, teachers, and students	n=79 (e.g. Costa et al., 2019; Cruz-González et al., 2020; Ghazali et al., 2020; Mestry, 2017; Romanowski et al., 2019)
Workload pressures	Accountability pressure on principal; high task volume on principals; responsibility shock on principals; low flexibility in strategies by principals; principal inability to fulfill their educational goals; doing routine matters;	n = 59 (e.g. Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2016 Irvine and Brundrett, 2016; Stynes and McNamara, 2019; Van Jaarsveld et al., 2015)		

Table 3. (continued)

Challenges Principals	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
	time management issues; dealing with the unexpected matters; lack of any long-term strategic plan to match educational and human resource needs; low degree of autonomy; turnover of principals; highly idiosyncratic 'craft' for the work of principal; management of students misbehavior; complex-diverse contexts where principals are working			
Role conflict	Difficulty in the adaptation of novice principals to a new environment and role; lack of attention to the leadership role; differences in principals' attitudes to school administration; principals personal life events factors; a duality between work-home, and administrative-academic tasks	n=40 (e.g. Abaya, 2015; Arar et al., 2018; Cruz-González et al., 2020; Hochbein et al., 2017; Service and Thornton, 2019; Stynes and McNamara, 2019)	Having a clear vision; thinking strategically; hardworking and full devotion to the job; not being a perfectionist; using humor; having educational and scientific insights	n=40 (e.g. Brinia, 2011; Mansor et al., 2020; Mistry and Sood, 2012; Ordóñez-Sierra et al., 2020; Poon-McBrayer, 2017; Zame et al., 2008)
Poor professional development	Low professionalism; lack of support and trust; exclusions from the processes of developing; isolation and loneliness of novice principals; lack of adequate preparation program; needs for further	n=74 (e.g. Brinia, 2011; Camarero-Figuerola et al., 2020; Mestry, 2017; Sepuru and Mohlakwana, 2020; Szeto et al., 2015)	Holding compulsory training and development programs; principals' continuous and in-service preparation program; training before assuming new principalship positions; giving clear guidelines for principals; having contextualized school leadership preparation; developing of using women in leadership positions	n=74 (e.g. Mestry, 2017; Sepúlveda and Molina, 2019; Sepuru and Mohlakwana, 2020; Slater et al., 2008; Szeto et al., 2015)

Table 3. (continued)

Challenges Principals	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
	research for principals' leadership practice; limited attention to the instructional dimension of the role; not investing of delivering training skills; problematic selection and employment of principals by the central-office; needs for efficient and effective in-service training; lack of effective assessment and evaluation			
Poor working relationships	Needs of fostering harmony in the school between staff by principals; principals facing violence; principals hurdles of relationships with stakeholders; lack of coherence of a leadership team; having less contact with pupils by principals; distant treatment with parents by principals; lack of effective communication by principals, limited access to the information of educational institutions	n = 13 (e.g. Lee et al., 2012; Moswela and Kgosidialwa, 2017; Murakami and Tornsen, 2017; Tian and Huber, 2019)	Listening to the others; sharing of senior principals 'experiences; being cooperative and communicative; building a sense of community and cohesion; networking between schools	n = 13 (e.g. Brinia, 2011; Cruz-González et al., 2020; Sandoval Estupiñán et al., 2020; Tahir et al., 2019; Tian and Huber, 2019)

expectations from families and society. This review also indicated that some principals in decentralised educational systems had no specific programs to involve parents or the local community in school matters (Dolph, 2016), while in centralised systems, principals' disconnection with families led to decreased family participation (Noman et al., 2016). Specifically, further regional analyses revealed that the studies conducted in developed countries—namely Australia, the USA, and nations in western Europe—were mainly concerned with the challenges posed by the poor professional development of principals, teachers, and staff, as well as their workload pressures. On the other hand, the studies conducted in developing countries in Asia and South America were generally concerned with the ambiguity in educational policies and bureaucracy, as well as the poor professional development of principals, teachers, and staff. Furthermore, developing nations in Africa mainly focused on ideological tensions and gender inequalities, alongside the poor professional development of staff. By adding leadership functions to the managerial roles of principals in both developed and developing countries, the workload pressures of principals and staff have greatly increased (Camarero-Figuerola et al., 2020; Hammad and Shah, 2018; Sepuru and Mohlakwana, 2020). Principals must handle educational goals as well as their leadership roles and managerial responsibilities; however, their poor professional development often prevents them from balancing these duties (Abaya, 2015; Drysdale and Gurr, 2011).

The most important challenge reported by the scholars surrounding the socio-cultural problems stemming from school context involved the culmination of social tensions, norms, and the cultural values of the environments of both developed and developing countries (Klar and Brewer, 2013; Merchant et al., 2012). As the results indicate, traditional cultures often did not recognize diversity and held negative views about change and women's leadership roles (Brinia, 2012; Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2019). In these developing countries, religious leaders and other influential members of local communities put intense pressure on school leaders (Akkary, 2014; Madsen and Mabokela, 2014). Government and local authorities can change the tide in both developing and developed countries by enacting more concrete rules on social justice and gender equality in education (Altinkurt and Yilmaz, 2011; Mai and Brundrett, 2019).

A school principal's main concern should be academic achievement and student learning, given the literature's strong emphasis on the key role that principals play in students' academic achievement, albeit indirectly through their influence on teacher and staff motivations and abilities (Leithwood et al., 2020). This review identified that challenges surrounding poor student learning and academic achievement could be traced back to students' lack of motivation to engage enthusiastically in the learning processes resulting from absenteeism and truancy, defiance of classroom rules, difficulties communicating due to language barriers, an unhealthy learning climate, and bullying (DeMatthews, 2014; Mestry et al., 2013; Moral et al., 2017).

Implications

Implications for research

This review points to the importance of contextually sensitive school leadership (Brauckmann et al., 2020; Earley, 2016; Hallinger, 2018a; Harris and Jones, 2018; Pashiardis et al., 2018; Pont, 2020). As argued by Neumerski (2013), searching for decontextualized leadership behaviours is a problematic endeavour. The broader leadership literature also endorses the contextually dependent view of successful leadership through its interest in cross-cultural leadership studies (Belchetz and

Table 4. The challenges facing principals on teachers and staff.

Challenges Teachers	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
Low-performing	Lack of productivity in teachers' job performance; the pressure with accountability; excessive administrative tasks; lack of discipline of teachers; excess of teaching workload; sick leaves among teachers; no role in schooling and being passive in schooling; needs for teachers empowerment	**n = 10** (e.g. Drago-Severson et al., 2014; Irvine and Brundrett, 2016; Klar and Brewer, 2013; Tian and Huber, 2019)	Increasing teacher involvement in school decision making; exposing and sharing leadership responsibilities and accountability; monitoring the progress of teachers; recruitment of interested and diligent teachers	**n = 15** (e.g. Klar and Brewer, 2013; Sepuru and Mohlakwana, 2020; Truong and Hallinger., 2017)
The shortage of teachers	Lack and shortage of teachers; demographical issues of teachers; shortage of certified teachers	**n=5** (e.g. Cravens et al., 2012; Dolph, 2016; Gillett et al., 2016; Romanowski et al., 2019)		
Demotivation	Low motivation; private needs; dissatisfaction; lack of commitment; lack of encouragement; reluctant to take on new functions; teacher resistance to change; low expectations of teachers	**n=15** (e.g. Jacobson, 2011; Madsen and Mabokela, 2014; Mai and Brundrett, 2019; Nehring and Lohmeier, 2010; Varela et al., 2019)	Acknowledging the individual talents of teachers; influencing the teachers in indirect ways such as overpayment; expecting real expectations from teachers	**n = 15** (e.g. Hallinger et al., 2017a, 2017b; Hernández-Castilla et al., 2017; Johansson et al., 2009; Moos and Kofod, 2009)
Poor professional development	Unplanned headteacher succession; lack of knowledge about technology; poor teachers' expertise; inadequate professionalism;	**n = 18** (e.g. Costa et al., 2019; Ordóñez-Sierra et al., 2020; Pan and Chen, 2011; DeMatthews et al., 2020)	Building teachers' capacity; enhancing teachers' morale and quality; teachers' training improvement; leadership skills for teachers	**n = 18** (e.g. Ahumada et al., 2015; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Mulford et al., 2008; DeMatthews et al., 2020)

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

Challenges Teachers	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
	poor training; needs to improve teachers' learning; malpractice in promoting teachers; needs for supporting and protecting teachers			
Poor relationships	Distance between the teachers; culture of individualism and monotony among teachers; hardly any collaboration among teachers; poor communication of teachers; just competition between teachers	**n** = **11** (e.g. Brinia, 2011; Costa et al., 2019; Mai and Brundrett, 2019; Moswela and Kgosidialwa, 2017)	Creating communities for teachers; safe and secure environment for teachers; teachers in working together; building trust between teachers	**n** = **7** (e.g. Fink and Brayman, 2006; Johansson et al., 2009; Mestry et al., 2013; Moos and Johansson, 2009)
			Supporting new teachers; respecting teachers' pedagogical expertise; reducing situations for litigation; transparency among teachers' relationships	**n** = **4** (e.g. Cobb, 2015; Costa et al., 2019; Tian and Huber, 2019)
Staff				
Poor participation	Not all staff involvement; staff low participation, and collaboration	n=9 (e.g. Brinia, 2012; Mulford et al., 2008; Poon-McBrayer, 2017; Szeto et al., 2015)	Sharing decision-making and sharing power; staff involvement in setting the school's targets; staff meetings reformations	n=9 (e.g. Ordóñez-Sierra et al., 2020; Stynes and McNamara, 2019
The shortage of school staff	High staff turnover; lack of manpower; lack of ICT staff in	n=8 (e.g. Gillett et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2012;	Recruiting young and motivated staff	**n** = **8** (e.g. Forfang, 2020; Lee et al., 2012)

Table 4. (continued)

Challenges Teachers	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
	the school; understaffed; lack of creative and innovative force	Richardson et al., 2015)		
Demotivation	Poor support; resistance to change; low level of manpower motivation; not risk-taking by all staff	**n**=7 (e.g. Aravena, 2020; Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2019; Gurr et al., 2010; Ordóñez-Sierra et al., 2020)	Creating a culture of supporting; broadening trust among staff; staff motivation by welfare practices; embracing the differences between staff; mutual respect	**n**=7 (e.g. Drago-Severson et al., 2014; Irvine and Brundrett, 2016; Mulford et al., 2008)
Poor professional development	Poorly prepared staff; needs for more new specialized staff; poor properly certified staff; unskilled staff	**n**=10 (e.g. Alsharija and Watters, 2020; Moswela and Kgosidialwa, 2017; Tian and Huber, 2019)	Providing academic training for their preparation and professional growth; networking professional peers	**n**=10 (e.g. Mistry and Sood, 2012; Moral et al., 2017; Mulford et al., 2008; Steyn, 2013)
Poor relationships	Lack of trust in staff; intrapersonal dilemma (working with other staff); hypocrisy between staff; needs for establishing friendly communication between school staff; the conflicts of interest between school staff	**n**=10 (e.g. Hallinger, 2016; Van Jaarsveld et al., 2015)	Being a team staffing; trust between staff; staff collaboration; guidance from an experienced mentor	**n**=10 (e.g. Mistry and Sood, 2012; Stynes and McNamara, 2019)

Leithwood, 2007). Thus, researchers should develop an in-depth understanding of the challenges and problems faced by principals through analyses of multi-layered school contexts. Nevertheless, the wide context of a school can be categorised based on the level of society's development (developed vs. developing), the authority of decision-making in the education system (centralised vs. decentralised system), and regional categorisation (e.g. continental and geographic differences and divisions). The challenges arising from each of these contexts and its impact on principals' behaviour can be explained more by future studies.

Table 5. The challenges facing principals on student performance.

Challenges Student performance	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
Indiscipline	Truancy and school absences; bullying; unfair discipline practices on students; disobedience to school and classroom rules; students' behavioral disorders	**n**=16 (e.g. Çevik, 2019; Dolph, 2016; Drago-Severson et al., 2014; Ordóñez-Sierra et al., 2020)	Supporting students whole development; curriculum alignment with students' needs; emphasizing on learner well-being; safe schools environments	**n** = 23 (e.g. Chu and Cravens, 2012; Litz et al., 2020; Moswela and Kgosidialwa, 2017; Mulford et al., 2008)
Physical and mental health problems	Student physical issues; gang violence against students; vulnerable context; issues of early puberty; special-needs students; toxic school culture; a low value on the spiritual development of the child	**n** = 7 (e.g. Ahumada et al., 2015; Klar and Brewer, 2013; Mai and Brundrett, 2019; Wise, 2015)		
Limited student-student relationships	The difficulties in making communication among students because of the lack of experience and the language barriers; diversity of students; difficulties of relationships	**n** = 17 (e.g. Dolph, 2016; Klar and Brewer, 2013; Lumby and Foskett, 2011; Ordóñez-Sierra et al., 2020)	Networking; reigniting children's sense of connection with each other	**n** = 17 (e.g. Carr, 2016; Hernández-Castilla, et al., 2017; Tahir et al., 2019)
Poor learning and academic achievement	The need to improve student learning and their holistic development; low students' academic achievement; discontinuity in education; learner underachievement, and creaming for high-performing students; low	**n** = 22 (e.g. Litz et al., 2020; Mahfouz et al., 2019; Mestry et al., 2013; Mulford et al., 2007; Tian and Huber, 2019)	Developing collaborative and co-constructive learning; continuous learning; creating a learning space; observing classroom lessons	**n** = 22 (e.g. Carr, 2016; Moos and Kofod, 2009; Nehring and Lohmeier, 2010)

(continued)

Table 5. (continued)

Challenges Student performance	Description	Author/year	Coping solutions	Author/year
	motivation of learners; lack of encouragement, and too many expectations upon students; the insufficient possibility of continuing education for most students			
Unhealthy learning climate	Lack of clear vision and mission of transforming the school; the need to adaptability to a new culture; crises(unexpected events) in the school; lack of contextually literate; sick school cultures; market-like competition; low equity between all students	**n** = **21** (e.g. Bush and Glover, 2016; Lumby and Foskett, 2011; Mansoor, 2015; Sepúlveda and Molina, 2019)	Paying attention to contextual considerations for each school	**n** = **5** (e.g. Cheng, 2003; Gurr et al., 2010; Hernández-Castilla et al., 2017)
			Achieving the maximum potential of all students; learning to enhance the life chances of children; setting specific goals for students	**n** = **6** (e.g. Ahumada et al., 2015; Cruz-González et al., 2020; Garner and Forbes, 2013)
			Providing supportive school culture; equity for all students; appropriate learning conditions, and required supplies and appliances for all students; specialized guidance, and counseling services; enhancing a good relationship with students	**n** = **10** (e.g. Bush and Glover, 2016; Litz et al., 2020; Medina et al., 2014)

Implications for policy

The key implications from this review of research on coping solutions can inform the strategies developed by policymakers. When designing reform initiatives, policymakers in decentralised contexts should recognise the critical role that principals can play as change agents within their schools. Due to the wide challenges facing principals that arise from their various responsibilities, policymakers, especially in developed countries, should prepare leaders according to specific contextual features and develop their problem-solving and cognitive skills (Hallinger et al., 2017a, 2017b). Moreover, it would be helpful to design policies that are sensitive to the unique features of local values, recognize religious and cultural diversity in each society, and create a supportive and collaborative culture that encourages mutual progressive trust between governments, local communities, and school principals.

Furthermore, government authorities must take action and pass concrete legislation on social justice and gender equality in education (Altinkurt and Yilmaz, 2011; Mai and Brundrett, 2019). Since school leaders need to respond to the diverse interests and needs of various stakeholders both inside and outside of the school community (DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003; Gurr et al., 2006; Gurr, 2010; Litz et al., 2020), they should be supported through policies, spaces, and attitudes that respect their skills and knowledge (Romanowski et al., 2019). Thus, it is vital to develop a continuous and ongoing professional development program to support principals, and indeed all school staff (DeMatthews, 2014). These changes call for innovative methods, such as the case method and problem-based learning (Hallinger, 2018b). Therefore, we suggest that training program designers become aware of the need for context-responsive leadership programs and use problem scenarios to highlight the productive responses of leaders to different contextual constraints and opportunities (Hallinger, 2018a; Klar and Brewer, 2013; Montecinos et al., 2018).

Implications for practice

In an increasingly complex and challenging environment, the core of the principal's knowledge should be more and more context-dependent. As such, principals are better able to handle context-related challenges as they seek to achieve the mission of schooling and exercise leadership in student affairs (e.g. curriculum, organization, management, school improvement, etc.). To reduce centralisation and simultaneously relieve principal administrative burdens, active participation and involvement should be distributed across all staff to encourage discussion about school targets and ways to achieve them (Maxcy et al., 2010; Saiti, 2009). Principals, especially those who are newly appointed, require training before they assume their positions, as well as clear formal and informal guidelines (Meyer and Patuawa, 2020; Sepuru and Mohlakwana, 2020; Slater et al., 2008). Creating a school culture that supports the learning and professional development of teachers and staff, as well as principals, can in turn enhance their willingness to go beyond the call of duty by building trust with educators, encouraging openness, and allowing them to take part in the decision-making process (Drago-Severson et al., 2014; Stynes and McNamara, 2019).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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