

## EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND LEARNER ACHIEVEMENT: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES.

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### ABSTRACT

The context of school leadership in Africa has been changing, which is reflected particularly in numerous past and ongoing educational reforms and school restructuring movements. At the macro level, the main trend of educational reforms include re-establishment of new national vision and new educational aims for schools, restructuring educational systems at different levels for new educational aims and market driving, privatizing, cost sharing, greater self management and self governance and diversifying school education throughout the world. At the meso level, there is increased parental and community involvement in school leadership. At the school site level, the major trends consist of ensuring educational quality, standards and accountability. At the operational level, the main trends include the use of Information and Technology (ICT) in learning and teaching and applying new technologies in management, and making a paradigm shift in learning, teaching and assessment. This paper examines educational leadership and learner achievement in schools. In this article I argue that, in many parts of the world, including both developed and developing countries, there is increasing recognition that schools require effective leadership schools are to provide the best possible education for learners. I conclude that the combined direct and indirect effects of school leadership on learner achievement may be small but educationally significant.

**Key Words:** Educational leadership, Empowerment, leadership styles, school performance, transformational.

### SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND LEARNER IMPROVEMENT

School leadership plays a central role in affecting the educational development of the learners for whom they have responsibility over. The roles of school heads is expanding as a consequence of the devolution of powers from local, regional or national bureaucracies to school level and heads of schools have become the public face of the school. Day and Sammons (2013) show that, adding to the administrative demands of leading a school to excellence; the role of the school leader is continually expanding, making it difficult for many school heads to successfully fulfill all of their obligations. The additional responsibilities imposed on principals in

many countries make great demands on the post holders (Walker and Dimmock, 2006). Besides all these roles, the general assumption from the general public is that the presence of the school head, or absence of effective leaders, positive school climates created by the head, and positive attitudes of teachers can, directly or indirectly, influence school performance and student achievement ( Hallinger and Heck, 1998, 1996; Kruger, Witziers and Steegers,2007; Waters, Marzano, and McNulty, 2004; Witzier, Bosker and Kruger, 2003). This article argues that, leadership in schools play a pivotal role in all phases of the school improvement and development processes. The school head is considered vital and is held responsible for keeping the school as a whole in mind and for

adequately coordinating the individual activities during the improvement processes. School leadership the world over is considered as a professional driving force and mediator for the development of the school towards sustainable improvement. I argue that the management and leading tasks of school heads are both complex and interrelated such that there is no clearly defined specific role, but at best a colored patchwork of many inter related roles. School heads empower teachers and contribute to the school improvement journey through empowerment and the spreading of good practice initiatives generated by teachers. Leithwood et al., (2004) show that, the impact of student outcomes is likely to be greater where there, is direct leadership involvement in the oversight of and participation of leadership in curriculum planning and ordination and teacher learning and professional development. In many parts of the world, including both developed and developing countries, there is increasing recognition that schools require effective leaders if they are to provide the best possible education for their learners. Leithwood et al., (2004:4) argue that, "School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupils achievement" They concluded that, " there is no single documented case of a school successfully tuning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership" (p.5).

In educational institutions, the core purpose of the school head is to provide leadership in all areas of the school to enable the creation and support of conditions under which effective teaching and learning take place and which promote the highest possible standards of learner achievement. Burns (1978) sees leadership as the process of persuasion by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader. This simple definition suggests that school leaders have a mediated role to ensure the achievement of educational goals through influencing teachers to work

towards the achievement of school goals. The school leader ensures that teachers are motivated, provided with the necessary conditions and are capacitated to maximize on the achievement of goals. It should however be noted that successful school leadership entails possessing the knowledge, skills and understanding of effective leadership skills along with the personal ability to effectively implement these skills.

Extensive empirical quantitative research conducted in North America, Great Britain, and New Zealand have shown that leadership in schools is a central factor for the quality of a school (see Bass, 1998; Avolio, 1999; Cotton, 2003; Sackney et al., 2006; Elmore, 2000; Crow, 2006; Huber, 1999a). These research results show that schools classified as successful possess a competent and sound school leadership. According to Gray (1990) most of the lists of key factors that school effectiveness research has compiled, leadership plays much an important part. School leaders matter, they are educationally significant, school leaders do make a difference (Huber, 1997). International research evidence has consistently reinforced the importance of leadership in securing and sustaining school improvement (eg Hopkins and Jackson, 2002; Walker et al., 2006; Leithwood et al., 2000; Day et al., 2013). It is clear that effective leadership exercise an indirect but powerful influence on the effectiveness of the achievement of students (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000).

Professional school leadership according to Huber (1997) is described as firm and purposeful, sharing leadership responsibilities, involvement in and knowledge about what goes on in the classroom. As Leithwood and Riehl (2003:3) note, "large scale studies of schooling conclude that the effects of leadership on student learning are small but educationally significant." This therefore means school leadership plays a significant role in learner achievement and school improvement.

## **SCHOOL LEADERSHIP STYLES TO ENHANCE THE ACHIEVEMENT OF GOALS**

While the equation of effective school leadership and improved school performance appears to be relatively simple and straight forward in theory, in practice it is complex and unpredictable. Cotton (2003) remark that, while it is evident that a fundamental connection between the head's leadership style and school performance in terms of student achievement exists, research on this type of relationship begins and ends with that concept. Story (2004) argue that although the leadership field is replete with often largely descriptive studies of effective leadership, these studies have rarely tracked or explored with sufficient rigor the relationship between leadership styles and school performance. Harris (2004: 4) states that, "we do not know, for example exactly what forms of leadership result in high performing schools, across different school contexts, and in different types of schools." Researchers have discerned a number of school leadership styles, the most commonly known having been identified by renowned social scientist Kurt Lewin and his colleagues in 1939. These are authoritarian or autocratic, democratic or participative, and laissez-faire or passive leadership. The authoritarian leader makes all decisions, independent of members' input, the democratic welcomes team input and facilitates group discussion and decision making, and the laissez-faire leader allows the group complete freedom for decision making without him participating. In 1967, Likert suggested another set of styles: exploitative, authoritative, consultative, and participative. In exploitative authoritative style, the leader has low concern for the people, uses threats and punishments to achieve conformance. An authoritative on the other hand becomes concerned for people, while a benevolent authoritative leader emerges. In consultative style, the leader is making genuine efforts to listen to ideas, but major decisions are still largely centrally made. At the participative

level, the leader engages people in decision making, people in the organization are psychologically closer and work well together at all levels.

Another set of school leadership was coined by Burns (1978): transactional leadership and transformational leadership. These styles according to (Hallinger, 2003; Avolio and Bass 2004; Spillane et al., 2001; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000; Bennet et al., 2003) have dominated scholarly debates as conceptual models of school leadership since 1980. These paradigms build on earlier sets of autocratic versus democratic or directive versus participative leadership (Avolio and Bass, 2004). Transformational leadership can be defined as increasing the interest of the staff to achieve higher performance. It entails moving people to a common vision by building trust and empowerment (Burns 1978; Carlson, 1996; Avolio and Bass 2004). Leadership optimizes people's development and innovation and convince them to strive for higher levels of achievement ( Avolio and Burns 2004), form a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders. As articulated by Bass (1985), four factors characterize the behavior of transformational leadership: individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. There is inspirational motivation by communicating high performance and achievement.

Transactional leadership, on the other hand, is based on the reciprocal exchange of duty and reward that are controlled by the head. Transactional leadership involves setting up and defining agreements or contracts to achieve specific work objectives, discovering individuals' capabilities, and specifying the compensation and rewards that can be expected upon successful completion of the task (Avolio and Bass, 2004). The term "transactional leadership" has been applied to this concept of steady state leadership: the school leader is the manager of the transactions, which are

fundamental for an effective and also efficient work flow within the organization. The daily organizational office proceedings and the administration of buildings, financial and personal resources, the time resources of staff, as well as communication processes within and outside of school are all included in the definition of transactions or interactions (Huber 2004;672). Transactional leaders focus on the basic needs of their staff (Elmore 2000), but they are not interested in providing high level motivation, job satisfaction, or commitment. Bass and Avolio (1994) describe three forms of transactional leadership: passive management by exception, active management by exception, and constructive transactional. Passive management by exception involves setting standards but waiting for major problems to occur before exerting leadership behavior. Leaders who demonstrate active management by exception pay attention to issues that arise, set standards, and carefully monitor behavior. On the other hand a constructive transactional leader sets goals, clarifies desired outcomes, exchanges rewards and recognition for accomplishments, suggests and consults, provides feedback, and gives employees praise when it is deserved (Leithwood & Jantiz, 2000); Bass and Avolio 1994; Bass 1998). According to Bass (1985), transformational leaders are more likely to be proactive than reactive in their thinking, and more creative, novel, and innovative in their ideas. Transactional leaders may be equally intelligent but their focus is on how to keep the system for which they are responsible running and reacting to problems generated by observed deviance, and looking to modify conditions as needed. Bass (1998) believes that every leader displays practices of both styles to some extent. Although transformational and transactional leadership are at opposite ends of the leadership continuum, he maintains that the two can be complementary (see Leithwood & Jantzi 2000). However the ideal leader would practice the transformational components and more frequently the transactional

component less frequently to achieve a balance. It should be noted that by 1990 researchers were advocating transformational leadership and other forms of leadership that were consistent with evolving trends in educational reform, such as empowerment, shared leadership, and organizational learning (Hallinger, 2003; Avolio, 1999; Bass,1998; Bass and Avolio, 1994; Leithwood et al., 2006; Waters et al., 2004; Leithwood& Levin, 2004; Silins and Mulford, 2003).

I argue that professional school leadership to enhance the achievement of goals should be seen as firm and purposeful, sharing leadership responsibilities, involving using experts that exist in the school. That means, it is important to have decisive and goal oriented participation of others in leadership tasks. There should be real empowerment in terms of true delegation of leadership power distributed among members of staff, and that there should be a dedicated interest for and acknowledgement about what happens during lessons and professional school leadership action should focus on teaching and learning and use the school's goals as a benchmark.

## **DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

Distributed leadership perspectives of shared influence that can contribute to positive organizational improvement is one of the strategies that can be adopted by school leadership to enhance the achievement of goals. Distributed leadership is not just some accidental derivative of high performing organizations but rather has been shown to be an important contributor to organizational success and performance. (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Harris, 2008, 2013). In this article I argue the distributed perspectives offer a new and important theoretical lens through which leadership practices in schools can be reconfigured and

reconceptualised. Distributed leadership forms can assist capacity building within schools which contributes to school improvement.

A contemporary review of the literature (Hall, 2013) identified blank spots and areas that have been overlooked because of theoretical and epistemological biases within the leadership field. An important blind spot is the fact that much of the research literature has overlooked the kind of leadership that can be distributed across many roles and functions in the school (Bennett et al., 2003; Hargreaves et al., 2012; Hall, 2013; Harris, 2008). There is a growing body of evidence within the school improvement field that points towards the importance of capacity building as a means of sustaining school improvement (Fullan, 2001; Hopkins and Jackson, 2002; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; Story, 2004; Day and Sammons, 2013; Harris and Lambert, (2004) argue that, distributed leadership contributes on engaging expertise wherever it exists within the organization rather than seeking this only through formal position or role. At the center of capacity building model, is “distributed leadership along with social cohesion and trust” (Hopkins and Jackson, 2002:95). Implicit within the distributed leadership are the leadership practices of teachers, either as informal or in a formal leadership as head of department, subject coordinator or teacher mentor (Muijs and Harris, 2003; Harris and Lambert, 2004; Lumby, 2008; Hall, 2013). As Leithwood and Riehl (2003:3) show, “research suggest that teacher leaders can help other teachers to embrace goals, to understand the changes that are needed to strengthen teaching and learning and to work towards improvement” In this context distributed leadership is likely to contribute to school improvement and to build internal capacity for development. In contrast to traditional notions of leadership premised upon an individual managing hierarchical systems and structures, distributed leadership is characterized as a form of collective leadership in which teachers

develop expertise working together. Elmore (2000) argues that in a knowledge intensive enterprise like teaching and learning there is no way to perform these complex tasks without widely distributing the responsibility for leadership among roles in the organization. Distributed leadership in schools means multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent through a common culture (Goleman, 2002). The central basis of distributed leadership is to create a common culture of expectations around the use of individual skills and abilities. As Bennett et al., (2003 :3) notes, “distributed leadership is not something done by an individual to others, rather it is an emergent property of a group or network of individuals in which group members pool their expertise. Thus distributed leadership is a form of collective agency incorporating the activities of many individuals in a school who work at mobilizing and guiding other teachers in the process of instructional change (Spillane et al., 2001). It extends the boundaries of leadership significantly as it is premised upon high levels of teacher involvement and encompasses a wide variety of expertise, skills and input (Harris and Jones, 2012). Engaging many people in leadership activities is at the core of distributed leadership in action. Research by Silins and Mulford (2002) has shown that student outcomes are more likely to improve where leadership sources are distributed throughout the school community and where teachers are empowered in areas of importance to them.

A variety of studies have also found clear evidence of the positive effects of distributed leadership on teachers’ self efficacy and levels of morale (MacBeath, 1998; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; Story, 2004; Hall,2013; Waters et al., 2004). Evidence suggest that where teachers share good practice and learn together the possibility of securing better quality teaching is increased( Lunenberg and Orkstein 2004; Avolio and Bass,2004). Creative

collaborative has a sweet spot that consists of the right mixture of established relationships and newcomers. Within this collaborative cocktail, distributed leadership is pivotally important because it is the social glue that supports effective interdependent working (Harris and Jones, 2012). Hall (2013:1) show that, “ although the forms which distributed leadership takes within different school settings are in part shaped by particular contextual features within individual institutions the capacity of officially authorized discourses of distributed leadership to reach into the social practices of schools remain strong.”

### **EFFECTS OF SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE ON SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND LEARNER ACHIEVEMENT**

Organizational theorists have long reported that paying attention to culture is the most important action that a leader can perform. Likewise educational theorists have reported that the principal's impact on learning is mediated through the climate and culture of the school and is not a direct effect (Hallinger and Heck 1998). On the other hand Watson (2001) warned us that if the culture is not hospitable to learning then student achievement can suffer. Fink and Resnick (2001) reminded us that principals are responsible for sustaining a pervasive culture and climate of teaching and learning if schools are to achieve their goals. In this article I also argue that heads of schools are held responsible for organizing schools to ensure that curriculum and instruction are effectively supervised and that the core business of the school organization is protected from disruptions emanating from cultural effects. A school's culture is characterized by deeply rooted traditions, values, norms and beliefs some of which are common across schools and some of which are unique and embedded in a particular school's history and location (Hoy 1990). Heads of schools should ensure that there is high trust among members of staff, there is effective communication, and openness is encouraged and conflicts are

viewed as opportunities for creative problem solving.

There is substantial evidence in the literature to suggest that a school principal must first understand the school's culture before implementing change (Leithwood et al., 2004). Lakomski (2001) studied the claim that it is necessary to change an organization's culture in order to bring about organizational change and concluded that there is a causal relationship between the role of the leader and organizational learning. Heads of schools need to work on long term cultural goals in order to strengthen the learning environment. Heads of schools also serve as change agents to transform the teaching and learning culture of the school. Testimony from successful schools suggest that focusing on development of the school's culture as a learning environment is fundamental to improved teaching morale and student achievement (Nomura 1999; Reavis et al., 1999; Miner 1995; Lunenburg et al., 2004). In a school situation real and sustained change is more readily achieved by first changing the culture of the school, rather than simply changing the structures of the way the school operates and functions. However changing a school's culture to balance stability and change is not an easy task. It should be noted that heads of schools should first understand the school culture before initiating change. Successful school heads should comprehend the critical role that the organizational culture plays in developing a successful school.

Organizational culture and climate have been described as overlapping concepts (Miner, 1995; Hoy et al., 1991). While climate is viewed as behavior, culture is seen as comprising the values and norms of the school organization (Hoy, 1990; Heck and Marcoulides 1996). Organizational climate is described as the total environmental quality within an organization and recent attention to the effectiveness of schools and their cultures has shed more interest on the importance of climate

(Lunenburg and Ornstein, 2004). The relationship between culture and climate was supported by Schein (1996;1985) when he stated that norms, values, rituals and climate are all manifestations of culture. Even though the conceptual distance between culture (shared norms) and climate (shared perceptions) is small, it is nonetheless real (Hoy and Feldman 1999) because shared perceptions of behavior are more readily measured than shared values.

It should however be noted that school climate is the heart and soul of the school and the essence of the school that draws teachers and learners to want to be part of it (Watson 2001; Wang et al., 1997). A study by Wang et al., (1997) found that school culture and climate were among the top influence in affecting improved student achievement. Unhealthy schools lack an effective leader and the teachers are generally unhappy with their jobs and colleagues (Hoy and Tarter 1997). Hoy et al., (1990) argue that, healthy schools that promote high academic standards appropriate leadership and collegiality provide a climate more conducive to student success and achievement (Hoy et al., 1990). I argue that, the first major purpose of a school or head of a school is to create and promote a culture and climate that is hospitable to effective teaching and learning. The relationships that shape the culture and climate of the school are strongly influenced by the school head. In schools where achievement is high and where there is a clear sense of community, the school head invariably makes the difference (Wang et al., 1997) Finally since the culture and climate of school affects students achievement (Maslowski 2001; Hoy et al., 2006) and the school head directly influence the culture and climate (Hallinger and Heck 1998; Leithwood et al., 2004) the question that should be asked is: what characteristics of school climate should the head address in order to most effectively encourage and increase student achievement? A school head who creates a culture and climate that promotes and

encourages learning is absolutely essential in order to improve student achievement in schools. Strong school culture has better motivated teachers and healthy motivated teachers have greater success in terms of student performance and student learning outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004). School heads seeking to improve student performance should focus on improving the school's culture and climate by getting the relationships right between themselves, their teachers, students and parents.

### **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

In view of the ever changing and increasing responsibilities of school heads and the need to ensure quality learning outcomes in schools, school leadership development has become a contemporary issue and one of the central concerns of educational policy makers. Huber (2004) argues that, it is apparent that a number of countries have engaged in school leadership development more rigorously than others and elsewhere concrete steps have been taken to provide significant development opportunities for school leaders. The case for leadership development in developed and developing countries is linked to the evidence that high quality leadership is vital for school improvement and student learning outcomes. The additional responsibilities imposed on school heads and the greater complexity of the external environment; increase the need for school heads to receive effective preparation for their demanding role. Bush et al., (2011) show that, while there is an increasing body of evidence that leadership makes a significant difference, there is less agreement about what preparation is required to develop appropriate leadership behaviors. Bush (2008) argues that, there is a growing international focus upon leadership development as an important component of school improvement. In many countries, school leaders begin their professional careers as teachers and progress to headship via a range of leadership tasks

and roles. In many cases especially in Africa heads of schools continue to teach following their appointment, particularly in small schools and this leads to a widespread view that teaching is their main activity (Hall, 2013; Harris, 2004; Huber, 2004; Bush 2011; Bush and Oduro 2006). While in schools leadership is a specialized occupation that requires specific preparation. Bush and Oduro, (2006:362) argue that, "throughout Africa, there is no formal requirement for principals to be trained as school managers. They are often appointed on the basis of a successful record as teachers with the implicit assumption that this provides a sufficient starting point for school leadership." There is a rapidly growing international focus upon leadership development as an important component of school improvement (Bush, 2008). In the United States of America, Crow (2006) recognizes the importance of good development and preparation of school leaders as it may well make a difference to their subsequent leadership practices. Menstry and Sing (2007) show that, in my countries, including South Africa, school leaders begin their professional careers as teachers and progress to headship via a range of leadership tasks and roles. In Zimbabwe there is also a wide spread view that teaching for heads of schools is the main activity and that a teaching qualification, a degree and teaching experience are the only requirements for appointment to headship. In this article I argue that heads of schools should learn to do their jobs so that they may address their school improvement journey to advantage and play a key role in serving the needs of the learners. There is need to provide leadership learning experiences to provide a holistic learning experience able to meet the needs of school leaders at different stages of their careers and in different contexts. Developing the knowledge, attitudes and skills required to lead effectively requires systematic preparation.

In their report on leadership training in Hong Kong intended to maximize leadership learning. Walker and Dimmock (2006) have emphasized the efficacy of including learning linked to school contexts, the involvement of experienced principals as mentors, meeting diverse needs, ample opportunity for reflection and the facilitation of networking and bonding between participants. Similarly, Little (2000) has indicated the importance of personalized and work based experiences supported by high quality feedback and the opportunity to reflect. Avolio (2005) makes a compelling case for leadership development based on the view that leaders are "made not born". Those who appear to have natural leadership qualities acquired them through learning process. Without effective preparation, many new principals "flounder" (Sackney and Walker 2006, 344) as they attempt to juggle the competing demands of the post. Crow (2006) also notes the contribution of technological and demographic change to the complexity affecting school leaders impact on the nature of leadership preparation. That being the case, the additional responsibilities imposed on school heads, and the greater complexity of the external environment, increases the need for school heads to receive effective preparation for their demanding role.

Being qualified only for the very different job of classroom teaching is not appropriate. As teachers move from their teaching role to school leadership, there should be an entitlement for them to be developed appropriately. Bush (2008) argue that, requiring individuals to lead schools, which are often multimillion-dollar business, manage staff and care for children, without specific preparation, may be seen as foolish, even reckless, as well as being manifestly unfair for the new incumbent. The main question I have in mind is "What are the key areas of leadership which should be provided given the multiple functions and roles of the school head, some of which are not even documented?"

“Who should be held responsible for providing training of school heads and who has the capacity?”

At the same time, without effective preparation, new heads of schools blunder as they attempt to operationalize and meeting the demands of the leadership post. There is a growing body of evidence that effective preparation makes a difference to the quality of leadership and to school and pupil learning outcomes (Bush, 2008; Lumby et al; 2008). Given the importance of school heads, the development of effective leaders in schools should not be left to chance, rather it should be a deliberate process designed to produce the best possible leadership for the schools if the schools are to maximize on the achievement of educational goals.

### **CONCLUSIONS: School Leadership and the Core Purpose of Schools.**

As indicated in this review of literature, there is increasing recognition that effective leadership in schools is vital if schools are to be successful in providing good learning opportunities for the learners. The core purpose of a school is to provide for learnership programs to the learners and this core purpose can be achieved through effective leadership. There is emerging evidence that quality leadership in schools make a significant difference to school improvement and learning outcomes. In Zimbabwe and the world over, schools classified as successful possess a competent and sound school leadership and also where there is higher failure rates, there is often correlates with inadequate school leadership. Leithwood et al. (2006:4) show that “school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupils learning”. In light of this, “there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership (Leithwood et al., 2006:5). School leadership research emphasises that leadership effects operate

indirectly to promote student learning outcomes by supporting and enhancing conditions for teaching and learning through direct impacts on teachers and their work (Day and Sammons, 2013). Leadership in this sense is considered a driver of change and a catalytic agent for improvement (Bryk et al, 2010) in student learning not a direct causal influence. However, findings from my literature review established that the quality of school leadership is a key to continued organisational learning and improvement. The central importance of educational leadership is one of the clearest messages of school effectiveness and improvement. School leaders are educationally significant in enhancing the goals of educational institutions. Studies on educational development and improvement processes targeted at the core purposes of schools. For all phases of the school development process, the school head is considered vital and is held responsible for keeping the school as a whole in mind, and for adequately co-coordinating individuals towards sustained improvement and development. Generally the review of literature established that effective leadership in schools makes a difference in improving teaching and learning.

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## Notes

1. The term "School head" in this paper used instead of principal, head teacher, administrator, and rector or other terms describing the person who is in charge of an individual school.
2. The methods used in this paper comprised a wide-ranging review of literature on educational leadership the world over.
3. The series of reviews and reports on systematic review of literature from well-known and reliable sources on

school leadership and school improvement in general as well as in the contexts of developing countries are presented in this desktop study.

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