

INNOVATIVE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOL: THE IMPACT ON LEARNERS' PERFORMANCE AND THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

How to cite this paper: Ramasimu, N. F. (2023). Innovative stakeholder engagement in rural secondary school: The impact on the learners' performance and the quality of education. *Corporate Governance and Organizational Behavior Review*, 7(2), 50–60. <https://doi.org/10.22495/cgobrv7i2p5>

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ISSN Online: 2521-1889
ISSN Print: 2521-1870

Received: 04.05.2022
Accepted: 17.03.2023

JEL Classification: A21, I21, J24
DOI: 10.22495/cgobrv7i2p5

The stakeholder engagement process entails schools soliciting information and ideas from various stakeholders for them to meaningfully contribute to the school's success. The involvement of multiple stakeholders leads to effective school management (Bruns et al., 2011). The presence of stakeholders improves learner performance and educational quality. The stakeholders in the school are those who help the school achieve its goals and objectives, either directly or indirectly (Darrel et al., 2020). This paper seeks to investigate the extent to which rural secondary school principals engage stakeholders such as school governing bodies (SGBs), parents, community members, businesspeople, civic organizations, and teachers in novel ways to improve learners' performance and educational quality. The quantitative descriptive case study method was employed. Using a simple random sampling method, 110 principals were selected from a population of 151 principals of secondary schools in the Vhembe district, Limpopo province, South Africa. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. The findings of the study revealed that principals involve some stakeholders in school activities, including SGBs, teachers, students, and parents. The study, however, found that principals are not engaging with stakeholders such as civic groups, businesspeople, non-governmental organizations, and alumnae. If principals want to reap the benefits of stakeholder engagement in schools, they should not be picky about who they invite to participate. Since education is a societal issue, they should take a comprehensive approach to stakeholder engagement.

Keywords: Teachers, Engagement, Innovation, Principals, Secondary Schools, School Governing Body, Stakeholders, Stakeholder Engagement

Authors' individual contribution: The Author is responsible for all the contributions to the paper according to CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy) standards.

Declaration of conflicting interests: The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements: The Author would like to thank all participating principals in the survey. The Author also acknowledges the Limpopo Provincial Government Department of Education and Vhembe district for giving permission to collect the data.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is recognized as having the power to bring about the social changes needed by all societies. Several other achievements demonstrate the effectiveness of education beyond meeting financial and non-financial needs on a scale that improves people's living standards far beyond national borders. The important role of education in the 21st century has proven to be an essential tool for the advancement of civilization and cannot be exaggerated. Nevertheless, the school system is an open system that accepts and spends resources to foster healthy and reciprocal relationships with the community (Darrel et al., 2020).

During the apartheid era, autocratic leadership styles were prevalent in schools. Therefore, other role players, such as educators, parents, community organizations, learners, the business community, etc., had very little contribution to the education of their children. The system was dominated by the top-down approach from the education department, which resulted in a constant stream of schedules, policies, rules, regulations, and so on that provided marching orders to educators (Department of Education, 2000). Hence, educators regarded themselves as mere recipients of instructions, thereby viewing management as solely the function of the school management teams (SMTs) (Mchunu, 2010).

Since 1994, when the Republic of South Africa (RSA) attained its democracy, the new education system it introduced requires educational leaders such as principals to use their authority and power to develop others' ability to manage change effectively. There is a growing need for schools to involve external stakeholders actively and innovatively in decision-making to improve the quality of education and learner performance. To make education a priority for society, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has moved away from a centrally regulated educational system that believed in one-size-fits-all by creating an educational governance system for its educational stakeholders, including SMTs, principals, teachers, parents, community organizations, businesspeople, churches, learners, and alumnae. This has been made possible through the introduction of the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996, which seeks to enhance school-based management and engagement. The inclusion of external stakeholders seeks to address the school system's ongoing challenges such as high dropout rates, high failure rates, lack of parental and community involvement, and limited school infrastructure (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996). Therefore, the DBE also underlines that employing innovative strategies to make sure that everyone in the school community is heard and able to contribute is essential for good school leadership and management (Mchunu, 2010; Department of Education, 2000).

According to Bruns et al. (2011), engaging multiple stakeholders leads to improved learner performance, quality education, and effective and efficient school management. Santibanez (2006) finds that a school governing body composed of a variety of stakeholders has a positive impact on learner performance and the quality of education.

Involving stakeholders and encouraging them to get involved, make decisions, and propose ideas for school change is vital to this purpose as it instills in them a sense of ownership and responsibility. Hofosha (2012) went on to say that mutual decision-making is important for effective planning and management, intending to improve learner performance and quality education. According to the literature on policy networks, these networks encourage an active exchange of information, ideas, and resources necessary for effective policy implementation in the twenty-first century (Guzman, 2020; Conner, 2017; Agranoff, 2007; Agranoff & McGuire, 2001). The assumption that collaboration will lead to better policy decisions and organizational performance than would be feasible in more hierarchical settings is present with such multiorganizational groupings (Conner, 2017; Agranoff & McGuire, 2003). As a result, researchers have identified two different kinds of effects from collaborative partnerships: 1) direct, substantial effects on policy outcomes and performance; and 2) indirect effects in the form of enhanced, more "process-oriented" problem-solving and decision-making (Conner, 2017; Chen & Thurmaier, 2009). According to Conner (2017), the latter kind of outcome is known as "process-oriented" since it is accompanied by modifications to social interactions, new participant behavioral norms, and cross-cultural interchange.

Globally, increased stakeholder participation in school administration and management, as well as in academic discourse, is a current phenomenon. As a result, education is intended to serve as a platform for the integration of ideas from various stakeholders within the school community. If stakeholders are not actively involved in school administration and management, the school may be unable to bridge the gap between what the community wants and what the school intends to achieve (Darrel et al., 2020; Gichohi, 2015). However, it is critical to determine whether this global trend is present in secondary school governance in South Africa, particularly in the Vhembe district of Limpopo province.

Considering this, the purpose of this research paper is to answer the research question:

RQ: To what extent do rural secondary school principals innovatively involve stakeholders to improve learners' performance and quality of education in rural secondary schools?

Findings from this study can empower secondary school principals with the expertise on how to enhance stakeholder engagement. The findings of the study will add to the existing literature on stakeholder engagement in secondary schools. Moreover, the study will present recommendations to policymakers and educational practitioners on how to maximize the benefits of effective stakeholders' involvement in secondary schools.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The introduction is presented in Section 1. Section 2 is a review of the literature. The research methodology is presented in Section 3. Section 4 presents the study results, which are discussed in Section 5, and Section 6 presents the conclusion and managerial implications of the paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholders play a critical role in school administration and management. They work with SMTs to make schools more conducive to teaching and learning. It is impossible to deny that the child is at the centre of all teaching and learning activities in schools (Darrel et al., 2020). Henceforth, the vision and mission of schools are to prepare children for life-long learning and skills. As a result, stakeholders are members of the working committee that ensures that their participation in school activities contributes to the school being a learning environment. They must also actively participate in school activities, programs, and projects to ensure that the school achieves its learning outcomes (Darrel et al., 2020; Bruns et al., 2011).

The stakeholders in the school are those who help the school achieve its goals and objectives, either directly or indirectly. The primary burden has been placed on the school principals to manage the competing interests of the various stakeholders by making decisions that meet the educational stakeholders' expectations (Darrel et al., 2020). Furthermore, Darrel et al. (2020) and De Torres (2021) argued that not all decisions made by school principals are in line with stakeholder expectations; some decisions go against the interests of some stakeholders while others protect the interests of others. Secondary school principals can use their experience to strike the balance, as all stakeholders are important to the achievement of school goals and objectives.

The stakeholders have professional, business, and individual interests to project in the provisions, which could be generated externally or internally, and this has the potential to affect secondary school educational delivery. Their concerns are frequently incorporated into routine activities and management decisions made in schools. When stakeholders in the educational system are ignored, the school may not be able to withstand the pressures in the system. This pressure could come from various stakeholders' protests and dissatisfaction (Darrel et al., 2020). For this article, principals, school governing bodies (SGBs), teachers, families and community members, and external organizations are the major stakeholders, which are discussed hereunder.

2.2. Principals

Principals are crucial in school transformation. Principals who are committed to equity and social justice can foster inclusive customs and beliefs in their schools while also cultivating positive relationships outside of the classroom. When teachers and others shape policy and share ownership of the school, they effectively share leadership in reform efforts (Sanders, 2016; Adams & Jean-Marie, 2011).

Tedla et al. (2021) conducted the study to investigate and analyze the relationship between two variables in the Eritrean school system, namely principal leadership styles and school performance. The findings revealed that the leadership styles of principals influence school performance, either

positively or negatively, and that no single leadership style is always appropriate. The research also found that democratic and situational leadership styles improve school performance while autocratic and laissez-faire leadership styles degrade it. Thus, the distribution of leadership to stakeholders which includes teachers, parents, businesspeople, community organizations, and community members, improves student learner performance without reducing the influence of school leaders and improves educational quality. Shared leadership has an indirect impact on student achievement by influencing teacher morale and the work environment. Stakeholders can take on initiatives with supportive, ongoing, relevant professional development as school leadership establishes trusting and collaborative climates, improving the conditions and motivation for teachers (Bryk, 2010; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

The sharing of leadership and leadership practices between principals and teachers improves working relationships and thus contributes to enhanced learner performance and quality of education (Sanders, 2016; Bryk, 2010). Principals influence learning by establishing a style or culture that supports professional growth and by trying to take clear and specific measures to support teachers' personal development through activities such as direct observations and interactions in individual classrooms and team meetings (Fehrer & Leos-Urbel, 2016).

Principals foster collaboration by creating structures and opportunities for professional development for stakeholders. They also contribute to the school's mission by driving programs that improve instruction and fostering collaboration by establishing structures and providing professional development for stakeholders. Regular communication, collaborative decision-making, and task coordination among principals and SGBs result in a more engaged community and increased school functionality and effectiveness. Principals are encouraged to implement the community school strategy of share leadership and create a social hub for teachers, parents, school administrators, and community members that allows for frequent and open communication as well as time to build collaboration capacity (Warren, 2005; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). This collaboration promotes quality education and improves learners' performance.

2.3. School governing bodies (SGBs)

School governing bodies (SGBs) as parent representatives are critical in establishing community partnerships in schools. They link families to teachers, resources, and services as well as students and teachers to community resources and opportunities. SGBs function to synchronize partners' efforts with learning goals, bringing residents and parents into the school, and arranging the provision of services. The ability of a school to collaborate with community services influences the efficacy of supplemental resources in supporting student learning.

Constant communication with principals enables SGBs to align their work with school and student goals, allowing teachers to devote more time to developing and engaging students in academic

content. Collaboration, particularly between principals and SGBs, is critical to the successful improvement of learner performance and educational quality.

2.4. Teachers

Students' long-term relationships with teachers could significantly affect how pleasant they feel in a setting and how hard they work in school. Teachers who see themselves as part of a collaborative team believe they are supported by school leadership, have control over their work environments, and trust their principal as instructional leaders are more likely to stay at a school. If teachers are provided leadership roles in schools, this can contribute to the development of a learning community in which teachers, school management teams, learners, and parents can work together to enhance learner performance and quality education (Olivos, 2006).

Teachers who express concerns and collaborate on finding solutions build trust and improve practice, allowing them to translate school improvement plans into classroom practices while critically drawing on a variety of resources and expertise. Interestingly, teacher participation in school decision-making is strongly associated with positive learner outcomes. As a result, teacher learning improves instructional practice and assists the school in meeting its reform objectives. This also leads to an improvement in learner performance and educational quality (Seashore Louis et al., 2010).

2.5. Families and community members

As educational stakeholders, parents play critical roles in the education of their children. Parents' primary goal is to ensure that their children receive a high-quality education that will prepare them to live productive and rewarding lives as adults in a global society. As educational stakeholders, parents contribute additional resources to the school to help learners achieve and to foster a sense of community pride and commitment, which may have an impact on the school's overall success. (Water, 2011). Maluleke (2014) argues that there should be coordination, cooperation, and complementarity between schools and families, as well as the promotion of effective collaboration and communication between schools and homes. Parents know their children better and, as such, they must be fully engaged in their children's education. Munje and Mncube (2018) conducted a study on the lack of parent involvement as a hindrance in selected public primary schools in South Africa based on educators' voices. The study found that educators' perceptions of parent non-involvement do not account for the contextual realities that limit their involvement. Parents' participation in their children's education, both formally and informally, can have social and emotional benefits, but certain contextual challenges can make it difficult to achieve long-term parental engagement. However, parental involvement should not be limited to monetary contributions (though monetary contributions are important): parents should be directly involved in their children's academic, social, and emotional needs (Munje & Mncube, 2018). Parental involvement in their

children's educational experiences is extremely important because it demonstrates their belief in the importance of obtaining a quality education and the impact it will have on later life (Hong & Eamon, 2012). Learners who receive a high level of parental support develop positive character traits and avoid negative behaviors.

A partnership between families, communities, and schools that support schools is a critical factor in learners' performance and overall school success. If parents are fully engaged in their children's learning, this leads to significant improvements in learners' performance and overall quality of education. Bryk (2010) discovered that schools with strong ties between school actors, parents, and the local community benefitted immensely from such partnerships. Charamba (2016) ascertains that parental involvement enhances community and school relationships through mutual understanding between the school and community.

A well-coordinated school community program for improving learners' learning necessitates managing a wide range of academic and social support services while maintaining relationships with numerous institutions. When school-community ties are strong, it is easier to develop and implement effective plans that will enhance the functionality and effectiveness of schools (Warren, 2005). These connections aided them in creating a more welcoming overall environment for student learning. Schools can develop the capacity of community members to participate as school leaders by fostering a healthy school culture and recognizing their existing capacities and knowledge. Parental and community involvement should be the norm and schools should encourage the development of new skills and knowledge in families and school staff members. This can result in more trust and successful engagement. Trust, in turn, strengthens the school community's social foundation, allowing reform initiatives to develop over time and significantly improve a school's capacity to educate all its learners (Warren et al., 2009).

2.6. External organizations

Meaningful collaborations with outside groups, particularly non-profit organizations and government agencies, benefit schools in many ways. Collaborations like these can improve access to services for learners and families while also addressing some out-of-school learning challenges like crime and a lack of healthcare or housing. Collaborations of this type go beyond simply providing services as it includes defining problems, developing action plans to solve the problems, and carrying out plans. As a result, forms of engagement that bring local knowledge into the school while also strengthening the surrounding community's power emerges. Collaborative leadership can influence learners' learning growth by increasing the school's capacity for academic improvement (Warren, 2005; Olivos, 2006).

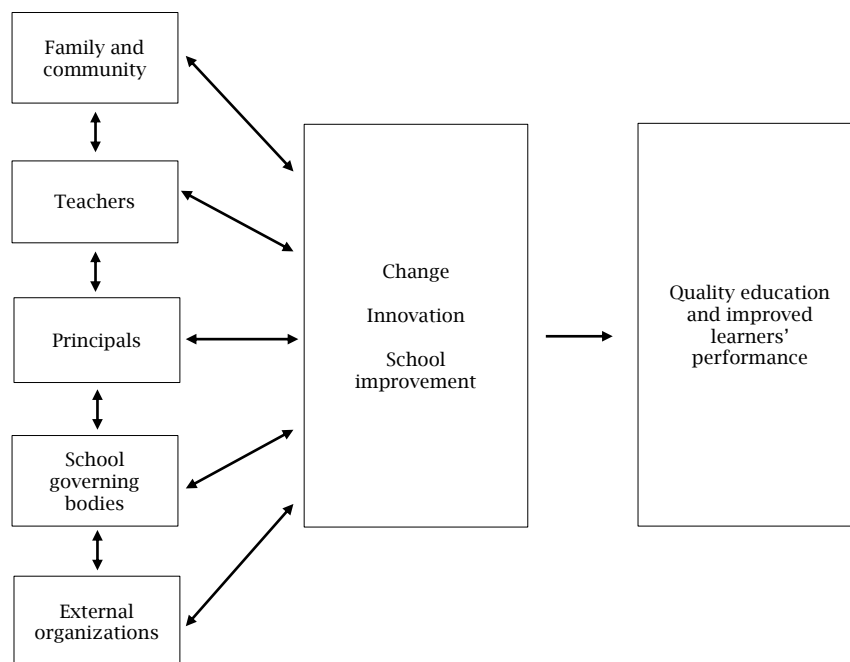
Schools in rural areas are in appalling conditions. Infrastructural shortages remain the major challenge. In the same way, rural schools experience infrastructural challenges such as a lack of classrooms, sanitation, computer laboratories,

science laboratories, school halls, libraries, and sports grounds. Rural areas also experience connectivity challenges which make it difficult for the integration of digital technologies into teaching and learning. It is the role of the authorities (government) to make sure that schools are provided with the required resources and infrastructure to achieve quality education and improved learner performance.

Therefore, for secondary schools to realize the goals of quality education and improved learners' performance, there is a need for a coordinated effort among all the role players in the education sector. Education innovation cannot be achieved if the stakeholders are operating in their silos.

Based on the above discussions, we proposed the analytic framework indicated in Figure 1 below. Figure 1 shows the analytic framework that has been adopted for this research. This framework proposes that if different stakeholders are innovatively involved in schools, they will have an impact both directly and indirectly on the overall performance of the school in terms of quality education and improved learner performance. The existing literature helps to conceptualize the existing relationship between the various stakeholders to ensure improved learners' performance and quality education in schools.

Figure 1. Proposed analytic framework for innovative stakeholder engagement



2.7. Theoretical framework

The research paper is supported by Epstein's model of school-family-community partnerships, which emphasizes stakeholder interactions and stresses how internal and external spheres of influence can overlap and have either positive or negative effects on learner experiences and overall academic performance (Epstein, 2018). Maintaining collaborations between schools, parents, and communities while exploiting underutilized parental resources can ensure learner success in their academic journey because all stakeholders share a common interest in advancing the education of their children (Epstein, 2018). Schools can choose to make decisions that are either positive or detrimental to school functioning by either drawing all stakeholders together or not. Parents can assist schools since they are aware of their children's educational goals and know how best to motivate them to achieve their intended academic goals (Tekin, 2011). In Epstein's concept, learners play a crucial role in keeping the lines of communication open between schools and parents by sending

notices such as summonses, reports, and memos (Epstein, 2018). Schools must therefore accommodate both pupils and parents by including them in school activities (Epstein, 2018). The concept also advises schools to comprehend their community's environment and parent backgrounds and welcome them despite various views, perceptions, and problems because stakeholder involvement improves learner attendance and performance (Epstein, 2018; Sheldon, 2002). Based on their level of education, lack of empowerment, lack of vision, poverty and employment dynamics, familial structures, teacher attitudes, and exclusion, it is likely that parents in underprivileged communities are underrepresented in learner education (Lemmer, 2007).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study involved secondary school principals in the Vhembe district, Limpopo province, South Africa. The principals were sampled from public secondary schools. The quantitative study was chosen to improve the accuracy of the findings

of the study through statistical analysis (Berndt et al., 2011) and circumvents the elements of subjectivity accompanying the qualitative approach (Du Plessis et al., 2007). One hundred ten (110) principals were randomly selected from a population of 150 principals. The sample size of 110 principals was reached, guided by Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for calculating sample size. The study aimed to achieve 95 percent confidence and an acceptance of 5 percent error at a low budget.

A structured self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents. The questionnaire to measure the degree of innovative stakeholder engagement as practiced by secondary school principals was developed based on the Likert scales ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (5). It consisted of 10 items. The questionnaire was developed relying on the theoretical literature and previous studies. Questionnaires were delivered to all 110 sampled principals. The study received 80 usable responses from the principals, thereby achieving a response rate of 72.7 percent, which is adequate as Babbie (2013) argues that a response rate of at least 50 percent is adequate for analysis and reporting.

The data collected through a questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to analyze data in this study.

Alternatively, a qualitative study using unstructured interviews could be considered to get the feelings of the participants regarding stakeholder engagement in rural secondary schools.

To verify the validity of the data collection instrument, the questionnaire was presented to the principals in the Vhembe district. They were asked to assess the quality of the questionnaire and provide information regarding language wording and correctness, the extent to which the items match the domain under which they are listed and to provide information on items to remove, add or combine. Their contributions and suggestions were considered in the drafting of the final questionnaire.

To check the reliability of the questionnaire, it was first administered to 15 principals who are not part of the sample of the study. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to check the internal consistency of the items. The value of the stability coefficient was 0.700 as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of reliability test results

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>	<i>Number of items</i>
Innovative stakeholder engagement	0.700	10

4. RESULTS

4.1. Frequency distributions of the respondents

Table 2 below indicates the frequency distributions of the respondents according to gender, age, years of experience, and highest qualification.

Table 2. Biographical information

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid percent</i>	<i>Cumulative percent</i>
Gender				
Male	48	60.0	60.0	60.0
Female	32	40.0	40.0	100.0
Total	80	100.0	100.0	
Age				
36-45 years	10	12.5	12.5	12.5
46-55 years	40	50.0	50.0	62.5
56-65 years	30	37.5	37.5	100.0
Total	80	100.0	100.0	
Years of experience				
0-10 years	31	38.9	38.9	38.9
11-20 years	32	40.0	40.0	78.9
21-30 years	16	20.0	20.0	98.9
Above 30 years	1	1.1	1.1	100.0
Total	80	100.0	100.0	
Qualification				
Bachelor's degree or Advanced diploma or Bachelor of Technology	10	12.5	12.5	12.5
Honors degree or Postgraduate diploma	56	70.0	70.0	82.5
Master's degree	14	17.5	17.5	100.0
Total	80	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 shows that 60% (48) of the respondents were males and 40% (32) were females. Thus, most of the principals were males. The table also shows that ages of the principals who responded, 50% (40) were between the age of 46 and 55 years, 37.5% (30) were between the age of 56 and 65 and 12.5% (10) were between the age of 36 and 45. Accordingly, the bulk (87.5%) of the respondents were between the age of 46 and 65.

Furthermore, Table 2 indicates the respondents' years of experience in current position. Thus, 40% (32) of the respondents have between 11 and 20 years of experience, 38.90% (31) have between 0

and 10 years of experience in current position, 20% (16) have between 21 and 30 years and 1.1% (1) have above 30 years of experience. Thus, most principals (78.90%) had experience of between 0 to 20 years.

Table 2 also indicates the highest professional qualification of the principals. The results indicate that 70% (56) of the respondents had Honours degree or Postgraduate diploma, 17.5% (14) had a Master's degree and 12.5% (10) had a Bachelor's degree, Advanced diploma, or Bachelor of Technology. Thus, most of the respondents had Honours degree or Postgraduate diploma.

4.2. Reliability of the innovative stakeholder engagement factor

Table 3 below shows the reliability of innovative stakeholder engagement and is made up of 10 items. Moreover, the table indicates the scale mean, scale variance, and Cronbach's alpha if any item is removed. Cronbach's alpha is a weighted average of an instrument's split-half reliability estimates (Henson, 2001). It is a reliability metric that assesses the degree of internal consistency or homogeneity between variables that measure the same construct or concept (i.e., the degree to which different items measuring the same variable attain consistent results). This coefficient has a range of 0 to 1, with 0.6 or less indicating poor internal consistency reliability (Malhotra, 2010). Coefficients equal to or

greater than 0.70, according to O'Leary-Kelly and Vokurka (1998), indicate that the measuring instrument is highly reliable. Cronbach's alpha for this study ranges from 0.641 to 0.733 for the items. All items have a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.6 implying that all the scale's items are based on the same underlying construct (Hair et al., 2010) and are thus found to be reliable and suitable for further analysis. This factor's overall Cronbach's alpha was 0.700, which was deemed acceptable for further investigation. Although the item "*I attend non-school events in the community*" has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.733, which is higher than the overall Cronbach's alpha, deleting it will have no effect on the overall Cronbach's alpha of this factor. As a result, no items are deleted to increase the overall Cronbach's alpha.

Table 3. Item total statistics for the innovative stakeholder engagement

Item	Scale mean if the item deleted	Scale variance if the item deleted	Corrected item-total correlation	Cronbach's alpha if the item deleted
1. I develop school policies with all role players.	22.3429	14.026	0.334	0.685
2. I ensure maximum involvement by parents and community members.	22.2714	12.983	0.540	0.654
3. I communicate learners' progress with parents.	22.4143	13.869	0.270	0.692
4. I involve all role players when developing school development plans.	22.3571	13.537	0.404	0.674
5. I involve all role players when developing school improvement plans.	22.2571	12.773	0.497	0.656
6. I communicate school progress and challenges with all role players.	21.4200	11.763	0.493	0.631
7. I constantly engage with civic groups.	20.5000	11.065	0.519	0.641
8. I constantly engaged with businesspeople and non-governmental organizations.	20.1286	11.331	0.483	0.650
9. I attend non-school events in the community.	20.3571	14.291	0.079	0.733
10. I created a database of the alumnae.	20.2857	11.077	0.421	0.670

Table 4 below indicates the overall mean (24.1143), variance (15.581), and standard deviation (3.94727) for the 10 items.

Table 4. Scale statistics for the innovative stakeholder engagement

Mean	Variance	Std. Dev.	No. of items
24.1143	15.581	3.94727	10

4.3. Descriptive statistics of the innovative stakeholder engagement factor

This section analyzes the descriptive statistics of the factor of innovative stakeholder engagement. The section answers the question: "*What are the innovative measures of trying to improve stakeholder engagement?*". A Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (5) was used.

Table 5 displays the descriptive statistics and response distribution for the innovative stakeholder engagement factor. This section of the questionnaire had the highest mean score of 3.9857 (Item 8) and the lowest mean score of 1.7000 (Item 3), for a total score range of 2.2857. The standard deviation ranges from 1.14172 to 0.51560. The factor consists of 10 items and their central tendencies are analyzed hereunder.

"*I develop school policies with all role players*". The standard deviation and mean for this item are 0.51560 and 1.7714, respectively. A lower standard

deviation shows a less dispersion of responses to the item and the mean indicates that respondents agree with the item.

"*I ensure maximum involvement by parent and community members*": The standard deviation and mean for this item are 0.58075 and 1.8429, respectively. A lower standard deviation shows less variation in responses to the item and the mean indicates that respondents agree with the item.

"*I communicate learners' progress with the parents*": The standard deviation and mean for this item are 0.64494 and 1.7000, respectively. A lower standard deviation shows a less dispersion of responses to the item and the mean indicates that those who responded agree with the item.

"*I involve all role players when developing school development plans*": The standard deviation and mean for this item are 0.57573 and 1.7571, respectively. A lower standard deviation shows less variation in responses to the item and the mean shows that people who responded agree with the item.

"*I involve all role players when developing school improvement plans*": The standard deviation and mean for this item are 0.66563 and 1.8571, respectively. A lower standard deviation shows less dispersion of responses to the item and the mean shows that respondents agree with the item.

"*I communicate school progress and challenges with all role players*": The standard deviation and mean for this item are 0.90364 and 3.2286, respectively. A greater value of standard deviation

shows that there is a wide dispersion of responses to the item and the mean indicates that respondents were not sure about the item.

"I constantly engage with civic groups": The standard deviation and mean for this item are 1.01143 and 3.6143, respectively. A greater standard deviation shows that there is a wide variation in responses to the item and the mean indicates that people who responded disagree with the item.

"I constantly engage with businesspeople and non-governmental organizations": The standard deviation and mean for this item are 0.99990 and 3.9857, respectively. A high value of standard deviation shows that there is a wide variation in

responses to the item and the mean indicates that respondents disagree with the item.

"I attend non-school events in the community": The standard deviation and mean for this item are 0.87536 and 3.7571, respectively. A lower standard deviation shows a less dispersion of responses to the item and the mean indicates that people who responded disagree with the item.

"I created the database of the alumnae": The standard deviation and mean for this item are 1.14172 and 3.8286, respectively. A high value of standard deviation shows that there is a wide variation in responses to the item and the mean indicates that respondents disagree with the item.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics

Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
1. I develop school policies with all role players.	1.7714	0.51560	80
2. I ensure maximum involvement by parents and community members.	1.8429	0.58075	80
3. I communicate learners' progress with parents.	1.7000	0.64494	80
4. I involve all role players when developing school development plans.	1.7571	0.57573	80
5. I involve all role players when developing school improvement plans.	1.8571	0.66563	80
6. I communicate school progress and challenges with all role players.	3.2286	0.90364	80
7. I constantly engage with civic groups.	3.6143	1.01143	80
8. I constantly engaged with businesspeople and non-governmental organizations.	3.9857	0.99990	80
9. I attend non-school events in the community.	3.7571	0.87536	80
10. I created a database of the alumnae.	3.8286	1.14172	80

5. DISCUSSION

Of the 10 items for innovative stakeholder engagement, all were found to be reliable according to reliability analysis. These items are: *"I develop school policies with all role players"*, *"I ensure maximum involvement by parent and community members"*, *"I communicate learners' progress with parents"*, *"I involve all role players when developing school development plans"*, *"I involve all role players when developing school improvement plans"*, *"I communicate school progress and challenges with all role players"*, *"I constantly engage with civic groups"*, *"I constantly engaged with business people and non-governmental organizations"*, *"I attend non-school events in the community"*, and *"I created a database of the alumnae"*. The findings reveal that all items were reliable as they have Cronbach's alpha value greater than 0.6.

Further data analysis using descriptive statistics reveals that principals in the Vhembe district have attitudes towards the implementation of innovative stakeholder engagement in schools. The findings reveal that the mean score of the items ranges from 3.9857 the highest (8) and 1.7000 the lowest (3). The standard deviation of the items ranges from 1.14172 to 0.51560. The findings indicate that principals agree with items 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, disagree with items 7, 8, 8, and 10, and were neutral about item 6. This shows that principals in the Vhembe district involve parents and other stakeholders to a lesser degree in their schools. Stakeholders are involved in some school activities. Principals were found not to involve all relevant stakeholders to ensure continued support towards the education of their children. The results are in accordance with the outcomes of the research by Mathekgga (2016), Bhekhimpilo (2015), Manamela (2015), Hhlabati (2015), Parmaswar (2014), and Maluleke (2014) who found that a lack of parental involvement in rural schools is prevalent in the majority of rural schools in South Africa.

The study also found that schools are not enjoying the benefits of engaging stakeholders in school activities as alluded to by Charamba (2016), Gwija (2016), Van Zyl (2013), Stewart (2011), and Heystek (2003). Charamba (2016) asserts that parental involvement results in unity of purpose between parents and school and thus leads to enhanced academic performance and promotes acceptable behavior among learners. Van Zyl (2013) argues that the following are the benefits of parental involvement: reduced absenteeism, better attitudes of learners, better learners' behavior, declined dropout rate, and improved academic performance. Charamba (2016) posits that through parents' active involvement in children's education, schools are likely to run smoothly. Parental involvement improves school programs and the school climate.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper seeks to answer the research question: *"To what extent do rural secondary school principals innovatively involve stakeholders to improve learners' performance and quality of education in rural secondary schools?"* This paper investigated the dynamics of the relationship between stakeholder engagement and the impact on educational quality and learners' performance in secondary schools. Overall, the stakeholder engagement literature review supports the claim that certain impacts are dependent on stakeholder engagement. Despite this, the findings of the study highlight some of the major challenges associated with high stakeholder engagement strategies. The paper also builds on the work of Epstein (2018), who focuses on stakeholder relationships dominated by internal and external overlapping spheres of influence with either negative or positive implications for learner experiences and performance. It also claims that stakeholder engagement and impact should be viewed as a process or set of sub-processes built on specific

productive interactions and linked by discrete delivery mechanisms. A key finding was that principals were not involving all relevant stakeholders to ensure continued support for their children's education. Moreover, the findings of the study reveal that many principals prioritize their managerial and administrative responsibilities over innovative stakeholder engagement. Although principals are responsible for a variety of administrative and managerial tasks, there is an urgent need for them to take an active role in innovative stakeholder engagement, which is critical to improving learner performance. The principal has the power to influence learner performance by promoting effective and innovative stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, the article concludes that principals are not innovatively involving all stakeholders in schools. Meanwhile, the principals agree that stakeholders should be involved in the day-to-day running of the schools, civic organizations, businesspeople, community, and alumnae are not engaged in school activities. Therefore, this has a negative impact on learners' performance. The article is one of those few that have explored the innovative stakeholder engagement practices amongst principals in rural secondary schools. The study collected data from secondary schools in the Vhembe district, Limpopo province, South Africa. When interpreting the results of this study, consideration must be given to its limitations. The results are based on a survey of 150 secondary schools in the Vhembe district conducted between 2019 and 2021. Since the sample size is small and the study area is volatile, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

The study could not achieve a high response rate as anticipated due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown regulations, which made it impossible for the researcher to reach more schools to collect the data. This background makes the generalisability of the findings difficult. In practice, this paper highlights the existing gap between the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 (RSA, 1996), which emphasizes sustainable stakeholder engagement as a foundation for school functionality, and what is currently manifesting, particularly in rural schools. Given that stakeholders are important mediators between the school and the learners, with an indisputable impact on performance and quality education, schools should initiate truly inclusive, welcoming, and encouraging strategies rather than engaging in a blame game (Munje & Mncube, 2018). This emphasizes the significance of principal empowerment in terms of school, family, and community partnerships (Epstein, 2018). This could be reinforced by ongoing training that provides principals with the knowledge and skills required to initiate and implement long-term stakeholder relationships for the benefit of schools and learners (Epstein, 2018; Munje & Mncube, 2018). Moreover, the study has developed an analytic framework for innovative stakeholder engagement to assist principals. Therefore, more similar studies should be conducted in the future using data collected from secondary schools in urban areas. Furthermore, studies can also be conducted using data collected from primary schools. The resultant findings will likely uncover similarities and differences in innovative stakeholder engagement from secondary schools in other districts and provinces.

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