

Teachers' Perceptions of Effective School Leadership in Moroccan Public Schools

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Abstract

This study explores public school teachers' perceptions of effective school leadership in the Oriental Region of Morocco. As a data collection method, the study employed a qualitative online survey, which involved 110 public school teachers. Participants' responses were thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's six-phase process of thematic analysis. The findings show that principals have a significant influence on their schools, the learners, and the staff. They also reveal that effective school leaders are perceived as communicative individuals, relationship-focused, team oriented and collaborative. Having good administrative and managerial skills are necessary for effective leadership. However, these skills should be complemented a focus on relationships, communication, team building, and collaboration. Other attributes of effective school leadership include professionalism, fairness, consideration, and support. The findings highlight the importance of understanding leadership within its specific organizational and cultural context. Practical implications are suggested for leadership development in the context of Moroccan public schools.

1. INTRODUCTION

Until the early 1960s, the prevailing notion was that schools had a limited impact on student achievement. The predominant belief was that achievement was determined by genetics, family background, and socio-economic status. However, starting from the mid-1960s, school effectiveness research has revealed various factors, variables, and processes that result in some schools being more effective and successful than others. Leadership was one of the factors identified as influencing school effectiveness (Dinham, 2007). Systematic reviews by Hallinger and Heck (1996), Marzano et al. (2005), and Robinson (2007) strongly suggest that leadership is a major factor in the variation of important student outcomes across schools, which highlights the essential role of school leadership in driving educational improvements and achieving better academic results.

Leadership, however, is not a set of universal characteristics that work in every setting. Leadership is essentially context-bound as what is considered effective leadership depends on the cultural and organizational context. Thus, this study aims to explore leadership within the specific context of Moroccan public schools. Research on leadership within this context is scarce, and most of the studies conducted relied on universal leadership theories to investigate school leadership in the Moroccan context. For instance, El Bakkali (2020) examined the importance of distributed leadership in the Moroccan educational context, and Laouni (2023),

similarly, investigated the relationship between Moroccan school principals' transformational leadership and level of technology integration. In these studies, the context was neglected, which reflects the belief that leadership is a set of universal leadership characteristics rather than being context-dependent. One of the scarce studies that addressed the effect of context was conducted by Lekchiri et al. (2018), but in the context of higher education Moroccan institutions, which is different from the context of public schools.

Amghar (2019) emphasizes that the shortcomings of top-down educational leadership in Morocco necessitate developing strong school-level leadership. This can be achieved by enabling public school principals to take a more active leadership role in driving reform and responding to challenges that Moroccan public schools face. To lead their schools more effectively, principals need to be aware of what leadership practices fit their schools. Accordingly, this study explores how public school teachers in the Oriental Region of Morocco perceive effective school leadership. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. How do public school teachers in the Oriental Region perceive the impact of school leaders on the school, the staff, and the learners?
2. How do they perceive the characteristics of effective and ineffective school leadership?

Leadership is primarily a process of influence. Thus, the first question addresses teachers' perceptions of the influence of principals on their schools, the staff, and the students. This question ensures that this study does not treat effective leadership as an abstract concept but as practices that have real effects on the people involved in the school. The second research question concerns teachers' perceptions of what characterizes effective and ineffective school leadership.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Defining School Leadership

Looking for a definition of leadership is not an easy task. Leithwood and Riehl point out that "like other complex human activities, leadership is difficult to pin down" (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 2). Northouse (2016) adds that over the course of more than a century of academic exploration, definitions of leadership have undergone continuous evolution. These definitions have been shaped by global events and political contexts to the disciplinary perspectives within which the topic is studied.

Although leadership has been conceptualized in various ways, several components can be identified as central to the phenomenon of leadership: leadership is a *process*, it involves *influence*, it occurs in *groups*, and it involves *common goals* (Northouse, 2016). House et al. (2004) note that "the core of almost [most] definitions concerns influence—that is, how leaders influence others to help accomplish group or organizational objectives" (p. 15). Northouse (2014) offers the following definition based on these components: "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 6).

2.2. School Leadership in Context

Leadership does not occur in a vacuum; it occurs within a context. Schools operate within a context that affects how leadership is practiced. Thus, "no sensible evaluation of

school leadership (practice, effectiveness) can take place without consideration of the context within which leadership is enacted” (Miller, 2018, p. 177). Burak Oc (2018) argues that the context of leadership consists of three dimensions; *where, when, and who*. The “*where*” dimension includes culture, institutional factors, and the type of organization. The “*who*” dimension describes the demographics and characteristics of the whole group or team of individuals. The “*when*” dimension, on the other hand, considers how time-related factors influence leadership. Such factors might include organizational changes or crises, which can affect the leader’s behaviour.

Schools, like all organizations, are also subject to the contextual factors discussed above. These factors involve the social, geo-political, technological, economic, religious, and cultural issues within a school’s national environment. There are also other factors or issues specific to individual schools. Such issues include the size of a school, the average class sizes, and the number and quality of the school’s staff. On top of this, there are also community-related factors, including the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of parents and their involvement in school activities. Community-related factors might also involve the support provided by the school’s local community. Other factors pertain to the governance of schools. Among these, there is the effectiveness of the institutions that manage schools as well as the adequacy of support provided by the Ministry of Education/Education Department to schools in terms of resources required (financial and technical) (Miller, 2018).

Leading a school, thus, does not simply mean putting ready-made solutions or prescriptions into action; it is ongoing encounters with challenges “that demand thinking, responding, and adjusting to the situations at hand” (Acker-Hocevar et al., 2015, p. 5). What makes the job of school leaders more challenging is the fact that they hold a myriad of responsibilities and roles. School principals are expected to manage the often conflicting interests of the various stakeholders that exist within and outside the school’s community (Ni et al., 2018). In the Moroccan context, public schools’ stakeholders and partners involve parents, teachers, students, political officials, representatives and institutions, unions, educational authorities, and civil society associations.

The context of leadership, moreover, involves the culture within which it operates. What is regarded as effective leadership might vary among cultures. Dorfman comments that “leadership processes are inexorably intertwined within one’s culture” (Dorfman, 2004, p. 265). This is because what leaders do is influenced by the values, norms, and practices that characterize their culture (Hartog & Dickson, 2018).

2.3.School Leadership as a Personal Activity

In Addition to being context-bound, leadership is also inherently a personal activity, as school leaders have unique life and professional experiences that affect their values, which in turn affect how they perceive and practice leadership (Miller, 2018). Values, consciously or unconsciously, are employed by school leaders as guides “in interpreting situations and suggesting appropriate administrative action, which is the artistry of leadership” (Begley, 2001, p. 364). Larsen and Derrington (2012) note that the “most reliable guide at the principal’s disposal may be the ‘moral compass’ upon which the individual has learned to rely” (p. 2). However, a leader’s values do not always match those of the followers or the school’s environment. A school leader who tries to lead and manage without regard to the broader

environmental context will quickly face difficulty as the values of profession, organization, community, and society are not always in line with each other (Begley, 2001). Thus, a leader who does not consider the context before acting is likely to fail. Leadership that is detached from the situation in which it operates is not effective as different situations need different behaviors or styles.

2.4.Responsibilities of Principals in Moroccan Public Schools

The primary role of principals in Moroccan public schools is the general supervision of the school. The administrative staff assists the principal in handling paperwork, scheduling, monitoring student attendance, and other administrative duties, especially in middle and high schools where there are more students compared to primary schools. The number of administrative staff members depends on the size and type of school (e.g., primary or high school, boarding or day school). Moroccan public schools also have four school councils whose role is to participate in managing the school. These councils are formed annually and consist of teachers and administrative staff. School councils are headed by the principal who calls meetings when required.

According to Decree 2.02.376, school principals head the school's councils and implement their decisions. They are also tasked with preparing an annual work plan as well as an annual report to assess the school's performance. School principals are also responsible for ensuring timetables are respected, supervising curriculum progress, and assessing staff performance. In addition, they coordinate between school councils, communicate updates from educational authorities, call meetings as required, manage the school's budget and maintain equipment, represent the school at local government meetings and community events, and establish partnerships with civic society associations and institutions (*Men.Gov.Ma*, 2002). There are, of course, other duties that principals have and that change depending on the size of the school and the administrative staff as well as the type of school. These duties are not independent of those of the school councils and the administrative staff. The main duty of the school principal, however, is to supervise the school's administrative, educational, and financial operations.

School principals in Moroccan public schools have an extensive list of responsibilities. Their effectiveness as leaders can be compromised by such an overwhelming list of responsibilities which are primarily about managing the day-to-day school's operations. Such an extensive list of responsibilities can limit the potential of Moroccan school principals as school leaders. Moreover, the size of the school and the number of administrative staff can influence the effectiveness of the principal as a school leader. A small school is easier to manage, which can allow the school leader to be effective, unlike a larger school with a larger number of students and teachers. In addition, schools with supportive and sufficient administrative staff can allow the school principal to be more successful in leading the school as he or she will have more time and fewer tasks.

3. METHOD

This study used an online qualitative survey method as a data collection method. In qualitative surveys, questions are presented in a fixed and standard order to all participants who respond using their own words instead of selecting from a set of predefined response options as in

quantitative surveys (Braun et al., 2021). This allows qualitative surveys to produce rich, detailed, and varied data and is well-suited for exploring different topics (Terry & Braun, 2017).

Qualitative surveys “mix openness with standardisation” (Terry & Braun, 2017, p. 18). Standardization is achieved by including a fixed list of questions presented to participants in the same order while openness is ensured through open-ended questions. Qualitative surveys offer flexibility concerning when and where participants complete the survey, unlike interviews and focus groups which often require participants to be available at a specific time and location set by the researcher. Online surveys can also provide a high degree of anonymity, which encourages more open answers as opposed to face-to-face interviews in which interviewees might be reluctant to speak openly, especially when the topic of research is sensitive (Braun et al., 2021). The anonymity that online surveys provide is the main reason this study opted for such a method for data collection. Online surveys, in addition, enable data collection from a large and geographically dispersed sample, which is not easily achievable using other qualitative methods (Davey et al., 2019). This study seeks to explore the topic of leadership within the Oriental region, which is a large and geographically diverse area. This makes online qualitative surveys well-suited for covering the study’s target population.

The questionnaire contained respondents' personal information (age, gender, and job tenure) and 3 open-ended questions (Table 1). The three open-ended address this study’s research questions which explore:

- Teachers’ perceptions of the school leader’s impact on the school, the staff, and the learners.
- Teachers’ perceptions of the characteristics of effective and ineffective school leadership.

The questionnaire was then translated into Arabic, and to ensure the questions were clear and precise, they were submitted to a group of high school teachers (N=10) to rate their clarity and suggest modifications. Following this, the questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms.

Table 1

Open-Ended questions Included in the Questionnaire

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1. To what extent does the principal affect your school? Please, give examples that demonstrate this influence.
 2. To what extent does your school principal affect you and the students? Please, give examples that demonstrate this influence.
 3. What makes a school principal a successful or unsuccessful leader?
-

3.1. Participants and Sampling

The population of this study is teachers employed in public primary, secondary, and high schools in the Oriental Region of Morocco. This study used convenience sampling to recruit participants online using WhatsApp and Facebook groups. This sampling technique was chosen because of the qualitative nature of this study and because participation was voluntary.

In addition, the population of this study is geographically dispersed, which makes convenience sampling most suitable for data collection.

The total number of teachers who completed the questionnaire was 110. However, two responses were removed as they were irrelevant. Among the participants, 66 were males and 44 were females. The average age of the participants is 37.8 years. As for the participants' teaching experience, Table 2 below illustrates the teaching experience of the teachers who completed the questionnaire.

Table 1

Teaching Experience of Participants

Teaching Experience	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Less than 1 year	2	1.8%
1-3	14	12.7%
4-6	35	31.8%
7-10	17	15.5%
11-15	9	8.2%
16-20	15	13.6%
20+	18	16.4%

3.2.Data Analysis Procedures

Participants' responses were translated into Arabic with the help of colleagues who were proficient in both English and Arabic. The translated responses were then uploaded to QDA Miner (Qualitative Data Analysis Minor), which is a qualitative data analysis software that codes qualitative textual data. To analyze the participants' responses, a thematic analysis was conducted. This study followed the six-phase process developed by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) familiarization, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing potential themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. This study followed these six phases to analyze participants' responses.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the results obtained after analyzing the participants' responses. Data analysis aims to address the research questions of this study:

- What are teachers' perceptions of the school leader's impact on the school, the staff, and the learners?
- What are their perceptions of the characteristics of effective and ineffective school leadership?

This section is divided into two main subsections. Each subsection presents the results related to each of this study's objectives. The themes identified in the participants' responses are defined along with the frequency of occurrence of each theme and the frequency and percentage of participants who contributed to each of the themes described.

- The frequency of occurrence of the theme: the number of times a theme was mentioned.
- The frequency and percentage of participants: the number and percentage of participants who contributed to the theme.

The frequency of occurrence of the themes identified is sometimes different from the number of participants who contributed to the themes because one participant might reference a theme more than once in the same response. The names of the themes identified are in *Italics* and participants' quotes that illustrate the themes are presented between "inverted commas". The themes identified in each section are shown in tables to provide a clear and concise visual representation of the data.

4.1. The Perceived Impact of School Leaders

The Perceived Impact of the School Leader on the Learners

As Table 3 shows, teachers' responses reveal 3 themes related to the school leader's impact on learners. The most frequent is *Student Discipline*, which was referenced 37 times. This theme highlights the impact of the school leader on student discipline at school. Student discipline is reflected in students' compliance with school rules such as punctuality and respecting the dress code. Student discipline also involves reduced absenteeism and disruptive behaviour. For example, participant 14 explains: "As for the impact of the principal on the students, from my experience, the stricter and more respectful the principal is, the more students are likely to comply with the school rules (Being punctual on time, respecting the dress code, etc.)."

Table 2

The Impact of the School Leader on the Learners

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Student Discipline	37	25	22.70%
No Impact on Learners	5	5	4.50%
Student Learning and Performance	4	4	3.60%

5 participants believe that the school principal has no direct impact on the learners. Their responses are categorized under the theme *No Impact on Learners*. In contrast, the theme *Student Learning and Performance* highlights the significant impact of the principal on students' learning and performance, with only 4 references across the participants' responses. Participant 107, for instance, points out that the principal's "effect is significant as he contributes to improving student learning ... When the principal does not do their job effectively, chaos follows and students are less interested in learning".

The Perceived Impact of the School Leader on the School

Regarding the principal's impact on the school, 9 main themes emerge from the participants' responses. Table 4 details each theme, including the frequency of its occurrence and the number and percentage of participants who mention it.

Table 3

The Impact of the School Leader on the School

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
School atmosphere/environment	27	23	20.90%
Functioning of the school	25	24	21.80%
School conduct	11	9	8.20%
Success of the School	10	9	8.20%
Learning Process	3	3	2.70%
Image and Reputation of the School	3	3	2.70%
Work Conditions	3	2	1.80%

As the table above shows, 23 participants emphasize the principal's impact on the *School Atmosphere/Environment* in 27 instances. The words "atmosphere" and "environment" are employed by participants interchangeably to describe the social climate within the school. Most participants emphasize that effective school leaders create a healthy, positive, friendly, and educational work atmosphere/environment. Participant 73, for instance, remarks that "the principal's impact is significant as they create the appropriate work atmosphere that is free from tension and where there is mutual respect between the principal and the teachers."

24 participants emphasize the impact of the school leader on the *Functioning of the School*. The functioning of the school describes the efficiency, organization, and operation of school activities. For instance, Participant 47 mentions that "the principal has a central role in the educational process. The educational functioning of the school is closely related to the influence of the principal's personality, firmness, and how he manages the school."

The school leader's impact on the *School Conduct* is stressed 11 times. School Conduct refers to the behavior, discipline, and standards expected of students and staff. Participants highlighted that the school leader enforces order and rules, establishes respect, and maintains discipline, punctuality, and seriousness in the school. For example, Participant 105 maintains, "The school principal has an effective and important role inside the school, such as maintaining discipline among students and ensuring school rules are followed."

The school leader's impact on the *Success of the School* is referenced 10 times. Responses within this theme emphasize that the school's success or failure depends on the school leader. Achieving the school's objectives is also linked with the effectiveness of the school leader. An example that reflects this theme is mentioned by Participant 68 who stresses that "The success of the school depends on the success of the principal."

The remaining themes are all highlighted 3 times: *Learning Process*, *Image and Reputation of the School*, and *Work Conditions*.

The Perceived Impact of the School Leader on the School Staff

Teachers were asked to describe how the school leader affects teachers. However, answers describe the impact of the school leader on both the administrative staff and the teaching staff. Thus, this section describes the impact of the school leader on the school staff

and not just on teachers. 6 themes emerged after the coding process concerning the impact of the school leader on the school staff. Table 5 below shows the frequency of occurrence of each of the themes and the number and percentage of the participants who mention or contribute to the theme.

Table 4

The Impact of the School Leader on the School Staff

Theme	Frequency of occurrence	Number of Participants	Cases Percentage
Facilitating Work	22	22	20.00%
Motivating and Engaging the School Staff	18	17	15.50%
School Staff Productivity and Performance	13	12	10.90%
Teacher development	8	8	7.30%
School Staff Discipline	3	3	2.70%

Facilitating Work is mentioned by 22 participants. Most responses within this theme indicate that the school leader facilitates their work by providing the necessary resources. Responses also point out the school leader's role in assisting teachers with classroom management and administrative matters. The following example by Participant 69, for example, stresses that "The principal has a central role in managing the school and facilitating the work of teachers." Participant 90 points out that "The principal helps teachers by providing the necessary resources."

The theme *Motivating and Engaging the School Staff* is highlighted 18 times throughout the responses. Participants who contribute to this theme stress that effective school leaders increase the staff's motivation, encourage engagement in school activities and creativity, and increase their commitment and morale. Participant 5 emphasizes that "The principal significantly affects ... teachers' morale and commitment to the school."

The theme *School Staff Productivity and Performance* is mentioned 13 times. Responses that reflect this theme show that the school leader has a significant impact on the productivity and performance of the school staff, particularly when he or she is encouraging and motivating. Participant 31 notes that "The monitoring and supervision that [the principal] provides from time to time play a significant role in enhancing productivity and achieving the school objectives."

Teacher Development, highlighted in 8 references, emphasizes the role of the school principal in teacher development through guidance, advice, and supervision. Participant 29 states that the school principal "affects teachers by offering guidance and advice." Participant 48 also remarks "The principal affects our jobs by supervising our work and sometimes offering guidance."

School Staff Discipline is less frequent than the other themes. It is referenced only 3 times, and it stresses the school leader's impact on the discipline of the school staff. Participant 14 states: "The principal has a major impact on the school. If they are serious, teachers, the administrative staff, and students are more disciplined, and vice versa."

4.2. Teachers' Perceptions of Effective and Ineffective School Leadership

The aim of the third open-ended question in the questionnaire was to explore teachers' perceptions of effective school leadership. The question was: "What makes a school principal a successful or unsuccessful leader?" The themes identified in the responses to this question are divided into two categories: 1) characteristics of effective school leadership and 2) characteristics of ineffective school leadership.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Characteristics of Effective School Leadership

After the coding process, the codes were grouped into 22 distinct themes which describe the qualities, skills, and behaviors of effective school leaders.

Table 5

Teachers' Perceptions of the Characteristics of Effective School Leadership

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Communication and Relationship-Oriented	46	46	41.70%
Team-Oriented and Collaborative	26	25	22.60%
Professional Conduct	22	21	18.90%
Fair and Ethical	20	20	18.20%
Respectful, Modest, and Kind	17	16	14.50%
Considerate, Supportive, and Humane	15	15	13.60%
Flexible and Adaptable	14	14	12.70%
Effective Administrator and Manager	14	14	12.70%
Charismatic	9	9	8.20%
Wise and Calm	8	8	7.20%
Motivational and Encouraging	8	8	7.20%
Experience and Expertise	6	6	5.40%
Creates a positive atmosphere	6	6	5.40%
Involved in the Learning Process	4	4	3.60%
Community Engagement and Partnerships	4	4	3.60%
Strict and Decisive	4	4	3.60%
Models Behavior	3	3	2.70%
Visionary and Innovative	3	3	2.70%

As shown in Table 6 above, the most frequent theme is *Communication and Relationship-Oriented*, which appears in 46 instances throughout the responses. 41.70% of participants contribute to this theme, which highlights that effective school leadership is primarily perceived as communication and relationship-oriented. This theme primarily emphasizes the importance of effective and positive communication, active listening, and maintaining positive relationships within the school. It also highlights the importance of establishing mutual trust and effective conflict management. For example, Participant 25, emphasizes the importance of effective communication stating it is "a successful principal promotes a healthy relationship that bonds teachers".

The theme titled *Team-Oriented and Collaborative* is mentioned 26 times. This theme describes effective school leadership as participatory, democratic, collaborative, and team-oriented. It emphasizes the importance of involving the school staff in decision-making. Participant 32 provides a strong example of collaboration for effective school leadership: “To be a successful leader, they should work collaboratively because perspectives complement each other.”

Professional Conduct appears 22 in the responses. It defines effective school leaders as professional, responsible, accountable, credible, disciplined, organized, dedicated, and committed. An example that demonstrates this theme was mentioned by Participant 7 who states that “What makes a principal successful is being professional, while not being biased or neglecting and procrastinating in addressing school issues. What makes the principal fail as a school leader is personalizing matters when dealing with teachers, being authoritarian, and misusing authority.”

The theme *Fair and Ethical* is stressed 20 times. Participants who contribute to this emphasize that effective school leaders are fair, just, objective, and neutral, and apply rules fairly. For instance, Participant 64 states that “A successful leader is fair; they treat all staff equally.”

The theme labeled *Respectful, Modest, and Kind* is highlighted 17 times. It highlights that effective school leaders respect and are kind and modest toward everyone in the school. Participant 48, underlying the importance of respect, mentions that “A successful school leader respects the staff and recognizes their efforts.” Participant 49 adds that an effective school leader: “treats the staff kindly.”

The theme described as *Considerate, Supportive, and Humane* is highlighted 15 times, and it stresses the importance of demonstrating individualized Consideration, being understanding, considerate, supportive, and humane with the staff members. Participant 3, for instance, says “What makes a principal a successful school leader is the ability to ... demonstrate individual consideration for students’ and teachers’ needs.”

Flexible and Adaptable is highlighted in 14 references, and it emphasizes the leader’s ability to adapt their behavior to meet the individual needs and preferences of the staff members. Participant 6 indicates “A successful leader ... adapts his behavior according to the individual characteristics and needs of the staff.”

The theme labeled *Effective Administrator and Manager* appears 14 times. This theme emphasizes the importance of being an effective manager and administrator. This theme highlights general managerial and administrative skills, as well as specialized skills such as planning, problem-solving, effective time management, crisis management, and technological proficiency. As an example, Participant 70 comments “The one leading should have various skills in administration and continually improve them to manage situations without being authoritarian as that does not benefit anyone.”

The theme *Charismatic* appears in 9 occurrences. It emphasizes that effective school leaders possess the ability to influence others by being charismatic and through their strong personalities. Participant 10 notes that successful school leaders achieve success through “first

and foremost, personality and charisma, then managing legal and educational matters and building respectful human relationships with the rest of the staff.”

Wise and Calm is referenced in 8 instances. It emphasizes the leader’s ability to use knowledge and experience to make sound decisions and judgments and remain calm under stressful circumstances. For example, Participant 85 mentions that “The school principal is a successful leader when they lead the school wisely and rationally.”

The theme *Motivational and Encouraging* appears in 8 instances in the responses. Responses within this theme underline stress that the successful school leader encourages initiatives, recognizes efforts, and supports school activities. Participant 48 maintains that “A successful school leader respects the staff and *recognizes* their efforts.”

The theme *Experience and Expertise* is emphasized in 6 references. It underscores the importance of having the necessary experience and expertise to be an effective school leader. Participant 47: “The principal has to have enough experience in teaching so that they can always find effective solutions to problems that take place in the school.”

The theme labelled *Creates a Positive Atmosphere* is pointed 6 times. It gives emphasis to the importance of the leader’s ability to establish and promote a positive school atmosphere. Participant 42, for example, remarks that “The principal is a successful leader when they ... create a positive and friendly atmosphere.”

The theme titled *Involved in the Learning Process* is referenced 4 times, and it emphasizes that effective school leaders are involved in the learning process in their school. For example, Participant 4 mentions that successful school leaders show “genuine concern for students’ progress to adjust their shortcomings.” Participant 65 further adds “What makes the principal a successful leader is the extent to which they are involved in and support the school activities.”

The theme *Community Engagement and Partnerships* is highlighted in 4 instances. It involves behaviors such as being open to the school’s wider community and attracting and establishing partnerships with stakeholders, associations, and other organizations. The response provided by Participant 25 illustrates this theme: “A successful principal promotes a healthy relationship that bonds teachers and is also open to the school community: parents and other school stakeholders.”

The theme labeled *Strict and Decisive* is referenced 4 times. Participants who contributed to this theme emphasized that effective leaders are strict when dealing with the school staff and the students and decisive when making decisions. Participant 107, for instance, states that the successful school leader “is strict when dealing with students and the school staff.”

The remaining two themes were the least frequent among the responses as they appear in only 3 instances. The theme *Models Behavior* describes the leader’s ability to lead by example. The effective leader under this theme models positive behavior that he or she expects from staff and students. Participant 23 for example mentions that successful school leadership is achieved by being “a role model in ethics, values, and dedication to work.” *Visionary and*

Innovative, mentioned also 3 times, describes the effective school leader as someone who has a vision for the future and embraces new ideas. Participant 3 states that the successful school leader “should make effective decisions and clearly guide the school’s vision.”

Teachers’ Perceptions of the Characteristics of Ineffective School Leadership. After coding, 4 themes emerge from the responses (Table 7). Most responses focus more on effective than ineffective school leadership. Because of that, only 25 instances focused on effective school leadership.

Table 6:

Teachers' Perceptions of Ineffective School Leadership

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Authoritarian	8	8	7.20%
Irresponsible and unprofessional	7	7	6.30%
Uncommunicative and unsupportive	6	6	5.40%
Favoritism and unfairness	4	4	3.60%

The most frequent theme is *Authoritarian* which is cited 8 times. This theme stands in contrast with the effective school leadership theme labeled *Team-Oriented and Collaborative* mentioned above. Authoritarian school leaders make decisions independently of the school staff and misuse authority. Participant 7, for instance, comments “What makes the principal fail as a school leader is ... being authoritarian, and misusing authority.”

Irresponsible and Unprofessional is referenced 7 times. This theme describes qualities and behaviors that contrast with the theme *Professional Conduct* highlighted above as part of effective school leadership. Irresponsible and unprofessional school leaders neglect or procrastinate in addressing school issues and intervene in teachers’ work. In addition, irresponsible school leadership is characterized by “leaving his responsibilities to others” as highlighted by Participant 43.

The theme *Uncommunicative and Unsupportive* is mentioned 6 times, and it can be compared to the two effective school leadership themes *Communication and Relationship-Oriented* and *Considerate and Supportive*. Such school leaders are ineffective communicators, unsupportive, disrespectful, rude, create a hostile atmosphere in the school, and do not encourage communication. Participant 93, for example, emphasizes that “an unsuccessful principal drives teachers to avoid him and communicate with him only when necessary.”

The least frequent theme *Favoritism and Unfairness* is referenced 4 times. It contrasts with the effective school leadership theme of *Fair and Ethical*. Leaders who demonstrate favoritism and unfairness favor some individuals over others and apply double standards to different staff members or students. Participant 59 mentions that “what makes the principal unsuccessful ... favoring some people over others.”

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The Perceived Impact of School Leadership

The findings suggest that there is a significant impact of school leadership on the school, the staff, and learners. The school leader's influence on the school is reflected in the atmosphere/environment, functioning, conduct, and overall success. As for the impact of the school leader on the school staff, the primary themes identified included facilitating work, motivation, productivity, and teacher development. For learners, the school leader's impact on student discipline was highlighted. Participants also stressed the school leader's influence on student learning and performance. However, some participants reported that the leader's influence on student learning and performance is insignificant. These findings indicate the principal is not simply an administrator, but someone who directly affects staff, students, and the school environment.

Participants, particularly, highlight the school leader's impact on the school "environment" and "atmosphere". The environment or atmosphere of schools is often referred to in the literature as "school culture", a term that describes:

a school's own unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that seem to permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about or avoid talking about, whether they seek out colleagues for help or don't, and how teachers feel about their work and their students. (Deal & Peterson, 1999, pp. 2–3)

Participants highlighted the influence of the school leader on the school culture. Research emphasizes that school leaders influence and shape the cultures within their organizations. Scribner et al. (1999) maintain that an effective culture is the main instrument with which a leader promotes change within their schools. Hanson (2001), in this vein, mentions that "although the culture of a school is not visible to the human eye, its artifacts and symbols reflect specific cultural priorities" (p. 641). In the context of Moroccan public schools, such specific cultural priorities might include promoting citizenship values, encouraging community service, enhancing sports education, preserving Moroccan cultural heritage, promoting foreign language learning, and developing religious and cultural tolerance.

Schein (2010) argues that leaders exert a significant influence on the culture of their organizations through how they communicate their values and assumptions. This can be achieved through what they pay attention to, measure, and control regularly, and how they react during a critical incident or a crisis. A school leader, for instance, might emphasize student achievement, staff morale, punctuality, etc., which are communicated through the decisions they make, the behaviors they model, and the standards they enforce.

Another important aspect that the participants highlight regarding the impact of the school leader on the school is the aspect of discipline. Marzano et al. (2005) identify discipline among the 21 key Responsibilities of School Leaders. Discipline is described as the school principal's responsibility to protect teachers from needless distractions. In Moroccan public schools, principals might assume this responsibility in different ways. For instance, they can enforce clear policies regarding student movement in the school (e.g., corridors and schoolyard) during instructional hours to prevent disruptions to ongoing classes. Similarly, they might collaborate with parents to address student misbehavior.

5.2.Characteristics of Good and Bad School Leadership as Perceived by Teachers

Regarding the characteristics of effective school leadership as perceived by teachers, 22 themes were identified. However, 10 themes were the most dominant. Overall, effective school leaders for teachers are

1. *Communication and Relationship-Oriented,*
2. *Team-Oriented and Collaborative*
3. *Professional*
4. *Fair and Ethical*
5. *Respectful, Modest, and Kind*
6. *Considerate, Supportive, and Humane*
7. *Flexible and Adaptable*
8. *Effective administrators/managers*

Concerning ineffective school leadership, four main themes were identified. Ineffective school leaders are:

1. *Authoritarian*
2. *Irresponsible and Unprofessional*
3. *Uncommunicative and Unsupportive*
4. *Demonstrate Favoritism and Unfairness.*

These findings suggest that effective school leadership focuses more on communication, relationship-building, and being team-oriented and collaborative more than having strong administrative and managerial skills. Other perceived effective leadership characteristics include being professional, fair and ethical, showing respect and kindness, being considerate and supportive, and exhibiting flexibility and adaptability. This suggests that effective school leadership is perceived as people-oriented since it prioritizes communication, interpersonal relationships, ethical behavior, empathy, and flexibility over purely technical or administrative skills. These findings do not suggest that technical, administrative, and managerial skills are unimportant for effective leaders but rather emphasize that such skills need to be complemented by a concern for people, communication, and relationships.

To better understand the findings, it is helpful to consider the classic distinction in leadership research between *people-oriented* and *task-oriented* leader behavior (Hornung et al., 2011). This distinction is made between leaders who prioritize people (i.e., relationships) and others who prioritize tasks (i.e., performance) in their organizations (Ramzan & Khurram, 2023). Task-oriented leadership focuses on “defining the task structure, clarifying roles and allocating resources for the aim of accomplishing tasks” (Ceri-Booms, 2020, p. 92). People-oriented leadership, on the other hand, “help followers feel comfortable with themselves, with each other, and with the situation in which they find themselves” (Northouse, 2014, p. 71). This distinction does not imply that there are leaders who are purely people-oriented, while others are entirely task-oriented. Instead, the organizational and cultural context might determine what leadership behaviors are preferred. The personal characteristics and values of the leader can also be reflected in his or her behavior as a leader. For most participants in this study, successful school leadership is perceived as more people-oriented than task-oriented.

Such a perception of effective school leadership can be explained in terms of the unique cultural context within which leadership is practiced (Dorfman, 2004). The Model of Culture

Fit (MCF) asserts that the socio-cultural environment has a significant influence on what is regarded as effective managerial and leadership practices (Kanungo et al., 2020). To be effective, management and leadership practices need to fit the local context in which it is practiced. When practices that are inconsistent with deeply held cultural values and expectations, "employees are likely to feel dissatisfied, distracted, uncomfortable, confused and uncommitted, and this will result in lowered ability and willingness to perform well" (Ayman, 2005, p. 1113).

Moroccan public schools are situated within a specific cultural context that affects what behaviors are preferred, which influences the leadership qualities and behaviors that are considered effective. Numerous studies that have investigated the relationship between culture and leadership. In particular, the Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness Project (GLOBE) is an ongoing research program that has involved more than 160 leadership researchers (e.g., House et al., 2004; Kabasakal et al., 2012; House et al., 2014; Karacay et al., 2019; Raza et al., 2020). The aim of this project is to understand culture's influence on leadership. Based on cultural similarities, GLOBE researchers grouped countries into cultural clusters, and Morocco was included in the Middle East cluster. This cluster ranks low in *Performance Orientation*, which suggests that countries within this cluster do not emphasize achievement, performance improvement, and excellence as other countries with a high-performance orientation such as the United States. Instead, family and background are more important than what one achieves. This cluster also scores low in terms of *Future Orientation* and *gender egalitarianism*. This implies that there is an inclination in the societies of this cluster to address current issues rather than exert control over future events. The countries in this cluster regard gender inequality as the norm. This cluster scores higher than the average on the *humane orientation* dimension, indicating that the countries within this cluster emphasize values such as altruism, generosity, concern, and kindness toward others. As for *uncertainty avoidance*, the cluster's score is lower than average. That is, there is not much emphasis on orderliness and consistency, and people in this cluster are less likely to rely on policies and procedures. *Assertiveness* and *institutional collectivism* are rated in the mid-range. An average score on assertiveness suggests that assertive, confrontational, and aggressive behavior in relationships is moderately accepted. An average score on institutional collectivism indicates that the countries in the Middle East cluster moderately encourage and reward the distribution of resources and collective action (House et al., 2004).

These cultural orientations affect how leadership is perceived and practiced. Ideal leadership for the Middle East cluster is perceived as *Charismatic/value-based*, *team-oriented*, *participative*, and *humane-oriented*. *Charismatic/value-based leadership* describes the capacity to inspire, motivate, and expect high performance from others. *Team-oriented leadership* stresses team unity and a collective goal among members of the team. *Participative leadership* reflects the extent to which leaders involve others in making and implementing decisions. Participative leadership is reflected in behaviors that are participative and nonauthoritarian. *Humane-oriented leadership* describes supportive, considerate, compassionate, and generous leadership behaviors (House et al., 2004, House et al., 2014). A more recent GLOBE study by Karacay et al. (2019) also suggests that effective leaders in the MENA region tend to adopt a participative leadership style. They also encourage collaboration, unity, and cohesion, avoid conflict-inducing behaviors, and emphasize harmony and consensus-building instead. In another study within the GLOBE project, Kabasakal et al.

(2012) found that in Morocco, *participative leadership* is seen as the most important leadership attribute.

These findings by the GLOBE studies support the findings of the present study. The only exception is that House et al. (2004) suggests that ideal leadership is *charismatic/value-based*. The findings of the current study indicate that charisma is a characteristic of effective school leadership. However, it does not emerge as one of the dominant characteristics. This discrepancy may be attributed to the study's context. Unlike business organizations, schools may place less emphasis on charismatic leadership.

Morocco shares many societal norms and practices with other MENA (Middle East and North Africa) nations. These similarities reflect historical, religious, and socio-cultural characteristics (Kabasakal et al., 2012). However, there are also distinctions not only in terms of religion, language, and ethnicity, but also regarding the political, legal and economic development of these nations as well as in their governmental structures (Namazie & Covarrubias Venegas, 2016). These similarities and differences are reflected in leadership practices across these nations. Similar to Morocco, In the UAE, leaders are expected to involve followers in decision-making. Participative and team-oriented leadership is also valued, especially by young, educated leaders (Suliman & Hayat, 2011). In Saudi Arabia, Islamic values such as fairness, humility and justice are emphasized in the practice of leadership. However, "Saudi managers, like managers from Kuwait and Qatar, are conformist and thus oriented towards duty and loyalty" (Mimouni & Metcalfe, 2012, p. 181). A clear similarity between Morocco and Saudi is that leaders are expected to be relationship-oriented. Such an orientation could also be described as personalism, which is "a characteristic of Muslim society whereby individuals relate to each other in a personal and warm manner. As such, it needs to be encouraged and promoted" (Mimouni & Metcalfe, 2012, p. 183). Egypt is also similar to Morocco as leaders in both countries are expected to be relationship-oriented; "it is relationships that matter in Egypt, not rules" (Rice, 2011, p. 265). Similar to Morocco, effective leaders in Egypt are seen as humane-oriented. Such leaders are "friendly, compassionate and supportive" (Rice, 2011, p. 268). In Algeria, leadership behaviors are also deeply rooted in cultural values, and similar to Morocco, effective leadership prioritizes informal communication, participative decision-making, conflict avoidance, employee well-being (Tounes & Assala, 2007). In Tunisia, Béjar and Boudabbous (2020) examined how cultural differences between French and Tunisian managers influence their leadership practices. Findings suggest that Tunisian leaders traditionally centralize power but adapt to participative styles under French influence. Tunisian leaders are also relationship-oriented as there is a strong emphasis on personal bonds, family ties, and social integration in professional settings. Moreover, leaders are less rigid about deadlines (e.g., "Inch'Allah" mentality) compared with French punctuality.

Leadership across countries in the MENA region is strongly influenced by cultural and religious values that emphasize relationships, personalism, and humane treatment. While participative and team-oriented leadership is valued, especially in the UAE and under external influences (e.g., French in Tunisia), traditional expectations like conformity, loyalty, and informal communication remain important. Despite these differences, relationship-oriented leadership is a shared characteristic of effective leadership in the region.

6. CONCLUSION

Overall, these findings regarding the impact of the school leader emphasize the important role of school principals as school leaders. School principals have a significant impact on the school, the learners, and the staff. The school leader's influence is particularly evident in the school culture. This suggests that the principal's role is not limited to administrative duties, but it also affects school effectiveness, discipline, and culture.

To be an effective leader within the context of public schools, principals should focus on supportive and open communication as well as positive relationships. Effective school leadership also requires being team-oriented and collaborative. Having strong administrative and managerial skills are necessary for effective leadership, but they should be complemented by a focus on relationships and communication. In addition, demonstrating professional conduct, being fair and ethical, showing respect and kindness, being considerate and supportive, and exhibiting flexibility and adaptability are also regarded as contributing to effective school leadership. Overall, such perceptions of effective school leadership reflect the norms and values that characterize Morocco. The findings of this study have various implications concerning leadership training and development and selection criteria of school leaders.

6.1. Training and Development

Training programs offered for principals often provide out-of-context leadership theories and expect principals to apply them. Since context affects what leaders can and cannot achieve, training should focus on better understanding the school context. Thus, principals need specialized leadership training that takes into consideration the unique context of Moroccan public schools and that goes beyond purely administrative skills. Such training should focus on:

- Communication and relationship-building skills
- Team collaboration and participatory management techniques
- Conflict resolution and stakeholder management
- Flexibility and adaptability

In addition to training, educational authorities are required to provide:

- Programs that pair experienced principals with newer ones
- Resources for managing challenging situations with staff and stakeholders.

6.2. Selection of School Leaders

Selection criteria for leadership positions should consider the fit between the leadership context and the leader's skills and abilities. Based on the findings of this study, I propose that in the context of Moroccan public schools, principal selection criteria should emphasize:

- Interpersonal and communication skills and abilities,
- Ability and readiness to build and lead teams,
- Ethics and fairness in decision-making,
- Flexibility and adaptability,
- Professionalism and management capabilities

This study focused on effective school leadership in the context of Moroccan public schools. The findings can offer insights into what leadership skills and qualities principals should develop to be effective school leaders. However, this study faced some limitations. Time limitations made it difficult to conduct follow-up interviews with teachers and principals, which would have made the findings richer and more elaborate. To address these limitations, future research will target a larger population to gain a broader and deeper understanding of the practice of school leadership in Moroccan public schools. Participants of this study were only from the Oriental Region. Involving participants from other regions can provide more diverse insights into what constitutes effective school leadership. Future research will attempt to gather more in-depth data using interviews with teachers and principals. Future research will also focus on leadership in other educational contexts including private schools and higher education institutions. This study was primarily qualitative given the nature of the research questions. Future research will attempt to adopt a mixed-methods approach to address the limitations of adopting a purely qualitative approach.

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