Understanding challenges in informal leadership mentoring: Voices from Malaysian deputy primary schools.

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Abstract: Due to the lack of support and preparation received by deputy principals, the school principals were assigned to provide their informal mentoring with the purpose of enhancing DPs' leadership skills and knowledge. Admittedly, some challenges and barriers decrease and lessen the effectiveness of informal mentoring between DPs and their principals, which previously received little attention. The primary aim of this study is to identify the main challenges and barriers faced by DPs in participating in informal mentoring with their principals. A total of 318 primary deputies were asked to respond to a questionnaire. In addition, 12 DPs were purposely selected to capture the in-depth reasons related to their challenges and barriers in informal mentoring. As predicted, the lack of time due to their heavy workload has lessened the effectiveness of informal mentoring in schools. Besides, disagreement between DPs and principals, lack of explanations from principals, and issues with principals' trust are the other challenges DPs and principals face while engaging in informal mentoring. The challenges were selected by DPs and later highlighted by DPs during interview sessions. To overcome the challenges, a few suggestions were forwarded to improve the informal mentoring practices.

Keywords: educational management and leadership, challenges and barriers, deputy principals, informal mentoring, primary schools

1. Introduction

The role of a deputy principal (DP) is considered essential in determining school achievements. In fact, during schooling hours, DPs were assigned many roles and responsibilities, including determining the school's operational management and administrative procedures (Khumalo & Van der Vyer, 2020) and handling student discipline and welfare (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Thabethe, 2020; Baskett, 2020). They are also assigned a curricular leadership role (Abrahamsen, 2018; Chitamba, 2019;

Swain, 2016; Petrides, Jimes, & Karaglani, 2014) by assisting principals in school planning, monitoring and assessment (Morgan, 2018) and ensuring the school's procedures and policies are followed (Erturk & Akgun, 2021). Interestingly, DPs' responsibilities become more substantial when school leadership involves distributed practice and widely shared responsibilities (Lochmiller & Karnopp, 2016; Bukoski *et al.*, 2015).

Nevertheless, the reporting of DPs' roles has been largely overlooked within the educational leadership literature (Petrides, Jimes & Karaglani, 2014; Searby & Armstrong, 2016) and their leadership exposure and skills programmes have lacked support (Khumalo *et al.*, 2018) leaving them inadequately prepared to become principals (Swain, 2016). As such, Goldring *et al.* (2021) claim that support programmes for DPs are ineffective and poorly planned. Thus, it seems that DPs are abandoned without obtaining any exposure, support and initial training that prepares them to become future principals.

With little support received, the school principals are informally consigned to be the DPs' mentors or coaches within the workplace (Shakir, 2021; Ho & Kang, 2022). As informal mentors, principals are expected to share their profitable knowledge with DPs and other middle leaders in developing their leadership capacities through informal mentoring or school-based mentoring in administration, crisis management and resource management (Ng & Chan, 2014; Sezgin et al., 2020). The main reason is that principals are the most appropriate school leaders who are knowledgeable and have attained wide experience (Retelle, 2010; Khumalo, 2018; Zhang & Bundrett, 2010). Thus, it is believed that the knowledge shared with DPs will have some positive influence on their self-efficacy and performance (Swain, 2016; Calabrese & Tucker-Ladd, 1991). In addition, informal mentoring will also lessen DPs' deficiencies and provide them with adequate leadership preparation and a profound understanding of actual practices (Hallinger & Murphy, 1991; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016) as part of their learning and socialising phase (Hamm, 2017; Armstrong, 2009). Some DPs also seek or request guidance and mentoring from their peers, e.g. other DPs from other schools (Searby *et al.*, 2017), as their external support and inspiration (Kwan & Li, 2016).

In terms of benefits, Khumalo (2018) postulated that principals act as DPs' 'supervisors' and support them as middle leaders who are preparing to become principals. Through informal mentoring, knowledge and skills are significantly shared or disseminated to DPs as part of principals' initiatives. DPs can also practise the effective leadership knowledge and skills they have learned during the informal mentoring. This informal practice is considered beneficial to DPs in understanding the know-how approach, thereby developing their leadership skills based on actual situations (McCullough *et al.*, 2016; Barnett, Shoho & Okilwa, 2017). In fact, DPs can also observe their principals and be guided when undertaking their school leadership duties and gain confidence and competence (Marshall & Davidson, 2016).

Notwithstanding, there is still a lack of notable studies on the challenges to the informal mentoring of DPs (Gurley *et al.*, 2015; Lochmiller & Karnopp, 2016; Rhodes, 2012; Sezgin et al., 2020). In fact, there is a paucity of research studying the challenges of informal mentoring practices within the local context. As Cohen and Schechter (2019) pointed out, many previous studies on DPs focused on their tasks and preparation to be principals. However, research dealing with informal mentoring is considered limited in scope, especially their encountered challenges. Moreover, few studies explore informal leadership mentoring in schools within the Asian or Malaysian primary school context. In the same vein, Kwan and Li (2016) critically argued that most published studies on the challenges of informal mentoring are primarily based on the North American and UK school systems, emphasising the wide gap in addressing this topic within the Asian and Malaysian school leadership frameworks. Based on the above situation, this study will unpack the challenges within the informal leadership mentoring of DPs by principals, which is considered to be a thought-provoking and significant study area.

2. Challenges affecting informal leadership mentoring

The introduction of informal or job-embedded mentoring has officially provided advantages and challenges to the working practices of DPs. Beside the benefits, there are reports of challenges that DPs and principals faced while practising an informal leadership mentoring strategy. Khumalo (2018) identified obstacles that both supervisors and mentees faced within their workplace contexts: lack of

time and heavy workload (Veeramah, 2012; Sezgin et al., 2020), poor communication, lack of commitment, personality differences, conflicts of interest, the mentor's lack of experience (Strauss *et al.*, 2013), unwillingness to share their knowledge and skills (William, 2016) and trust issues or a negative relationship between supervisors and mentees (Hudson & Hudson, 2017).
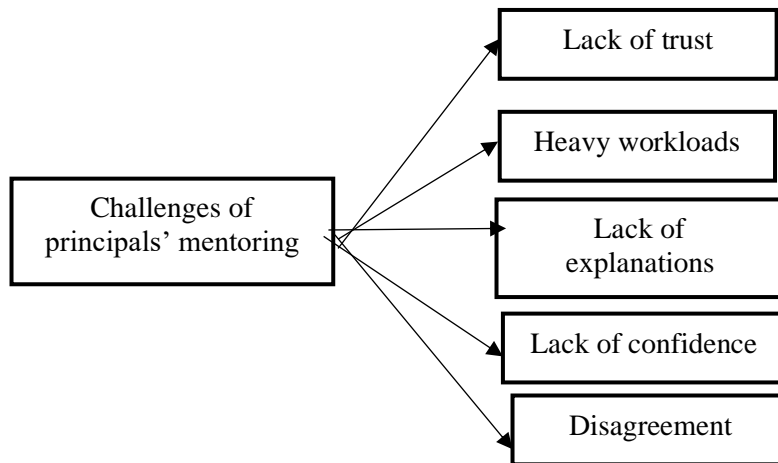
In Singapore, Ho and Kang (2022) mentioned that, although principals have high trust in their DPs, there are many aspects within the school's management and leadership that still 'rest on the shoulders' of the principal. Thus, principals remained the sole decision maker with the belief that DPs are still in the process of learning to lead. In addition, many have argued that principals still exert a strong influence on DPs' leadership practices. In describing principals' influence over DPs' performance, Lochmiller and Karnopp (2016) disclosed the strong influence of principals on DPs' leadership practices although they were seen to be very supportive and providing guidance. In fact, principals have created a plan for a DP based on their yearly performance and designed the DP's learning goals and objectives. In terms of instructional leadership, DPs also revealed their dissatisfaction when their instructional responsibilities have not been written down as part of their formal leadership roles (Koru, 1993; Celikten, 2001).

Another significant challenge noted deals with the aspects of busy schedules, lack of time and heavy workloads for both mentor and mentee. These issues have caused difficulties in finding the suitable free time for their mentoring roles (Myburgh, 2021; Du Plessis, 2015) which is another reason why informal leadership mentoring took longer than formal mentoring. As such, both are relying on their scarce free time to discuss, guide and share their skills and knowledge. In addition, DPs were noted for having busy schedules and difficulties in finding time to fulfil their school leadership activities such as curricular leadership, innovation, mentoring teachers and checking on school discipline (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). In fact, many educators involved in mentoring have pointed out the challenges of busy schedules and lack of time which negatively impacted the effectiveness of mentoring practices (Enrich *et al.*, 2011; Collier *et al.*, 2002). This issue has also been pointed out by Sharif *et al.* (2021) who conducted a study with DPs and principals in Sabah, Malaysia. The findings of both these studies noted that busy schedules resulted in a lack of time for coaching or mentoring sessions.

Earlier, within the context of Hong Kong schools, Kwan and Li (2016) disclosed the challenges experienced by DPs while being mentored by their principals. Through interviews, DPs shared that lack of explanations given to DPs by their principals about reasons for making a decision which left them lacking an understanding of how to carry out leadership strategies when they become principals. The findings from DP interviews have argued that simply observing their principals is considered insufficient without concrete or constructive guidance or explanations from their principals since they cannot experiment or receive critical reflections on their leadership practices. Previously, DPs merely guessed principals' reasons and rationales for choosing a suitable leadership strategy.

3. The conceptual framework

The conceptual foundation lays at Kalbfleisch (2007)'s model of mentoring in explaining the positive relationship with both parties (principals and their DPs), a model of mentoring enactment will be presented and widely employed to signify the collaborative relationship. As such, mentoring is defined as a helping process between two individuals or persons with the objective to assist and share their knowledge and skills (Kalbfleisch, 2007; Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2017). Through mentoring, the latter person will definitely benefit the relationship by focusing on her/his growth and development as an effective and productive employer. Based on the theory, it was assumed that the mentor and mentee have a close relationship. By definition, this model explains how a mentor which is being defined as a skilful individual and have successful experiences provide his/her willingness to share or overt practices with the least experience in trained the least experience to become a successful person (Kalbfleisch, 2002; Kalbfleisch, 2007). Thus, as school leaders, the principals remained as the skilful individual and have obtained the successful experiences in guiding their DPs. In this situation, the primary principals have provided his/her willingness to share or overt practices with the least experience to train the least experience to become a successful person which refers to the DPs.

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│  Challenges of   │───────────────────▶│ │──▶│    Lack of      │
│ principals' mentoring │                │ │   │  explanations   │
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Fig. 1: Conceptual framework of this study.

As shown in Figure 1, this study will explore challenges experienced by deputy principals when they participated as the informal mentees to their principals. To ensure their challenges, five listed challenges which derived from previous studies/researchers were constructed as the study's framework and items which later responded as challenges within the informal mentoring. As such, previous studies had listed five major challenges of principals' informal mentoring which are lack of trust, heavy workload, lack of explanations, lack of confidence and disagreement.

4. Methodology

4.1 Design and participants

In answering the developed research question, a sequential mixed method had been chosen to explore DPs' perspectives and personal feedback (Bryman, 2012) on their challenges in the practice of informal mentoring. This study has two major phases. In the first phase, all participating DPs from selected primary schools were asked to respond to questionnaire items related to their challenges during informal mentoring. In the second phase, 12 DPs were interviewed to explore their challenges while taking part in informal mentoring sessions. The reason for conducting the interview is to support the quantitative data with in-depth findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) related to DPs' views on the challenges and to obtain their thick descriptions of their informal mentoring (Kwan & Li, 2016). According to Creswell (2014), using a sequential mixed method approach can provide comprehensive explanations for the study data which later leads to an in-depth overview of its findings.

The participants for this quantitative phase were 318 DPs from selected primary schools. Of these, 126 were male and 192 female. The designated DPs ranged from 140 (44%) in administrative followed by 116 responsible for student affairs (36.5%) and another 54 who were in extra-curricular positions (17.8 %). Finally, eight DPs were responsible for evening sessions (2.5%). In general, the number of female DPs who participated in this study exceeded the male participants. In terms of their position, the number of student affairs DPs have exceeded those in the other three DP positions. For the second phase dealing with the qualitative interview sessions, the 12 DPs were selected from the total of 318 DPs who had provided feedback in the quantitative phase.

4.2. Instrumentation

There are two major instruments used in this study: the questionnaire and the interview protocol. The questionnaire has nine items divided into two sections. Section A (2 items) concerned the DP demographics: their gender and their administrative positions (administration, students' affairs, extra-curricular and evening session). Section B contained five items which had been adopted and re-developed to explore DPs' challenges. Several notable studies were referenced in developing and

constructing the items**.** Studies such as Khumalo (2018), Kwan and Li (2016) and Ellinger (2002) are sources of reference for constructing the study items. For scaling purposes, DPs were asked to give their responses using a five-point Likert scale from 1 - *strongly disagree* to 5 - *strongly agree*.

The second instrument is the semi-structured interview protocol used to capture DPs real experiences of the challenges in informal mentoring with their principals. Similarly, the interview protocol items were initially constructed based on extensive reviews of published studies on the challenges in informal leadership mentoring. In the interview periods, DPs were asked about the challenges of their informal mentoring practices within their own school premises. The interview protocol items are:

(a) Based on the informal mentoring with your principals, what challenges have you encountered?

(b) Can you describe or explain in-depth the challenges in the informal leadership mentoring practice in your school?

In a pilot study phase, the questionnaire and the interview protocol were piloted to a few selected DPs. In this quantitative pilot study, 15 DPs were selected but excluded from the actual data collection. The criteria used to select the pilot study sample were predominantly based on the exact criteria that matched the actual study sample. From the pilot study, the *Cronbach*'s *alpha* was 0.715. Based on the findings, modifications were made to some items in the questionnaire.

The second phase involved the qualitative interview pilot study. 12 DPs who had participated in the quantitative pilot study were later interviewed. Their feedback on the challenges was recorded and remarked. From the pilot study, two items were eliminated based on the actual length of the pilot interview session. To test the credibility of the qualitative data, two external evaluators were appointed. Their task was to check on the precise themes and codes given to the study transcripts. In addition, all transcripts were also returned to the selected DPs to authenticate the accuracy of interview data (Bush, 2012). Based on responses from DPs, all the interview data were agreed correct after DPs checked the contents of the transcripts.

4.3   Data collection procedure and analysis

This mixed methods study's data collection phase commenced with administrating questionnaires to all chosen DPs who were then given a week to provide their feedback and return their questionnaire. After a week, researchers revisited the selected primary schools to collect the questionnaires. All these questionnaires were later checked before proceeding with the quantitative data analysis.

In the second phase, 12 purposely selected DPs were interviewed (six males and six females). Before proceeding with the interview, all DPs needed to provide their official consent to participating in this research. There were four focus group interview sessions and each session included three DPs. To avoid disturbance, the focus group interview sessions were conducted in a school meeting room. Each session lasted about one to two hours. Before the session began, DPs were informed of the study's objectives and purposes. In the focus group interview, a researcher was appointed to be facilitator and to avoid the dominance of any participant (Krueger & Casey, 2009). In addition, the facilitator role is to probe when there is ambiguity in the information (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Through this type of focus group interview, more insightful evidence, information and perceived inferences and explanations were obtained (Hancock and Algozzine, 2017).

After completing the interviews, all verbatim notes obtained relating to DPs' experiences and standpoints on the challenges were checked and inspected. Later, themes and codes were given. The analysed verbatim records were later examined by two evaluators to check the correctness of the themes and codes. In analysing the interview data, thematic analysis procedures suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were employed. In the first stage, all interview data were transcribed and re-read several times to understand DPs' comments. Second, the recorded data were revisited and inspected. Later, data were matched and checked with the actual recording to ensure accuracy. The reason is to become familiar with the data in order to identify the emergence of appropriate coding (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Third, transcriptions were later revised and sentences that were described

as meaningful were highlighted and codes assigned. Further, the process of coding started with a process of open coding followed by an axial coding process. In the final stage, conclusions were drawn based on interpretations and meanings.

5. Findings

5.1 Challenges of DPs' informal mentoring

Feedback results indicate that having too high a workload (M=3.17; SD=1.05) was chosen by DPs as their main barrier during informal mentoring. In addition, a lack of explanation given by principals (M=2.94; SD=0.99) was named the second challenge faced by DPs. The third challenge was related to the principals' lack of trust in DPs (M=2.55; SD=0.86). The other challenges were related to disagreements over ideas between DPs and principals when making decisions (M=2.26; SD=0.80), and finally DPs' lack of confidence and need to refer to principal (M=2.42; SD=0.84). Evidently, primary DPs perceived that their major challenge is related to their heavy workload which sometimes limits their free time with their principals.

Table 1: DPs' perspective on the challenges of informal mentoring.

Challenges	Mean	SD
Lack of confidence to lead schools and need to refer to principal.	2.42	0.84
Disagreement in terms of ideas when making decisions.	2.26	0.80
Lack of trust in DPs' skills.	2.55	0.86
Workloads too high.	3.14	1.05
Lack of explanations by principals.	2.94	0.99

In Table 2, the t-tests results disclose that there are non-significant differences based on gender in all five challenges faced, which indicates that male and female DPs confronted similar challenges. Nonetheless, based on mean scores, female DPs responded with a higher level of consent towards the challenges within their informal leadership mentoring compared to male DPs. Similarly, for DPs positions, all the five challenges faced by DPs revealed that there are non-significant differences in terms of deputy principals' positions.

From interview sessions with DPs, four pertinent themes emerged as DPs' challenges while being informally mentored by their principals. These were heavy workload and lack of time, disagreement in terms of ideas and strategy, lack of trust and lack of clear explanations from principals.

Table 2: Comparing primary DPs' demographics with challenges in informal mentoring

Challenges	Deputy principals' demographics									
	Gender				Positions					
	Male (N= 126)	Female (N= 192)	*F*	Sig	Admin (N=140)	Extra-curricular (N=54)	Student affairs (N=116)	Evening (N=8)	*F*	Sig
Lack of confidence in leading	2.45	2.55	.374	.541	2.56	2.47	2.55	2.12	.861	.462
Disagreement in terms of ideas	2.34	2.27	1.136	.287	2.32	2.34	2.28	2.12	.163	.921
Lack of trust to DP's skills	2.67	2.73	.478	.490	2.72	2.70	2.64	2.68	1.259	.533
Too many workloads	3.09	3.24	.979	.323	3.36	3.26	3.10	2.85	1.004	.391
Lack of explanations	2.91	2.99	.036	.849	3.00	3.00	2.83	2.96	1.999	.114

Significance level at *p<0.05*; p<0.01**; N = 318*

Heavy workload and lack of time

From DPs' feedback, it is evident that a majority of DPs mentioned the main issues of heavy workload and lack of time as lessening the effectiveness of informal mentoring. A majority of DPs pointed out the effect of heavy workload on the school administrative tasks that they have to complete as a significant challenge.

> The main challenge to us is much related to the heavy workload that we need to fulfil. Sometimes, I don't have much time to discuss with principal. In fact, our principal is also a busy person. Thus, there is a situation when we difficult to find our free time due to our busy schedules (Female; Urban primary).

In the context of another evening session DP from another urban school, the same situation related to lack of time as the main obstacle arose.

> I learn by myself. We seldom meet because I work at evening session. Thus, we lack of time to discuss. In fact, she usually let me to complete the task through distributed leadership approach. We sometimes meet whenever we have our free time. We have heavy workloads (Male, Urban Primary).

Disagreement in terms of ideas

The second emerging theme is related to the differences or conflicts in terms of ideas and strategy between DPs and principals. In the interview, three DPs mentioned a challenge that they faced while being mentored by their principals. One DP shared a challenge related to a conflict in solving a school problem.

> There are a few situations when we are having disagreement. This is happened when we have difference ideas and solutions to overcome the school's problem. There are many times when I have to withdraw my suggestion in order to give respect to my principal's decision or solution (Male, Urban Primary).

Another DP also supported the above situation when he faced a disagreement with his principal.

> There are situations when we realised that he insisted us to accept his idea. I just follow his idea as our respect to him as our leaders (Male, Rural Primary).

Lack of clear explanations from principals

DPs also complained of the lack of explanations from principals when they were given a task to complete. There are many situations in which DPs need to refer to their principals. Nevertheless, there are times when DPs received no clear explanation from their principal.

> Admittedly, I have an issue related to principal's explanation. There is a situation when we as DP were not clearly explaining on how to finish the tasks. This much relevant with tasks given by the JPN or PPD. In fact, I already asked him to how to complete the tasks. He replied by saying that he also lacks of understanding on the tasks. Later, he asked me to ask other DP from other schools (Male, Rural Primary).

Another rural DP also mentioned the lack of clear explanations obtained from his principal. This issue happened when he was involved in tasks based on recent school improvement policies.

> My principal, he good on the practical aspect such as managing the school financial. However, he has constraints on recent policies introduced. For instance, in completing the TS 25, I think he has problem in understanding on the conceptual aspects. Thus, we facing

problem in completing the tasks especially the school strategic planning. He is very fluent in routine aspects of school management. He leaved everything to me as DP administration to finish the given task by the JPN (Male, Rural Primary).

Lack of trust in DP's decision making

Another major barrier faced by DPs is lack of trust in their decision making.

The principal did all the decision making although it was a small aspect. I think the principal is lack of trust on our capabilities. To be positive, they think we are in the process of learning, thus, she doesn't want to accept any mistake since it involved the school's performance (Male, Urban Primary).

6. Discussion

This study has confirmed findings based on the emerging literature on the challenges faced by DPs while being mentored by their principal. Findings have pointed out the heavy workload and lack of time facing both principals and DPs which diminish the effectiveness of the informal mentoring in their workplace and make it hard for DPs to fulfil their other important tasks as a school leader.

As emphasised by previous findings on informal mentoring, the main challenges for its effectiveness are related to lack of time and busy schedules arising from DPs' heavy workload (Enrich *et al*., 2011; Collier *et al*., 2002; Sharif *et al*., 2021) which slow the mentoring dialogue between principals and DPs. As DPs, they need to complete the many tasks related to the school's management and administration ranging from discipline and welfare to curricular leadership, school strategic planning and assessment. In fact, Lochmiller and Karnopp (2016) wrote that, with the implementation of distributed leadership, the roles and workloads of DPs would become more critical and significant and include many tasks, roles and responsibilities which would require more time for school management. As previously stated, DPs work pressure and task overload are significant challenges facing DPs which leads to emotional fatigue and low functionality (Celik, 2013). In this sense, Cohen and Schechter (2019) argued that this debating issue has reduced DPs' willingness to be promoted to principalship position.

Alongside the issue of time constraints, DPs also mentioned other challenges faced such as differences in ideas when making decisions with their principals. In these circumstances, although DPs and principals disagreed, the majority of DPs nevertheless decided to follow their principal's decision in order to avoid conflict. Thus, principals were the dominant decision makers for matters relating to the school (Ho & Kang, 2022). In fact, DPs also believed that principals are the suitable and experienced school leaders when making effective decisions for the school (Lochmiller & Karnopp, 2016) compared to them, although DPs believed that they were also capable of exercising leadership (Ho & Kang, 2022; Jansen and du Plessis, 2020). Another pertinent issue is related to the lack of explanations received from principals on completing the school's administrative tasks. In fact, DPs complained that principals lacked understanding about how to complete the tasks required by the educational authorities. This challenge has led DPs to ask for, or obtain, information from external sources such as other DPs and the relevant education officers. Earlier, Kwan and Li (2016) revealed the issue of imprecise information received from principals which resulted in DPs asking their external sources for help in completing their administrative tasks.

The final obstacle mentioned by DPs was related to lack of trust of their principals' trust towards DPs' decision making especially on the school's improvement efforts. In this situation, most DPs do understand that they are in the phase of learning to be school leaders. Thus, most of them did not feel disappointed although they received a lack of chance in making decisions for their schools. Nevertheless, DPs were truly understanding that principals need to provide the best practices towards their schools' performance and effectiveness. In this sense, the mentoring principals need to provide trust and confidence to DPs in making decision related to the school's performance which previously stated by past literature of the significant role of mentoring principals to enhance DPs' confidence in making the school's decision (Sezgin et al., 2020; Fuentes, 2021).

Based on the DPs' demographic factors, especially gender, parametric analyses found that male and female DPs face comparable challenges in their informal leadership mentoring. Nevertheless, female DPs were perceived as having high levels of consent in their informal leadership mentoring challenges compared to male DPs. In terms of DPs' positions, there are identical perceptions based on the challenges faced by DPs with different responsibilities: administration, student affairs, extracurriculars and evening sessions. Based on the mean scores obtained, DPs responsible for evening sessions faced fewer challenges compared to DPs holding administrative positions. This has happened because DPs in the administration are the most senior DPs compared to DPs responsible for evening sessions who some are novices or newly-appointed. In fact, DPs involved in administration were perceived to have higher levels of stress compared to those in other positions (Mohd Tahir *et al*., 2023).

6.1. Implication of the study

This study has several implications. First, principals, as the supervisors and mentors for DPs, must try to provide free time in order to discuss, mentor and guide DPs, especially when DPs feel that time constraints are preventing them from being well-guided by their principals. Second, Duncan (2017) has suggested practising the shared leadership approach when DPs were given the chance to lead the school and build their capacity to become future principals. In order to provide more conducive for DPs in making decisions, principals are urged to create conditions in sharing their leadership in schools especially related to instructional leadership (Abony & Sofo, 2019). This approach will provide less dependency to the principal when making decisions for the school and a more favourable working environment to DP (Ismail *et al*., 2021). In improving the school performance, it is suggested to the principal to enhance the collegial relationship with their DPs (Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017).

The final suggestion is leaning towards the evaluation of the principals who mentored and guided their DPs. According to Barnett *et al*. (2017), an annual evaluation of principals' performance as mentors for their DPs would ensure DPs' growth and development. In their evaluation, principals would be assessed on how they help their DPs to hone their performance in school leadership areas such as decision-making skills, obtaining teachers' trust, leading change and improving their professional and personal values.

6.2. Study's limitations

This study is considered unique and significant based on the area it explores, which has received little attention hitherto. Nevertheless, this study has its limitations since it captures the standpoints of DPs working only within public primary schools, which has left the private primary schools unpresented. Additionally, the study considered the viewpoints of the public primary DPs with regard to the challenges they faced in the informal leadership mentoring with their principals. Thus, this study does not explore the standpoints of the primary principals and did not interview the primary principals who participated as mentors in the informal leadership mentoring. As a suggestion, future studies need to interview both participants - the DPs and their principals - to explore their challenges during the informal leadership mentoring in schools (Jansen, & du Plessis, 2020).

7. Conclusion

Based on the findings with DPs, this study has pointed out the main challenges/barriers faced by DPs while practising their informal leadership mentoring with their principals, namely the lack of time faced by DPs and principals which slowed their mentoring sessions although the practice of informal mentoring was considered to be a commonly employed and effective approach in assisting DPs. Besides the time constraints, DPs shared the issue of disagreements between DPs and their principals on selecting ideas or choosing an effective decision; although DPs finally decided to follow principals' ideas or strategies based on their acknowledgement of principals' wide experience. In addition, DPs also facing constraints due to lack of explanation from principals which resulted in DPs referring to their external sources such as other schools' DPs or the education officers. Through these external sources, DPs believed that they capable to enrich their professional network and boosting their confidence in developing their own leadership practice.

8.   Co-authors contribution

The first co-author was responsible for the proofreading and data analysis. The second and third co-authors were responsible for theoretical and the conceptual framework of the study, data analyses, proofreading and data collection. The fourth, fifth and sixth co-authors are responsible for the data collection and analysis.

9.   Acknowledgement

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