

Not Everything That Counts Can Be Counted: Rethinking the Influence of Leadership Programmes

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Abstract

School leadership is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of educational improvement, particularly in contexts marked by inequality and resource constraints. In response, national and international leadership development programmes, such as South Africa's Advanced Diploma in School Leadership and Management (AdvDip SLM), the United Kingdom's National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), Sweden's National Principal Training Programme and Ontario's Principal Qualification Programme (PQP) have emerged to support the preparation of principals. While these initiatives aim to enhance school performance and leadership capacity, they are often assessed using narrow accountability metrics, primarily student achievement scores. This paper argues that such evaluations obscure the full range of outcomes produced by leadership development. Drawing on qualitative data from South African school leaders enrolled in the AdvDip SLM, as well as supporting evidence from international research, the paper explores how leadership programmes contribute to school improvement through less tangible means. Participants reported significant growth in leadership confidence, strategic thinking, collaboration, and instructional involvement. Many noted a shift from administrative routines to pedagogical leadership, as well as the development of stakeholder engagement practices. These changes, while difficult to quantify, are foundational to effective school leadership and long-term improvement. Similar trends have been documented internationally, suggesting that professional growth, reflective capacity, and community engagement are consistent outcomes across varied education systems. The paper concludes by calling for a more nuanced evaluation framework, one that balances measurable indicators with qualitative evidence of leadership transformation. Leadership development programmes must be understood not simply as interventions for improving test scores, but as long-term investments in building sustainable leadership practices, especially in disadvantaged educational contexts. Recognizing what cannot easily be counted is essential to understanding what truly counts in educational leadership.

Keywords: influence, leadership, leadership development, leadership programme, non-measurable outcomes, school improvement

Introduction

School leadership is increasingly viewed as a critical lever for educational reform. Research has consistently shown that leadership is second only to classroom teaching in

terms of school-level impact on learner outcomes (The Wallace Foundation, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2020). An increasing number of studies highlight the pivotal role of school leadership in driving quality improvement in education, underscoring the need for ongoing professional development for school leaders throughout their careers (Sahlin, 2025). Moreover, strong leadership is a prerequisite for transforming struggling schools, particularly in rural or under-resourced communities (Heystek & Shula, 2024). Effective school leadership is central to improving learner performance and teacher motivation, which further contributes to institutional resilience.

Many countries have responded by developing leadership programmes that professionalize school management and encourage context-relevant strategic thinking. Sweden has the National Principal Training Programme and is guided by a national target document. This programme enables the alignment of expectations across multiple levels and supports the development of a shared knowledge base for all principals in Sweden (Sahlin, 2025). In the United Kingdom, the NPQH seeks to prepare principals with clear frameworks for instructional leadership and accountability. Ontario's PQP includes experiential learning and mentoring as part of leadership formation (Barber et al., 2010). In South Africa, the AdvDip SLM was introduced to address the professional development needs of school leaders, many of whom had been promoted without formal training (Naidoo & Mestry, 2019). Data from AdvDip SLM participants showed that many leaders had not previously engaged in structured leadership learning, and the programme offered their first opportunity for systematic reflection on school improvement and leadership responsibilities.

While these programmes aim to enhance overall school performance, their success is too often judged almost exclusively by learner achievement data. This narrow focus obscures the broader, more complex influences of school leadership, particularly those related to school culture, strategic thinking, collaboration, and professional identity. Leithwood et al. (2020) acknowledge that while student outcomes are important, they reflect only one dimension of a leader's impact. Similarly, Ma et al. (2024) caution that overreliance on academic scores risks undervaluing other leadership gains such as improved instructional practices, professional confidence, and stakeholder trust. These findings align with growing international consensus that leadership development must be evaluated more holistically, especially in contexts where structural inequality and resource scarcity influence school functioning.

Despite these developments, the effectiveness of leadership development is often judged by narrow performance indicators, primarily examination results (Heystek & Shula, 2024). This paper argues that such evaluations are incomplete. Drawing on qualitative data from AdvDip SLM participants and international literature, this study explores how leadership programmes influence school improvement through non-measurable dimensions such as confidence, motivation, collaboration, and community engagement (OECD, 2021). Developing broader measures of success is vital to recognize the comprehensive impact of leadership on learner well-being and school climate (Leithwood et al., 2017). Schools thrive when leadership enables inclusive participation, innovation, and long-term planning.

Leadership development in unequal educational contexts

South Africa's education landscape is profoundly shaped by historical inequality. Over 60 percent of schools are in low-income communities, where infrastructure is poor,

class sizes are large, and departmental support is often inconsistent (Heystek & Shula, 2024). School leaders are expected to meet national performance standards despite systemic barriers. Until recently, leadership preparation was fragmented and uncoordinated, often limited to short workshops with little opportunity for reflective practice (Naidoo & Mestry, 2019). The AdvDip SLM was introduced in 2015 to address this challenge, offering structured training that combines policy knowledge, leadership theory, and practical application (Department of Basic Education, 2018). This programme marks a shift toward a more coherent and qualification-based approach to school leadership, supporting broader education system reform. Its implementation signals policy recognition of the link between leadership quality and learner outcomes. Several participants from under-resourced schools described how the programme helped them adapt leadership theory to their disadvantaged contexts, particularly in finding creative, low-cost solutions for improving learning environments.

Similar trends are visible internationally. For example, Ontario's PQP was developed to better prepare school leaders for complex, culturally diverse school environments (Barber et al., 2010; Spooner, 2024). In Asia, leadership and teacher development programmes have been adapted to reflect diverse local and cultural contexts (Hallinger & Walker, 2017). However, in many contexts, including South Africa, the evaluation of such programmes remains dominated by learner achievement data, ignoring broader measures of leadership influence (OECD, 2021). In unequal contexts where resources are scarce, many of the most impactful leadership changes, such as fostering trust, building staff morale, and sustaining vision, remain invisible in standard metrics, yet are crucial for enabling academic success over time.

There is a growing global consensus that effective school leadership cannot be separated from the social, contextual, and economic realities in which schools operate (Barber et al., 2010; Bush & Glover, 2014; Sahlin, 2025). Training must, therefore, align with context-specific challenges to be meaningful.

Beyond test scores: Leadership confidence and strategic vision

One of the strongest findings from both national and international programmes is the development of confidence and strategic awareness in participants. AdvDip SLM graduates reported feeling more capable of managing difficult conversations, engaging with policy, and leading staff teams with purpose. As leaders, they developed a deeper understanding of their role in setting a clear vision and recognized the value of implementing contextually relevant strategies through workplace projects to drive effective and lasting school improvement. These outcomes reflect what Sahlin (2025, p. 394) describes as “sense-making”, where leaders reinterpret their learning to deepen their understanding and inform their leadership practice. In the PQP, confidence was consistently cited as a transformative outcome of the programme. Participants described moving from a reactive to a proactive stance in school leadership (Barber et al., 2010). Similarly, recent evidence from Ma et al. (2024) found that strategic leadership capacity, particularly the ability to lead instructional renewal initiatives, significantly improved among principals who completed structured leadership development programmes. While such developments are hard to quantify, they are essential to building the strategic capacity of school leaders. Confidence and strategic vision may be intangible and non-measurable, but they serve as foundational drivers of sustainable school improvement by shaping how leaders think, plan, and mobilize others around a shared purpose. According

to Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) and Sahlin (2025), strong leadership is rooted not only in technical competence but in a deep sense of purpose, confidence, and professional identity. Such identity development is key to navigating the multiple roles and responsibilities that modern school leaders must assume (Ma et al., 2024).

Instructional leadership and pedagogical engagement

A shift from administrative to instructional leadership emerged strongly among AdvDip SLM participants. Many reported increased involvement in curriculum oversight, learner tracking, and teacher mentoring. For example, one school leader described the implementation of a learner support programme informed by teacher feedback and classroom observation. The participants also indicated that the pedagogical focus of the AdvDip SLM is transformative, particularly in how it clarified their responsibility to lead teaching and learning. Several described becoming more hands-on in curriculum planning, lesson observation, and supporting teachers with assessment practices. The structured school-based projects enabled them to apply these skills in real-time, strengthening their instructional leadership identity. These interventions are difficult to assess through test scores (Harris & Jones, 2022) but represent substantial shifts in school practice.

In the PQP, instructional leadership is also emphasised through action research and collaborative inquiry (Barber et al., 2010). The Wallace Foundation (2009) similarly stresses that effective leaders create the conditions necessary for strong teaching and learning. Instructional leadership, therefore, is not about direct results, but about influencing systems and teacher practice over time. Leaders empower teachers to take ownership of learning initiatives contributes to a sustainable school culture and raises overall instructional quality (Harris & Jones, 2022; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Stakeholder engagement and school culture

Leadership programmes also enhanced participants' ability to work with stakeholders. AdvDip SLM candidates described involving parents in academic planning and running community workshops to address learner motivation. They were required to critically reflect on the prevailing culture within their schools, including issues of discipline, morale, and communication. This reflection often revealed misalignments between school values and daily practice. As a result, several leaders initiated efforts to shift school culture by fostering more collaborative staff dynamics, increasing transparency in communication, and creating platforms for parent and learner voices. These changes, while gradual, contributed to a stronger sense of belonging and shared purpose across the school community. These efforts built trust and cohesion within school communities, despite external challenges. Community involvement is also central to programmes like Ontario's PQP, which includes modules on equity, ethics, and cultural responsiveness (Barber et al., 2010). In Asia, school leaders are increasingly expected to lead professional learning communities and engage meaningfully with parents and civil society (Hallinger & Walker, 2017). Engaged stakeholders are more likely to support school initiatives and maintain a shared vision for learner success (Harris & Jones, 2022; OECD, 2021). These relational and social aspects of leadership, although rarely measured in traditional accountability systems, are essential to sustainable school improvement.

Professional growth and motivation

A final yet crucial impact of leadership programmes is the cultivation of motivation and professional growth. Participants in the AdvDip SLM frequently cited personal transformation as a key outcome. Many described a renewed sense of purpose, resilience, motivation, and moral responsibility. All participants experienced a profound sense of professional renewal. Many entered the programme feeling overwhelmed or uncertain about their roles, but described leaving it with a strengthened sense of purpose and a clearer understanding of what effective leadership entails, and that they can make a difference. Bush and Glover (2014) and Sahlin (2025) agree that resilience and intrinsic motivation play a central role in retaining effective school leaders, particularly in high-stress environments. One participant noted that although they had previously completed a postgraduate qualification, the AdvDip SLM was the first programme that challenged them to think and lead differently.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) argue that meaningful leadership development supports not only skills acquisition but also deep reflective practice. The AdvDip SLM's structured reflection tasks, professional learning communities, and school-based projects played a pivotal role in fostering this growth. Many participants also reported developing the confidence to pursue leadership roles they had previously considered beyond their reach and spoke of their increased willingness to mentor younger staff and lead collaborative initiatives within their schools. In the PQP, experiential learning is designed to strengthen leaders' ethical commitments and sense of social responsibility (Barber et al., 2010). These non-measurable outcomes are often what sustain leaders through the challenges of daily school life.

A broader framework for evaluation

There is a growing need to rethink how leadership development is evaluated by adopting broader frameworks that reflect the complex, long-term, and context-sensitive nature of leadership. Current evaluation models are too narrow to capture the full impact of leadership development. They tend to emphasise short-term academic outcomes, which are influenced by a multitude of contextual factors beyond the leader's control. As a result, they fail to acknowledge the deeper, process-driven shifts that leadership programmes often cultivate. Several well-established frameworks offer alternatives to this narrow view. The Wallace Foundation (2009) advocates for a multi-dimensional approach, including indicators such as organisational culture, relational trust, and the leader's ability to create and sustain long-term vision and planning structures. These dimensions reflect the broader institutional changes that effective leadership can influence over time.

Leithwood et al. (2017, p. 3) propose a four-path model for evaluating leadership impact, which includes:

- The rational path, focused on organizational structures and goal setting;
- The emotional path, emphasising leader influence on morale, trust, and commitment;
- The organizational path, including processes like collaboration, communication, and alignment; and
- The instructional path, which connects leadership to teaching quality and learner engagement.

This model recognises that leadership operates across multiple spheres of influence and should be assessed accordingly.

The OECD (2021) calls for mixed-method evaluation strategies, combining quantitative indicators (such as school performance trends) with qualitative data (such as teacher and stakeholder perceptions, reflective leadership journals, and portfolio-based assessments). Such an approach ensures that both measurable and non-measurable outcomes are considered.

For programmes like South Africa's AdvDip SLM, the United Kingdom's NPQH, Sweden's NPTP, and Ontario's PQP, such approaches offer more accurate and context-sensitive insights into leadership influence. Recognizing outcomes such as confidence, collaboration, and community engagement (Leithwood et al., 2020) is essential to understanding what truly contributes to school success. The Wallace Foundation (2009) and Bantwini and Moorosi (2023) agree that evaluation must account for context, particularly in diverse and unequal systems, where traditional indicators fall short of capturing leadership's actual influence.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that leadership development programmes must be evaluated through a broader framework that includes non-measurable outcomes such as strategic confidence, stakeholder trust, instructional leadership, and personal motivation. Evidence from the AdvDip SLM, as well as international initiatives like the PQP and NPQH, confirms that school leadership development extends far beyond measurable performance indicators. In particular, the qualitative data from AdvDip SLM participants revealed a depth of professional transformation that cannot be captured by test results or standard accountability tools. The programme equipped leaders with context-sensitive strategies, strengthened their pedagogical engagement, and encouraged critical reflection on the cultural, structural, and emotional dynamics of their schools. For many, it marked the first time they had engaged in systematic leadership learning that was directly applicable to their everyday challenges. Participants consistently described the course as a turning point in their professional lives, with long-lasting impacts on their leadership identity and their motivation to create more equitable and effective schools.

In under-resourced and unequal education systems, the importance of these intangible outcomes is even greater. The influence of such programmes lies in their capacity to empower leaders to act meaningfully within their contexts. It encourages critical reflection, collaborative learning, and action-driven change. As South Africa continues to professionalize school leadership, evaluations must evolve to capture the full range of outcomes, especially those that count, but cannot easily be counted. This requires policymakers and researchers alike to look beyond numerical data and understand leadership development as a long-term, context-sensitive process of transformation.

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