



Managing Incapacity Leave: Exploring the Experiences of Novice School Principals in Dr. Ruth Segomotsi Mompoti District in South Africa



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ABSTRACT

Incapacity leave refers to a teacher's inability to perform their professional duties and encompasses two categories: Temporary Incapacity Leave (1-29 days), which applies to short-term absences, and Long-term Temporary Incapacity Leave, which is available for absences exceeding 30 consecutive days. It is also applicable once sick leave has been exhausted. Effective management of incapacity leave is critical in preventing misuse and minimising lost work time within the public sector. Thus, this article explored the experiences of novice school principals in managing incapacity leave within the Dr. Ruth Segomotsi Mompoti District of South Africa. The study used an interpretive research approach, grounded in leadership and situational theory, to investigate the challenges faced by newly appointed school principals in managing incapacity leave. Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 newly appointed principals. Thematic analysis of the data revealed significant challenges, primarily due to insufficient empowerment workshops for orientation and guidance. The study revealed a significant knowledge gap and inadequate training on managing incapacity leave, particularly regarding the Policy and Procedure on Incapacity Leave and Ill-Health Retirement (PILIR). The policy's primary objective is to prevent misuse of leave and establish support structures for employees struggling with incapacitation. The study recommends that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) appoint experienced, knowledgeable educators as school principals and provide regular empowerment workshops to ensure comprehensive orientation on leave management for newly appointed principals. The findings from this study aim to inform strategies that can enhance the capacity of newly appointed school principals to effectively implement PILIR policies within district schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Novice or newly appointed school principals seem to be struggling with the management of educator incapacity leave in schools in the Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompoti Education District. There seem to be many inconsistencies and discrepancies in the management of this type of sick leave. This ultimately leads to the absence not being captured on the personnel system and educators who abuse the leave system due to poor record keeping. Educators who are due for retirement are delayed in their retirement payments due to leave records not being properly maintained both on the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS) and on the physical leave register being kept at school.

The gradual increase in the civil service triggered a related increase in the movement of paper to the collapse of official methods of business, which then encouraged the use of ad hoc techniques.¹ A growing trend occurred where institutions developed the practice of decision-making in the absence of records.² This orientation is a recipe for disaster. The governments ran short of resources to store records and support workers to manage the record-keeping processes. The incentives to ensure record-keeping systems were diminished. Biti argued that the desire to build and maintain the records was hampered by the urge to cover up many forms of irregularities, such as financial abuse and kleptocratic tendencies.³

Biti states that the record-keeping process deteriorated due to the use of ill-trained and less experienced employees.⁴ It also became difficult to meet the needs of modern states through the indexing and file classification systems of the colonial regimes.⁵ It is surprising that the deep-seated culture of keeping records remained despite the loss of value of those records to the institutions.⁶

Ideally, it became difficult for staff to authorize the destruction of records in the absence of guidelines and rules regarding items that should be kept and the period of storage of such materials.⁷ Gradually, registries crowded with old materials caused the eventual collapse of the system. However, the collapse of record keeping in most nations has been met with advancement in record management, especially in North America, Australia, and Europe.⁸ It is worrisome, though, to note that advances in technology have had little impact on nations that seem to need them desperately. This implies that countries should invest liberally in record keeping as records are synonymous with the nerve centre of a human being.⁹

Literature on record management has been difficult to obtain due to the availability of foreign exchange and ineffective communication systems.¹⁰ It can also be argued that the organisation of requisite materials may still not help the situation because of declining conditions around record management. This has caused a delay in the introduction of current records of management behaviours.¹¹ This implies that accurate records are a vital component of any effective planning.

Moletsane, Juan, and Reddy have emphasised that principals use their discretionary powers to manage teacher leave, whether related to illness or other reasons, with decisions informed by their understanding of PILIR policy.¹² Against this backdrop, this study seeks to address the research question: What challenges do newly appointed school principals face in managing the implementation of PILIR policy within the Dr. Ruth Segomotsi Mompati Education District?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The 2010 Public Service Commission (PSC) Report on leave management in the South African public sector highlights significant challenges in the proper management of employee leave. It emphasises the need for managers to closely monitor and regulate various types of leave to prevent misuse, thereby reducing unnecessary disruptions in work productivity. The report further notes that improper leave management can incur substantial financial costs, particularly when departmental operations are hindered, prompting the need to hire additional temporary staff to maintain service continuity. These issues underscore the critical importance of effective leave management in safeguarding operational efficiency and minimising organisational expenses.¹³

Newly appointed school principals within the Dr. Ruth Segomotsi Mompati Education District currently exhibit a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the management of incapacity leave,

¹ G.E.B. Hall and S.M. Hord, *Change in Schools: Facilitating the Process* (London: Sage, 2015).

² D. Coltart, *The Legal Resources Foundation* (Bulawayo: Chihambakwe Law Firm, 2010).

³ T.U. Biti, *Zimbabwean Inflation and Corruption* (Borrowdale: LRF Printers, 2017).

⁴ Biti, *Zimbabwean Inflation and Corruption*.

⁵ J.O. Kaufmann, *Records Keeping in Organizations* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2009).

⁶ B.D. Ropper and S. Folkman, *Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2014).

⁷ B.M. Coppotelli, *The Essence of Forensic Auditing*, Revised (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 2017).

⁸ Ropper and Folkman, *Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct*.

⁹ M.B. Kgadi, *The Art of Human Resource Management* (Oxford: UNU, 2004).

¹⁰ A.D. Siyabonga and P.Y. Glyn, *The Public Administration Essence* (Bulawayo: Skies Publishers, 2012).

¹¹ Biti, *Zimbabwean Inflation and Corruption*.

¹² Relebohile Moletsane et al., "Managing Teacher Leave and Absence in South African Rural Schools," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 43, no. 3 (May 10, 2015): 386–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143215574508>.

¹³ South Africa, *Evaluation of the Policy and Procedure on Incapacity Leave and Ill Health Retirement (PILIR) on Sick Leave Trends in the Public Service [RP261]* (Pretoria: Government Communication and Information Services, 2010).

as noted by.¹⁴ They have not received adequate training on the Policy and Procedure on Incapacity Leave and Ill-Health Retirement (PILIR), which was implemented to reduce the misuse of leave within the public sector, including by teachers.¹⁵ Policy and Procedure on Incapacity Leave and Ill-Health Retirement (PILIR) was introduced in 2005 and implemented in 2006, the policy has undergone substantial updates in 2013, 2015, and 2021—the revisions aimed to strengthen provisions for managing incapacity and ill-health retirement. The policy’s primary objectives include establishing effective structures and processes to ensure proper management of incapacity leave, thereby accommodating employees who are temporarily or permanently incapacitated.¹⁶

In the context of this study, incapacity refers to a teacher’s inability to perform their duties as outlined in their job description. The policy distinguishes between two categories of incapacity leave: short-term temporary incapacity leave for absences of 1-29 days due to illness, and long-term temporary incapacity leave for absences exceeding 30 consecutive days, which requires a valid medical certificate from a specialist.¹⁷

In a related study, Ahlstrom et al. noted the growing prevalence of long-term sick leave among women in human service organisations in Sweden, which has become a concern due to its financial implications.¹⁸ This issue extends to South Africa, where many human resource officials in the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in regions such as the Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, and Northwest still lack adequate knowledge of PILIR management and implementation.¹⁹ Mvula also observed that most newly appointed school principals had not received training in managing and implementing PILIR, often relying on experienced school managers for guidance on incapacity leave procedures.²⁰

Challenges and Experiences in the Implementation of Incapacity Sick Leave

One of the significant challenges is that newly appointed school principals lack the necessary training and understanding of incapacity sick leave administration, particularly due to insufficient workshops aimed at empowering school leaders in managing this policy. As a result, some employees exploit this lack of knowledge for personal gain.²¹ Accurate record-keeping for these types of leave is challenging, as some educators collaborate with medical practitioners to engage in unethical practices. Additionally, some administrative staff do not maintain proper records, particularly for individuals with whom they have personal connections.²² The DBE also bears responsibility, as it has not prioritised empowerment workshops or training for school principals. Another issue is that the DBE often promotes post-level one (PL1) educators into principalship roles, despite their lack of experience in handling key educational issues and understanding critical policies, leading to difficulties in managing temporary incapacity sick leave and other responsibilities.²³ Before approving 30 consecutive working days with full pay for incapacity leave, an investigation is often required. Some educators take advantage of this system by feigning illness and working with medical practitioners to circumvent regulations.²⁴ Such practices highlight the need for more robust oversight and accountability.

¹⁴ G. Mvula, *Circular from Mrs G. Mvula, Circuit Manager, Greater Taung Sub District, 19 February.*, 2018.

¹⁵ Mvula, *Circular from Mrs G. Mvula, Circuit Manager, Greater Taung Sub District, 19 February.*; South Africa, *Evaluation of the Policy and Procedure on Incapacity Leave and Ill Health Retirement (PILIR) on Sick Leave Trends in the Public Service [RP261]*.

¹⁶ Benny Hwata, “An Investigation of Different Phases of Pentecostal Experience in the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM)” (University of South Africa Pretoria, 2005).

¹⁷ South Africa, *Evaluation of the Policy and Procedure on Incapacity Leave and Ill Health Retirement (PILIR) on Sick Leave Trends in the Public Service [RP261]*.

¹⁸ Linda Ahlstrom et al., “The Work Ability Index and Single-Item Question: Associations with Sick Leave, Symptoms, and Health—a Prospective Study of Women on Long-Term Sick Leave,” *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, 2010, 404–12.

¹⁹ South Africa, *Evaluation of the Policy and Procedure on Incapacity Leave and Ill Health Retirement (PILIR) on Sick Leave Trends in the Public Service [RP261]*.

²⁰ Mvula, *Circular from Mrs G. Mvula, Circuit Manager, Greater Taung Sub District, 19 February.*

²¹ P.G. Manabele, *Distribution of Educational Resources* (Pretoria: Jersey Publishers, 2016).

²² Biti, *Zimbabwean Inflation and Corruption*.

²³ Biti, *Zimbabwean Inflation and Corruption*.

²⁴ Biti, *Zimbabwean Inflation and Corruption*.

Absenteeism of Learners and Teachers

Ehrenberg conducted a study in the United States on student absenteeism, finding an average annual absentee rate of 1.9 days across 381 school districts in New York during the 1986-87 academic year, well below two percent.²⁵ Cheng reported a similar absentee rate of 2.3% in a U.S. district between 2003 and 2006, including absenteeism due to illness and official duties.²⁶ Short-term personal illness and brief absences accounted for 415 instances, while medium-term illnesses made up 18%, with 15% of absences being feigned. Accurate data on absenteeism are essential for informed policymaking and the development of strategies to reduce instructional time loss. According to a UNICEF report, principals should focus on managing leave trends rather than merely administering them.²⁷ They should receive leave management reports to observe potential patterns and be trained in policies such as the eight-week rule.

The Collapse of Record-Keeping Systems

The World Bank Report indicates that record-keeping systems are weak in many countries, particularly those that were previously under European colonial rule.²⁸ These nations had centralised systems for managing records, with staff who often remained in the same position throughout their careers. However, following independence, these systems deteriorated as informal practices began to replace formal procedures, leading to significant challenges in public administration.²⁹ This trend has contributed to the weakening of institutional record-keeping practices, a critical issue that affects the management of public information and the functioning of government operations.³⁰ Without effective record-keeping systems, institutions are prone to administrative collapse.³¹ Furthermore, the lack of emphasis on reforming record systems has hindered the effectiveness of donor-supported initiatives.³² A review of the literature reveals limited scholarly attention to the experiences and strategies of school principals in managing and implementing the PILIR policy, highlighting a critical gap in current research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Leadership and Situational Theory

There are two broad theories of interest to this study, namely, leadership and organisational effectiveness theories. These two theories focus on one broad aspect of the research problem – organisational effectiveness (the functional aspect) and leadership effectiveness (the human aspect). Leadership theories describe the factors that influence certain individuals to become leaders and the strategies that are implemented to achieve such positions. According to Madanchin leadership effectiveness theory postulates that the crucial aspects of leadership include knowledge and skills learned and acquired.³³ The administration and application of incapacity sick leave, which borrows from these two theories, embrace both aspects. Therefore, an improved administration and application of incapacity sick leave grounded in the prevailing conditions within the schooling system of the Republic of South Africa (RSA) would effectively address the educational management needs of the educational sector, furthermore the literature review highlighted some pertinent issues on the research questions as the overview was an endeavour to contribute to understanding the various ways of failure by the newly appointed school principals in the DBE to administer and manage incapacity sick leave in their respective schools as part of their mandated discharge of duty.

²⁵ M.B. Ehrenberg, *Placement of Language Based on Competency* (London: Routledge, 2009).

²⁶ K.N. Cheng, *The Search for Quality Information in Educational Circles* (Oxford: Pergamon, 2014).

²⁷ *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023, The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023* (FAO; IFAD; UNICEF; WFP; WHO, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc3017en>.

²⁸ World Bank, *The World Bank Annual Report* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2016).

²⁹ K.L. Moyana, *Moral Based Leadership* (Mutare: ZPH, 2007); P.R. Mandaza, *The Plunder of National Resources in African Countries*, 3rd ed. (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2017).

³⁰ Coltart, *The Legal Resources Foundation*.

³¹ Coppotelli, *The Essence of Forensic Auditing*.

³² D. Booth, "Working with the Grain and Swimming against the Tide: Barriers to Uptake of Research Findings on Governance and Public Services in Low Income Africa," Working Paper 18, Africa Power and Politics Programme (London: Longman., April 2011).

³³ Q.O. Madanchin, *Measurement and Its Effect on Organization* (Boston: Pearson Education Inc., 2017).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative research design was used, specifically a case study of exploratory nature. The interpretive research paradigm was chosen due to its effectiveness in understanding participants' perspectives—in this case, newly appointed school principals in their natural environments. Creswell explains that the interpretive paradigm allows multiple meanings of a phenomenon, socially constructed by the participants.³⁴ This paradigm was selected for its flexibility, enabling the researcher to explore the perceptions of newly appointed school principals regarding the challenges they face and the strategies they propose for managing sick leave. The study involved 10 newly appointed school principals who were selected because they were well informed or had the required characteristics—being new to the position and directly involved in school management and educational leadership. HRD officials from the Dr. Ruth Segomotsi Mompati Education District were also included in the sample. Permission was requested and obtained for field entry from the Northwest Provincial Education Office and informed consent for face-to-face interviews and document analysis was given. The ethical guidelines were strictly followed to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity, using codes to conceal identities.³⁵ Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they voluntarily participated with a full understanding of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussions are categorised under the main theme: Challenges faced by newly appointed school principals in implementing PILIR, with a sub-theme addressing minimal empowerment clinics for proper orientation. Both themes explored leadership dimensions and situational theory in depth.

Challenges Faced by Newly Appointed School Principals in Implementing PILIR

This section explores the participants' experiences with managing PILIR, specifically their technical know-how in implementing and applying TIL (Temporary Incapacity Leave) without compromising the quality of teaching and learning. Newly appointed principals, defined here as those with fewer than two years of experience and unfamiliar with PILIR, require complete empowerment clinics to familiarize them with PILIR prescripts. The DBE and other stakeholders should prioritize organising training sessions to equip newly appointed principals to discharge their duties competently. Empowerment clinics would close knowledge gaps and address the challenges principals face in their mandate.

Ahiaku highlights the manipulation of selection and interview processes, choosing some candidates over others, which can result in corruption and nepotism.³⁶ This can leave newly appointed principals ill-prepared to manage school operations. As employees are the organisation's most valuable asset, their well-being must be safeguarded to minimize risks like sickness and incapacity. As noted in the literature, poor sick leave management is a significant challenge.³⁷ One critical problem is the delayed submission of sick leave forms by schools, resulting in backlogs in the Leave Administration Section. Many principals lack urgency in ensuring that signed sick leave forms reach the circuit office promptly. Interviews revealed numerous challenges, particularly from teachers, with principals emphasising the need for proper training on PILIR. Some participants felt that the DBE was neglecting their responsibility in this regard. One of the school principals indicated that he is not conversant with PILIR and needs training. He further revealed that he never had a chance to be exposed to or workshopped about the PILIR and its objectives. His greatest challenge is also the technical know-how to manage the PILIR instrument and thinks that DBE is letting them down in this regard. All principals agree that teachers are the source of their challenges, and any serious union would endeavour to see that its members are well-informed on policy matters.

³⁴ J. W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015).

³⁵ James H. McMillan and Sally Schumacher, *Research in Education: Evidence-Based Inquiry* (Pearson, 2010).

³⁶ Ahiaku P., "Measuring the Effectiveness of Appointment of School Management: A Qualitative Analysis of the Stakeholders' Views," 2019, <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-1a8060edb0>.

³⁷ M. Elliot, *The Search for Quality: Planning for Improvement and Managing Goals* (London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd., 2014).

Minimal Empowerment Clinics for Proper Orientation

The selected schools involved in the study had newly appointed school principals who were unfamiliar with PILIR regulations. However, there were significant differences in the knowledge gaps among them. Challenges such as poor network connectivity, failure to follow promotional procedures, and lack of exposure to PILIR issues were prevalent. Some schools, particularly those in rural areas, faced terrain challenges that hindered participation in essential empowerment clinics. A principal of an inner-city school remarked:

“We don’t have proper orientation due to the DBE that does not prioritize important issues and always engaging in blame game saying resources are scarce and we are under ‘Administration’ and our hands are tied. We do not have an alternative source of funding to conduct our own initiated workshops.”

This statement was affirmed by the HRD 21 of the personnel of the district offices who mentioned that because they have limited resources, at times they cannot conduct the workshops due to financial resources and time constraints. Therefore, the district must seek funding from educational donor agencies to implement the orientation programmes of newly appointed school principals as they prepare for the world of work. Analysis of the above statements suggests that the DBE is hiding behind the finger for failing to provide relevant educational matters by rolling out well-coordinated PLIR training for newly appointed school principals. In addition, most RSA schools are non-fee paying and the DBE has been receiving the highest allocation from treasury since the advent of democracy in 1994. In contrast, four schools indicated that they had sought permission from DBE and teacher unions for financial support and the human expertise to run the empowerment clinics, but no tangible support had arrived. According to principals they lack in terms of visionary leadership and planning. There is a lack of human expertise in our DBE circles because of the challenges principals face. Sometimes PILIR challenges cannot be addressed by Circuit managers who must refer to many offices, principals reiterated.

From these comments it is obvious that the participants viewed the DBE officials (HRD personnel and other supervisors) as an indispensable resource within the schools; however, this reform structure needs financial resources and human resources in terms of specialists to serve in the district teams for it to render the kind of quality support as envisaged by the department for the successful implementation of PILIR.

Management of Sick Leave Documents

A major concern was the mishandling of sick leave forms. School principals were frequently submitted incomplete or incorrect documents, with missing supporting materials such as medical certificates. In some cases, principals were unaware of the correct procedures, exacerbating delays and inefficiencies in processing leave requests. Furthermore, from the document analysis, the main concern is with the way the TIL and PILIR issues are handled, which leaves a lot to be desired. Most school principals submit incomplete Annexures and wrong Annexures; some Annexures do not have supporting documents like medical certificates and some are not signed by the employee or medical practitioners, raising serious concerns. The school that facilitates TIL processing is ignorant and does not have correct information, hence most of the TIL leave forms are not processed due to lack of technical know-how. Ideally, what the DBE should be doing to support newly appointed school principals, as expected in the PSC document, is to help school principals with sufficient orientation to be conversant with work-related statutory instruments and their application, administration, and management.

In addition, in the two other deeply rural schools, there were no documents (leave audit files) to show evidence of the leave processed or applied for, despite evidence of high absenteeism among teachers as shown in the time register. When asked to explain how her subordinates can move or be absent without being documented, this is what one of the concerned school principals had to say:

“We had serious challenges with which annexure to complete. I was never given proper orientation but just thrown into the swimming pool without the skills to swim.”

Such issues, particularly in rural areas, indicate a severe lack of leadership training on PILIR matters, which not only affects school management but also contributes to the mismanagement of leave

processes. The overall result is a situation where sick leave is abused, with some teachers exploiting policy loopholes, which compromises both teaching and learning.

Lack of Support from District Offices and Teacher Unions

Most principals reported receiving minimal or no support from district offices or teacher unions. In some cases, principals were left to self-educate, with unions focusing primarily on membership rather than on providing meaningful policy support. One principal shared:

“We only hear from officials when forms are processed correctly, but we receive no real support. It is a problem or a serious cause for concern when the principal who is the leader or the head or manager of the school is not conversant with the policy of PILIR. The question arises as to how they will manage TIL documents for processing if they are not knowledgeable on the matters. It appears that newly appointed school principals, especially those in deep rural areas, are lost and frustrated when they are supposed to advise teachers on which leave to apply for and the accompanying supporting documents in areas where they need help because they also lack the knowledge themselves”.

The discussion on situational leadership’s theory as well as the literature review presented the critical role of collaboration. In line with the findings of this investigation, when asked to explain how the DBE capacitates and coordinates its support to the newly appointed school principals in the schools, the HRD personnel replied and admitted that they do go to schools to monitor and know what challenges the newly appointed school principals face. However, their support for them happens haphazardly. Worst of all, it is usually a once-off thing. The newly appointed school principals are told to be well-read as there is no manpower to do the job.

This feedback suggests that the collaboration between the district and the schools is lacking, which is essential to address the challenges of PILIR management. Effective collaboration and support services are crucial for successfully managing sick leave and incapacity, as highlighted by the Department of Education's guidelines.³⁸

RECOMMENDATION

The study's findings underscore the need for better capacity-building for newly appointed school principals in managing PILIR. The government and teacher unions should play a proactive role in ensuring proper orientation and training. A policy should be developed that mandates orientation on all DBE policies as a prerequisite for promotion. Regular coaching and continuous evaluation of PILIR management practices are essential to improve implementation.

The Department of Basic Education must invest in sufficient resources, both financial and human expertise, to support school principals in effectively managing PILIR. The lack of clear, consistent feedback and support from the DBE remains a significant barrier to the success of PILIR policy implementation.

CONCLUSION

The research has highlighted the lack of emphasis within the South African education system on adequately supporting and equipping newly appointed school principals in managing sick leave and its related components. The study asserts that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has the responsibility of appointing competent, knowledgeable, and experienced educators to principal positions to bridge existing gaps in school management and administration. Consequently, the research concludes that providing newly appointed school principals with the tools and expertise necessary to effectively manage Temporary Incapacity Leave (TIL) and the Policy on Incapacity Leave and Ill Health Retirement (PILIR) is crucial. This capacity-building initiative would yield significant benefits for both individual schools and the education system as a whole. Therefore, school principals must receive targeted

³⁸ Department of Education. Managing sick leave and incapacity: Guidelines for educators, (Department of Education, South Africa, 2005).

professional development, such as workshops, to ensure they are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate these complex issues efficiently.

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