

Chapter # 22

PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN A DIGITALLY EVOLVING WORLD: A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The rapid pace of digital revolution in education requires school principals to reconsider and adjust their leadership styles. To handle the opportunities and difficulties presented by digital transformation, this study suggests a Human Rights Leadership (HRL) action toolkit. The study emphasized human rights leadership practices necessary for promoting inclusive learning, reducing digital divides, and guaranteeing that technological improvements benefit all learners. The Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) was used as the theoretical framework for this paper. We qualitatively analysed stipulations from *UNICEF's Policy Guide on Children and Digital Connectivity (2018)* to show the nature and importance of fostering human rights leadership practices in an era of digital transformation. The results demonstrated that in an era of digital change, *affordable access, protection from harm and privacy and identity* can be useful tools for advancing principals' human rights leadership practices which we propose in a human rights leadership action toolkit. By integrating digital innovation with human rights imperatives, the findings advance school principals' responsibilities as agents of educational and societal transformation and digital leadership. To promote human rights leadership in the digital age, this paper recommends that principals strive to be agents of transformation to advance HRL in an era of digital transformation.

Keywords: digital transformation, human rights leadership, principals, toolkit, UNICEF.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation is changing the educational landscape by integrating technologies such as cloud-based platforms, artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things (IoT), thereby reshaping school leadership and teaching and learning worldwide. These technologies improve individualised learning and promote global connectedness (UNESCO, 2021). However, the current issues with equity and inclusion are exacerbated by these technological changes. While schools with more resources are quick to adopt these advanced tools, a staggering 1.3 billion children aged 3-17 are without internet access in underprivileged areas, thereby threatening the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) for inclusive education (United Nations, 2015). Given the foregoing, school principals face challenges in navigating a complex environment where the digital divide is worsened by socio-economic, geographic and gender disparities (Van Dijk, 2020). In addition, ethical issues such as data privacy breaches and biased AI systems pose a threat to learners' rights (Regan & Jesse, 2019; Williamson, 2017). Notably, the predominant school leadership practices are devoid of addressing human rights practices necessary for fostering digital transformation in schools. The lack of requisite human rights leadership skills could be associated with a disconnect between technological adoption and adherence

to the principles that guide its ethical use (Ross, 2022). To bridge the identified gap, this paper drew on *UNICEF's Policy Guide on Children and Digital Connectivity* (2018) to propose a digital transformation toolkit for school principals in the era of digital transformation.

Significantly, the inequality in digital access further exacerbates learners' learning experiences from disadvantaged backgrounds who risk marginalization, educational and social inequities (World Bank, 2021). Notably, the digital evolution came with ethical concerns, ranging from surveillance, violation of data privacy, and algorithmic bias, which undermine learners' autonomy, rights to safety, and identity in digital spaces (Regan & Jesse, 2019; Williamson, 2017). For school principals, these challenges warrant a shift from traditional leadership to imbibe a more encompassing, rights-based approach that incorporates technological competence.

However, the disconnect observed between leadership practices and technological adoption in schools threatens justice and the safeguarding of human dignity. Although principals embrace technological tools to support administration and classroom instruction, few possess the leadership capabilities pertinent to bring about ethical and equitable transformation (Ross, 2022). These problems are seen to involve inadequate digital rights training, poor implementation of digital policies, and exclusion of vulnerable learners from digital learning opportunities (South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], 2012). Failure to address these gaps would counter the possible transformative impact of technology, and this will negate learners' human and constitutional rights to dignity, equality, and information access (RSA, 1996a).

Previous studies have explored digital leadership and principals' roles in facilitating technology integration (Kaya-Kasikci, Zayim-Kurtay, & Kondakci, 2023; Raman, Thannimalai, & Ismail, 2019). Some scholars have investigated human rights education and inclusive leadership (Stefani & Blessinger, 2018; Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022). However, limited research have ascertained how school principals can fuse human rights and leadership in the digitally evolving world to address social, ethical, and infrastructural challenges schools experience in an era of evolving technology. *UNICEF's Policy Guide on Children and Digital Connectivity* (2018) identifies major factors such as affordable access, protection from harm, and privacy and identity as crucial elements to be considered by principals as digital world has come to stay with us.

This study addresses this gap by proposing a Human Rights Leadership (HRL) toolkit for school principals navigating digital transformation. Contrary to earlier studies, this study adopts a human rights lens to examine digital leadership, emphasising the promotion of digital equity and inclusion in schools. By using a qualitative analysis of *UNICEF's Policy Guide on Children and Digital Connectivity* (2018), this paper proposes a toolkit for principals to ensure that digital transformation promotes and not undermines learners' human rights.

The study is guided by three research questions.

1. How can principals promote affordable digital access for learners aligned to human rights leadership principles?
2. In what ways can principals implement leadership practices that protect learners from digital harm while upholding a human rights-based approach?
3. How can principals navigate and safeguard issues of digital privacy and identity in schools as well as promote inclusive and rights-based leadership in a digitally evolving world?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Human Rights Leadership (HRL)

Human Rights Leadership (HRL) in education is a transformative approach rooted in social justice principles that empower school principals to advocate for learners' rights and ensure equitable access to education (Robinson, 2023). It enables school principals to address systemic disparities and align school policies with the broader goals of educational equity (Dladla, 2020). HRL encompasses establishing a clear vision that prioritizes learners' rights and welfare thereby creating an environment where they feel heard and respected (National Council for Social Studies, 2021). This leadership model transcends the traditional educational management approach by emphasizing smooth interpersonal relationships practices (Smylie, Louis, & Murphy, 2016) promoting diversity and countering injustice (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). Additionally, it encompasses the development of responsive leadership practices (Naido, 2019) that equip school leaders to create a human right-informed atmosphere thereby contributing to a more equitable and socially just society.

2.2. Human Rights Leadership in an era of Digital Transformation

Given the cascading effects of school leadership on learning outcomes, the role of school leaders in the implementation of digital transformation is paramount as it entails the infusion of a computer-oriented approaches to learning into traditional teaching and learning processes (Karakose et al., 2023; Maisyaroh et al., 2024). Scholarly evidence suggests that digital transformation may be associated with improved instructional delivery and increased learner digital nativity (Flores & Mean, 2025; García-Penalvo, 2021). However, the rate of digital assimilation in the education sector varies across developing economies due to infrastructural deficits, government priorities and socio-economic disparities. Despite the associated benefits, adherence to human rights policy guidelines such as data privacy, equitable access and online safety remain a concern in these economies (Jogezai, Baloch, & Koroleva, 2023; Karakose et al., 2023). To mitigate these challenges, the adoption of a human rights-based approach to digital transformation could promote an agenda of inclusion, privacy protection and ethical data usage as well as the safeguard learners' rights (Flores & Mean, 2025; Maisyaroh et al., 2024).

2.3. UNICEF's Policy Guide on Children and Digital Connectivity (2018)

To ensure equitable access and offer guidelines for adoption of digital technologies, *UNICEF's Guide on Children and Digital Connectivity* (2018) serves as a blueprint for the adaptable deployment of digital connectivity in schools. The guideline provides for safe, inclusive and equitable access to digital technology for learners. Specifically, the policy document addresses the potential risks and challenges associated with digital transformation in schools via its provision for protection against harmful content, violation of data privacy and disparities in access to digital resources (UNICEF, 2018). The policy document outlines six thematic areas that serve as blueprints for the deployment of digital literacy in schools. These areas include affordable access to digital skills, protection from harm, privacy and identity, business standards and government policy. Consistent with tenets of human right leadership, the *UNICEF policy guidelines on children and digital connectivity* (2018) serve as a framework for the deployment of digital literacy in schools. The provision of the guidelines suggests that its adoption would reduce digital divides among marginalized groups including female learners, learners with disabilities and those in rural schools. It would also enable school leaders to integrate digital literacy into the curriculum as well as develop robust

data protection practices (UNICEF, 2018, pp. 12-15). Ultimately, the adoption of these policy guidelines could serve as the basis for developing human rights leadership skills among school principals.

2.4. Human Rights Legal Framework, Digital Technology and Impact on Human Rights

Human rights leadership in education is founded in international, national, and regional legal frameworks that uphold education as a human right and a community good. From a global perspective, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations [UN], 1966) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) contain the rights to education and the responsibilities of the states to guarantee equity, dignity and access for all learners. In Africa, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Organization of African Unity [OAU], 1990), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (OAU, 1981) went further to entrench education as a right that fosters democratic participation and human development. In South Africa, the South African School Acts (RSA, 1996b) and the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996a) are policy documents that translate these global and regional insights into local commitments, ensuring principals practice equitable and inclusive education. These frameworks for the school principals are beyond compliance to represent a legal and moral compass upon which leadership decisions, especially ensuring that all learners, despite of race, gender or background, partake in a school atmosphere that honors their rights and dignity (Soudien, 2020). In other words, human rights leadership affords the principals to incorporate legal literacy, which enables them to navigate the complex intersections of social justice, policies and pedagogical responsibility.

In this contemporary time, there is a quick integration of digital technologies in all educational levels. This has reimagined how human rights leadership is carried out in schools. On one hand, it provides opportunities to promote educational rights through broad communication platforms, improved access to knowledge, and innovative instructional models (UNESCO, 2021). Similarly, on the other hand, it presents new challenges (legal and ethical) in the form of digital surveillance, cyberbullying, data privacy, and unequal opportunities to digital resources (Van Dijk, 2020). Hence, for the contemporary principals, this technological transformation requires a balance between technological access and the need to safeguard human dignity and equity. A leadership approach grounded in human rights beacons on principals to imbibe digital practices that corroborate affordability, protection from harm, and privacy (Enebe & Palmer, 2025). This is a call for the principal to guard against the tendencies of these tools deepening the existing social divide, rather it should enhance the digital empowerment of learners and teachers. Inasmuch as schools increasingly adopt a digital-driven system, principals are encouraged to apply and interpret digital policies from a human rights standpoint, which would in turn foster ethical decision-making, accountability, and transparency (Setiawan, 2024). In conclusion, this paper sought to enhance principals' human rights leadership in an era of digital transformation by reimagining human rights leadership using UNICEF's (2018) policy guide and proposes a toolkit for principals to ensure that digital transformation promotes learners' human rights.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs the human rights-based approach (HRBA). This theory has its root in the international human rights principles and standards. Organizations such as UNICEF and the United Nations recommend that this theory incorporate human rights standards into the planning, implementation, and assessment of practices and policies across institutions, including education (UNICEF, 2018; United Nations, 2003). HRBA scholars such as Jonsson (2005) and Uvin (2007) advocate that equity and sustainable development can be attained when individual rights, especially marginalized groups are respected, and protected throughout institutions. The goal of HRBA is to make sure that human rights are actively incorporated into daily activities and decision-making, not only recognized in policies (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). In the era of digital transformation, school principals are advised to imbibe a HRBA to protect and defend the rights of learners for inclusivity, access and privacy in their daily involvement with digital devices. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024) posit that policies should be used to ensure that digital transformation remains human-centric and rights-oriented. A rights-based approach in a digital era is further emphasized by UNICEF (2018) which maintained that international standards and best practices must serve as the foundation for protective measures and safeguards, which must maintain a balance between protecting children's privacy and data and other rights.

The essence of choosing this theory lies in the need to imbibe an inclusive, ethical, and justice-oriented leadership in the present digitally evolving world. The educational sector is increasingly experiencing a surge in the use of digital tools in instruction, and school principals are charged with the responsibility to safeguard the rights of learners. An application of the HRBA was thus relevant because policy requires school principals to consider how they can enact human rights leadership in the age of digital transformation. Notwithstanding, some scholars criticized the HRBA on the ground that its normative and wide nature can be difficult to use in a real institutional setting (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004). Merry (2006) argued that its emphasis on legal framework may possibly overlook cultural and contextual divide in how human rights are implemented and understood. On the contrary, these critiques do not undermine its relevance to the present study. In this regard, HRBA is adopted as an appropriate theory for this study as it provides practical guidance, normative foundation, and ethical clarity for principals in exploring how digital transformation can be harnessed to protect and affirm the rights of learners. Through the use of HRBA, this study adds to the current discourse on right-centred educational leadership, particularly amid regions marked by digital disruption and inequality.

4. METHODOLOGY

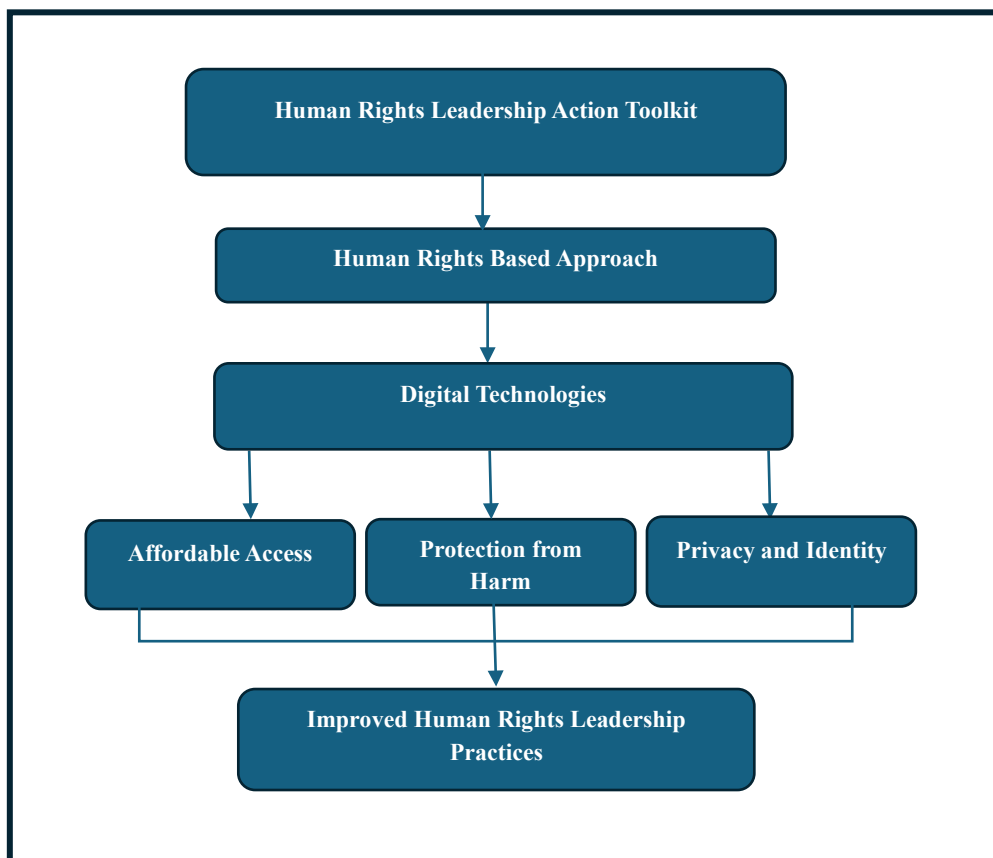
We adopted a qualitative approach in our study to explore the meaning of texts in the UNICEF (2018) *Guide on Children and Digital Connectivity* to advance principals' HRL in an era of digital transformation. A document analysis was conducted of selected texts within the Guide to interpret meanings within to obtain a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon or problem. Due to the consistency of the data, it is advantageous to analyse pre-existing texts as the data remains unchanged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In using this method, pre-existing texts are critically examined to identify meaningful trends and insights (Morgan, 2022). Complementary to a qualitative approach, we applied a conceptual research design (CRD) which focuses on scrutinizing existing concepts from texts in policies and information already in the public domain (Heinonen & Gruen, 2024). We analysed texts in

UNICEF's Policy Guide on Children and Digital Connectivity (2018) to understand new ways to advance principals' HRL in an era of digital transformation. First, we read the document to acquaint ourselves with relevant texts that have possible significance with principals' HRL in the era of digital transformation. Second, we reread and selected texts with the closest relationship and patterns with the phenomenon being studied. Third, the selected texts were coded to check their coherence and labelled with phrases that represent their content (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Afterwards, we identified three themes that strongly aligned with principals' HRL in the era of digital transformation, namely, affordable access, protection from harm and privacy and identity. We then employed thematic analysis to understand how the three selected texts communicate information about principals' human rights leadership in a digital era.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We propose a Human Rights Leadership Action toolkit (HRLAT) that can contribute to advancing principals' HRL in an era of digital transformation (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Human Rights Leadership Action Toolkit (HRLAT).



5.1. Affordable Access

According to UNICEF (2018) “*affordable access is defined as the availability of digital devices and internet connectivity at a rate that enables all children irrespective of their socioeconomic background, to use them effectively for communication, learning and engagement in the digital world*” (p. 9). Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not specifically list internet and digital access as a human right, it is acknowledged that these resources are necessary for the exercise of other fundamental rights, including freedom of speech and right to information (Malatsi, 2025). In South Africa, the constitution emphasizes the importance of access to information and freedom of expression (RSA, 1996a). As a result, principals can further their HRL by fostering digital literacy and guaranteeing all learners and teachers have fair access to digital resources. Hamzah, Nasir, & Wahab (2021) contends that this entails offering professional development, encouraging an innovative culture and using data to guide decisions on digital integration. More so, principals promote HRL by advocating for policies that make digital devices and internet accessible, prioritizing digital training and fostering partnership to mitigate digital divide (OECD, 2022).

Importantly, these actions can be executed by the principal through advocacy. Advocacy in the form of mobilising NGOs, district officials, and governing bodies to assist in securing zero-rated educational platforms, subsidised data, community Wi-Fi solutions and refurbished devices, as their contributions to sustain and uphold the educational rights of learners. Furthermore, principals can again exercise their human rights leadership roles by partnering with libraries to build community-based digital networks. In sum, affordable access to internet and digital devices are thus relevant for advancing principals' HRL as it would foster freedom of speech and right to information. These are fundamental human rights critical to address digital divides and guarantee fair access to technology.

5.2. Protection from Harm

UNICEF (2018) advised that principals should use their leadership “*to address online risks, vulnerability and harm*” (p. 17). Protecting learners from harm in the era of digital transformation necessitates a multifaceted strategy that emphasizes digital literacy, appropriate online conduct, and strong reporting and support mechanisms. Teaching learners about online safety, privacy, and moral behaviour should be a top priority for school principals who should also set up explicit procedures for reporting instances of abuse (UNICEF, 2023). Protecting learners in school is an act of defending their human rights. This could be championed by guaranteeing a secure and welcoming learning environment free from abuse and discrimination, premised on equality and inclusion. The South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC] (2012) discloses that protecting learners from online abuse and discrimination entails safeguarding their rights to equality, safety and non-discrimination which culminates as educational rights of learners. Further, the South African Constitution and SAHRC placed a significant interest in protecting learners from every form of harm (including in the use of digital devices) and always emphasized learners' interest. This involves defending learners' access, privacy and ensuring that abusive contents were properly reported (RSA, 1996a; SAHRC, 2012).

To embed this principle in schools, principals are encouraged to establish transparent and clear policies on responsible device use, data privacy, and cyberbullying. This, however, will protect learners from online exploitation, and can be communicated through accessible language and collaboratively developed with parents, teachers and learners. In addition, principals can also choose platforms and digital tools that conform with ethical standards, and data protection laws to ensure that digital learning does not expose learners to online

harm. In this regard, principals' HRL can be advanced when they protect learners and educators from online abuse, discrimination and harm, while ensuring digital literacy and ethical online conduct.

5.3. Privacy and Identity

The constant changes in the age of digital transformation requires school principals to search for *"appropriate strategies to avoid risks and seek support when needed"* (UNICEF, 2018, p. 13) so that individuals' privacy can be protected. Privacy and identity are pertinent safety measures to be considered when making use of digital devices as they could have a direct impact on users' safety, autonomy, and human dignity particularly for younger learners and other vulnerable populations (UNICEF, 2018). Notably, privacy and identity are fundamental human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Right (United Nation, 1948) as freedom of expression and thinking depends on people being able to manage their personal information and choose how it is shared. Moreover, accessing services, exercising rights, and guaranteeing legal protection all depend on having a distinct and identifiable identity. In the South African context, the enactment of the constitutional rights to privacy and identity in the digital age are seen in the "Protection of Personal Information Act [POPIA]" and "Regulation of Interception of Communications and Provision of Communication-Related Information Act [RICA]" (RSA, 1996a; Staunton et al., 2020) which points to the profound attention given to the exercise of human rights.

The legal human rights frameworks as seen above, can further be enhanced by the school principal by ensuring that there are policies put in place that control data gathering, storage and sharing. Such policies would prohibit reckless data collection, usage of insecure sites, and ensure adherence to data protection laws. In line with this, principals can vet all third-party platforms and digital equipment to ensure data encryption. Again, HRL can also be extended to professional training of teachers on the ethical use of digital tools. Therefore, to advance school principals' HRL in the fast-growing digital world, a grasp of privacy and identity as fundamental human rights should be upheld to ensure dignity, safety and autonomy of learners.

6. CONCLUSION

This study advances our understanding of human rights leadership in the context of digital transformation in education. This study highlights the challenging role of school principals in navigating digital transformation in schools while upholding human rights principles. To overcome these hurdles the study proposes a human rights leadership action toolkit (HRLAT) as a framework for principals to advance human rights leadership practices during digital integration. Underpinned by the provisions of UNICEF's policy guideline on children and digital connectivity 2018, the toolkit also addresses some of the challenges associated with the implementation of digital transformation in schools. Put together, the three research questions showed that for digitally evolving schools to implement human rights leadership, an ethical approach that expresses affordability, protection from harm, privacy and identity should be considered by the principal. Firstly, through advocating for affordable digital access, principals assist in actualising the education rights of learners in an inclusively. Secondly, principals uphold dignity, safety and accountability by implementing leadership practices that safeguard learners against digital harm. Finally, principals ensure that learners' privacy and identities are protected through participatory, transparent, and legally by compliance to data protection bodies. This study contributes to the ongoing debate on best practices regarding human rights leadership in schools. Given the conceptual nature of the study, future research could focus on conducting empirical and longitudinal studies to assess its practicality and the long-term efficacy of the proposed toolkit.

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