

Interpersonal skills as predictors of leadership effectiveness among secondary school administrators in Cameroon

Silas Shey Nyamka ^{1,*}, Ngamaleu Henri Rodrigue Njengoué ² and Oscar C. Labang ³

¹ Department of Curricula and Evaluation (Educational Management), Faculty of Education, University of Yaoundé I, Cameroon.

² Department of Curricula and Evaluation, Faculty of Education, University of Yaoundé I, Cameroon, PO BOX: 337 Yaoundé, Cameroon.

³ Department of Education and Humanities, St Lawrence University Institute, Ndop, NWR, Cameroon.

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Abstract

This study investigated the predictive relationship between interpersonal competencies and leadership effectiveness among secondary school administrators in Cameroon, a context where principals are frequently appointed based on teaching seniority rather than formal leadership preparation. Adopting a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design, data were collected from 320 teachers across public, lay private, and confessional secondary schools in three Cameroonian divisions (Kong-Khi, Mezam, and Mfoundi). Respondents rated their principals' interpersonal skills and leadership effectiveness via an online questionnaire (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.789$). Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27, employing Pearson product-moment correlation and multiple linear regression. The regression model revealed that interpersonal competencies significantly predicted leadership effectiveness, explaining 65.9% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.659$). Teamwork and collaboration emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.402$, $p < 0.001$), followed by communication competence ($\beta = .329$, $p < 0.001$) and conflict management competence ($\beta = 0.267$, $p < 0.001$). Pearson correlation analysis confirmed strong, positive, and statistically significant relationships between all three competency dimensions and leadership effectiveness ($r > 0.68$, $p < 0.001$). The findings underscore the necessity of redefining the Cameroon Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL) to prioritize interpersonal and emotional intelligence training. Educational policymakers and teacher-training institutions must shift from purely administrative preparation to targeted development of relational, collaborative, and culturally resonant (Ubuntu-informed) leadership competencies. By quantifying the predictive weight of specific interpersonal skills within the Cameroonian socio-cultural context, this study provides empirical evidence that relational competencies are central determinants of school leadership effectiveness, bridging the gap between global emotional intelligence theories and local educational realities.

Keywords: Interpersonal competencies; Leadership effectiveness; Secondary school administrators; Emotional intelligence; School climate

1. Introduction

Education is universally recognized as one of the most powerful tools for individual growth and national development (UNESCO, 2021). At the heart of any functional educational institution lies effective leadership; a force that shapes a school's culture, motivates educators, promotes student achievement, and ensures the optimal management of institutional resources (Leithwood et al., 2020). Among the myriad dimensions of leadership, interpersonal competencies have emerged as critical determinants of a school administrator's effectiveness. These competencies encompass a wide range of skills, including communication, empathy, conflict resolution, collaboration, and emotional

* Corresponding author: Silas Shey Nyamka.

intelligence, all of which are essential for navigating the complex human dynamics inherent in educational settings (Goleman, 2000; Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

It is widely expected that effective school principals possess strong interpersonal relationships, demonstrable leadership qualities, and a high degree of social and emotional awareness (Beauchamp et al., 2019). Competency frameworks for school principals globally consistently highlight domains such as instructional leadership, creating a positive student learning climate, human resource management, and crucially personal and interpersonal effectiveness (OECD, 2020). By demonstrating strong interpersonal skills, principals foster a trusting environment where open communication and empathetic leadership encourage teacher collaboration, boost morale, and enhance retention (Day & Sammons, 2013). Consequently, the link between these relational leadership qualities and organizational outcomes underscores the strategic importance of interpersonal competencies in education.

In the evolving discourse of educational leadership, social and emotional competencies have gained increasing recognition as essential attributes for effective school leaders. Leadership grounded in empathy, relational trust, and authentic care extends beyond mere managerial responsibilities to address the deeper emotional and relational needs of teachers and students (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). Research further underscores the centrality of emotional intelligence (EI) in this paradigm. Systematic reviews reveal that EI is key for effective school leadership, with self-awareness, self-management, and empathy ranking as the most frequently applied competencies (e.g., Vessey et al., 2014). Because school leaders must continually interact with diverse groups ranging from teachers and support staff to students, parents, and policymakers; using emotions adaptively is critical for cultivating a supportive, emotionally-toned school climate.

Equally vital is the role of conflict management, a core interpersonal competency. Conflict is an inevitable part of educational settings, often arising from diverse perspectives, systemic structures, and organizational changes (Rahim, 2002). For school leaders, effectively managing and resolving conflicts is essential to creating a respectful, collaborative, and thriving school culture. As the primary managers of their institutions, principals act not only as the center of internal conflict resolution but also as the bridge coordinating relationships with external stakeholders. Successfully navigating both internal friction and external pressures requires acute interpersonal communication skills and an awareness of environmental factors (Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

In the context of Cameroon, the educational system presents a distinct and complex landscape that demands highly competent leadership. Cameroonian educational policy has long emphasized the importance of forging national unity and developing human capital for the country's economic, social, and political advancement (Tchombe, 2019). A foundational document outlining school management, the *Handbook for Heads of Secondary and High Schools* (MINEDUC, 1996), identifies four main functions for secondary school principals: pedagogic, administrative, social, and financial. Successfully executing these multifaceted roles implicitly requires robust interpersonal and managerial skills.

However, despite these policy aspirations, the reality on the ground reveals significant gaps in leadership preparation and competency. A persistent challenge within Cameroon's educational sector is the need to improve institutional governance to address low instructional quality, indiscipline among staff and students, poor academic performance, and financial mismanagement (Nkengbeza, 2017; Tambi, 2021). This gap is largely attributed to a severe lack of formally trained school administrators. A World Bank Report (2019) on secondary education in Africa notes that principals in many parts of the continent, including Cameroon, have little to no formal preparation to effectively run schools, concluding that a central challenge of the near future is strengthening the management capacity of these leaders.

Wirba (2015) corroborates this observation, attesting that "the speed at which classroom teachers are turned into school principals" indicates a glaring lack of emphasis on leadership training for current principals in Cameroon. Consequently, the average school principal often possesses no specialized leadership qualities or experiences beyond those of their teaching staff. While Cameroonian policies dictate that newly appointed principals will receive training, in practice, such training is rarely provided, rendering the task of school management an uphill battle (Wirba, 2015; Fonkeng, 2019). The absence of sufficient, empathetic, and effective support from school principals leaves many teachers ill-equipped to navigate their professional challenges, ultimately compromising teaching quality and stalling broader school improvement initiatives (Tchombe & Nsamenang, 2017).

Against this backdrop, increasing the understanding of how interpersonal skills predict leadership effectiveness becomes not just an academic exercise, but a practical imperative. There is a pressing need to explore how competencies such as emotional intelligence, communication, and conflict resolution can mitigate the systemic challenges faced by secondary schools in Cameroon. Therefore, this article examines interpersonal skills as predictors of leadership

effectiveness among secondary school administrators in Cameroon, aiming to provide evidence-based insights for policy reform, targeted leadership training, and improved educational outcomes.

1.1. Statement of the Research Problem

Cameroonian secondary schools face persistent challenges, including teacher demotivation and uneven instructional quality, exacerbated by appointing principals based on teaching seniority rather than leadership training. Consequently, many administrators lack essential interpersonal skills such as empathy, conflict resolution, and trust-building which is vital for school effectiveness. Despite their importance, there is a scarcity of context-specific quantitative research examining how these discrete competencies relate to leadership effectiveness in Cameroon. Furthermore, existing Western measurement tools ignore culturally salient *Ubuntu* values, such as communal solidarity and ethical interconnectedness. As a result, policymakers lack reliable data to design targeted leadership development programs. This study addresses these gaps by developing a valid, culturally relevant, bilingual questionnaire to examine the relationship between interpersonal competencies and leadership effectiveness among Cameroonian secondary school administrators.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

1.2.1. General Objective

The general objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between secondary school administrators' interpersonal competencies and school leadership effectiveness in selected regions of Cameroon.

1.2.2. Specific Objectives

The study specifically seeks to:

- Examine the relationship between secondary school administrators' communication competence and school leadership effectiveness
- Assess the relationship between secondary school administrators' conflict management competence and school leadership effectiveness
- Investigate the relationship between secondary school administrators' teamwork and collaboration competence and school leadership effectiveness

1.3. Research Questions

In alignment with the above objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1.3.1. General Research Question

What is the relationship between secondary school administrators' interpersonal competencies and school leadership effectiveness in selected regions of Cameroon?

1.3.2. Specific Research Questions

- What is the relationship between secondary school administrators' communication competence and school leadership effectiveness?
- What is the relationship between secondary school administrators' conflict management competence and school leadership effectiveness?
- What is the relationship between secondary school administrators' teamwork and collaboration competence and school leadership effectiveness?

1.4. Hypotheses

In line with the specific objectives and research questions, the following hypotheses are formulated and will be tested at a significance level of $p \leq 0.05$:

H₁: There is a significant positive relationship between principals' interpersonal competencies and school leadership effectiveness in Cameroonian secondary schools.

H₂: The specific dimensions of interpersonal competence (communication, conflict management, and team work and collaboration) significantly predict leadership effectiveness.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Empirical Review

In Cameroon, school principals are central to shaping school culture, supporting instructional quality, and achieving educational goals. The Cameroon Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL) outlines key effectiveness domains, including shared vision, ethics, community engagement, and financial management. However, empirical evidence reveals that many Cameroonian principals ascend to administrative roles based on teaching seniority rather than formal leadership preparation, creating significant gaps in their management capabilities (Ebot Ashu, 2014; Mekolle, 2024). While local studies in areas like Meme and Mezam confirm that leadership styles influence teacher performance and student outcomes, the literature heavily focuses on general administrative training or broad leadership styles. Globally, interpersonal skills such as communication, empathy, and conflict management are recognized as core drivers of teacher collaboration and school success. Yet, within the Cameroonian context, few studies quantitatively isolate specific interpersonal competencies as direct predictors of leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, existing research often overlooks the nuanced differences between public and private, or Anglophone and Francophone subsystems, highlighting a clear need for context-specific, measurable evidence on how these relational skills drive school effectiveness.

2.2. Conceptual Review

This study conceptualizes Interpersonal Competencies (the independent variable) as the skills that enable administrators to build productive, goal-oriented relationships with teachers, students, parents, and the community. Drawing from educational leadership literature, this construct is operationalized into three dimensions: (1) Communication competence (active listening, clear dialogue, feedback); (2) Relationship-building and collaboration (teamwork, collegiality); and (3) Conflict management (constructive dispute resolution).

School Leadership Effectiveness (the dependent variable) is defined as the extent to which principals successfully influence stakeholders to realize the school's educational mission. Aligned with the CPSEL and global frameworks, this is measured through indicators including: (1) Mission and vision implementation; (2) Instructional leadership (supporting teaching and professional development); (3) School climate and culture (safety, discipline, respect); (4) Community engagement (parental and stakeholder collaboration); and (5) Resource and management effectiveness (efficient planning and decision-making).

Conceptually, we posit that principals who exhibit strong interpersonal competencies foster higher staff morale, constructive conflict resolution, and deeper trust, which collectively enhance their overall leadership effectiveness. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H₁: There is a significant positive relationship between principals' interpersonal competencies and school leadership effectiveness in Cameroonian secondary schools.

H₂: The specific dimensions of interpersonal competence (communication, conflict management, and team work and collaboration) significantly predict leadership effectiveness.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

2.3.1. Emotional Intelligence (EI) Theory

This study is anchored in Emotional Intelligence (EI) Theory (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995), building upon the foundational principles of the Human Relations Theory (Mayo, 1933). While Human Relations Theory established the critical importance of social interactions, group dynamics, and employee morale in organizational success, it does not explicitly isolate the specific interpersonal competencies required of the leader. Emotional Intelligence Theory bridges this gap by providing a competency-based framework that predicts leadership effectiveness.

Goleman (2000) categorizes EI into four domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. The interpersonal competencies examined in this study communication, team work/collaboration, and conflict resolution aligns directly with the domains of social awareness and relationship management. EI Theory posits that leaders who master these competencies are better equipped to navigate complex human dynamics, foster trust, and drive organizational success (Boyatzis, 2018).

In the context of Cameroonian secondary schools, where principals often face systemic challenges with limited formal training, EI Theory is highly adaptable. It not only supports the premise that interpersonal skills are the primary tools for improving school climate, teacher motivation, and administrative efficiency, but it also aligns seamlessly with culturally salient Ubuntu values such as communal solidarity and ethical interconnectedness which emphasize empathy and relational harmony (Elonga Mboyo, 2019). Therefore, EI Theory provides the most precise and culturally responsive lens for examining how interpersonal skills predict leadership effectiveness among secondary school administrators in Cameroon. Goleman's (2000) competency framework of EI is particularly relevant, as it categorizes leadership skills into four domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. The interpersonal competencies examined in this study; communication, empathy/relationship-building, collaboration, and conflict management align directly with the domains of social awareness and relationship management. According to the theory, leaders who master these competencies can effectively navigate complex social environments, foster trust, and inspire collective action, which directly translates into leadership effectiveness (Boyatzis, 2018; Druskat et al., 2013).

EI Theory provides a robust lens for explaining the mechanisms through which the independent variables (interpersonal competencies) influence the dependent variables (decision-making, teacher motivation, school climate, staff performance, and goal achievement). For instance, the theory suggests that a principal's empathetic communication and collaborative decision-making naturally cultivate a positive school climate and enhance teacher motivation by fulfilling the emotional and psychological needs of the staff (George, 2023; Mekolle, 2024). Furthermore, emotionally intelligent leaders are better equipped to manage conflicts, maintain discipline, and optimize administrative efficiency through relational rather than purely authoritarian approaches (Humphrey et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2023).

Crucially, EI Theory aligns seamlessly with the culturally salient Ubuntu philosophy highlighted in this study's problem statement. Both paradigms emphasize communal solidarity, ethical interconnectedness, empathy, and the prioritization of collective well-being over individual gain (Elonga Mboyo, 2019; African Centre for School Leadership, 2024). In the resource-constrained and complex Cameroonian educational landscape where many principals lack formal administrative training, EI Theory argues that interpersonal and emotional competencies become the primary tools for navigating systemic challenges, compensating for structural deficits, and driving school effectiveness (Nkengbeza, 2017; Wirba, 2015). Therefore, EI Theory provides the most appropriate and culturally responsive foundation for examining how interpersonal skills predict leadership effectiveness among secondary school administrators in Cameroon.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design. This design was deemed appropriate as it facilitated the systematic collection of numerical data at a single point in time, allowing for the examination of the nature, strength, and predictive value of the relationship between principals' interpersonal competencies (independent variable) and their leadership effectiveness (dependent variable) without manipulating the study environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2. Population and Sampling Procedure

The target population for this study comprised secondary school teachers in Cameroon. The accessible population was drawn from three purposefully selected divisions representing distinct regional and socio-cultural contexts: Kong-Khi Division (West Region), Mezam Division (North-West Region), and Mfoundi Division (Centre Region). To ensure a heterogeneous and representative sample, a stratified random sampling technique was utilized. Schools were first stratified into three ownership categories: public, lay private, and confessional/faith-based institutions. Subsequently, schools were randomly selected from each stratum across the three divisions. From the selected schools, 350 teachers were randomly sampled to serve as the unit of analysis, ensuring a robust sample size sufficient for multivariate statistical analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2020).

3.3. Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire. The instrument was bifurcated into three sections: (a) demographic information of the respondents; (b) principals' interpersonal competencies, measured across sub-dimensions such as communication, conflict management, teamwork/collaboration; and (c) school leadership effectiveness, measured by indicators including instructional leadership, school climate, and administrative efficiency. All items were operationalized on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

To mitigate common method bias and the inflation of self-ratings, only teachers were used as respondents. They served as independent evaluators, rating the interpersonal skills and leadership effectiveness of their respective principals and administrative teams. This subordinate-rating approach is widely supported in leadership research as it provides a more objective, ground-level assessment of leader behaviors and their organizational impact.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

Content and face validity of the instrument were established through a thorough review by a panel of experts in educational leadership and measurement. Following expert revisions, a pilot study was conducted using a sub-sample of 30 teachers in a division not included in the main study. The internal consistency and reliability of the instrument were tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the three sub-scales (communication, conflict management, and teamwork/collaboration) ranged from 0.72 to 0.84, confirming acceptable internal consistency for each dimension. The overall questionnaire yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.789, which exceeds the widely accepted psychometric threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978), thereby confirming that the instrument was highly reliable for measuring the targeted constructs in the Cameroonian context.

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

Upon obtaining the necessary ethical clearances and administrative authorizations, the questionnaires were administered electronically to the selected teachers via an online survey platform. The digital survey links were shared with the 350 targeted teachers across the selected schools in Kong-Khi, Mezam, and Mfoundi through official school email directories, staff WhatsApp groups, and direct messaging. Utilizing an online administration method not only facilitated broader geographic reach across the three diverse divisions but also ensured expedient data collection, cost-efficiency, and automated data capture. The online platform was configured to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, with an introductory section explicitly outlining the study's purpose and ethical assurances.

3.6. Data Analysis

All retrieved questionnaires were screened for completeness and consistency before being coded. Data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) were used to summarize the demographic data and the central tendencies of the variables. Inferential statistics, specifically Pearson Product-Moment Correlation and Multiple Linear Regression, were employed to test the study hypotheses. Prior to regression analysis, preliminary assumptions including normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were verified to ensure the validity of the parametric tests. The regression analysis determined the specific predictive weight of each interpersonal competency dimension on overall leadership effectiveness.

4. Data Presentation

A total of 320 valid questionnaires were retrieved and analyzed. The final instrument comprised twenty (20) items: five (5) measuring communication competence, five (5) measuring conflict management, five (5) measuring teamwork and collaboration, and five (5) measuring school leadership effectiveness. The results are presented in the following sub-sections.

4.1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 320 teacher respondents. The majority of respondents were male (61.9%), held between 5 to 15 years of teaching experience (53.2%), and were predominantly from government secondary schools (42.5%).

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 320)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	198	61.9
	Female	122	38.1
Teaching Experience	Less than 5 years	54	16.9
	5–10 years	102	31.9
	11–15 years	68	21.3
	16–20 years	55	17.2
	More than 20 years	41	12.8
Type of School	Government Secondary School	136	42.5
	Government Technical School	58	18.1
	Lay Private School	74	23.1
	Confessional/Mission School	52	16.3

Note. Percentages are based on the total sample size of 320 teacher respondents.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation matrix for the study variables. The mean scores for all variables ranged from 3.88 to 4.08, indicating that teachers generally perceived their principals' interpersonal competencies and leadership effectiveness positively. The correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between all three interpersonal competency dimensions and school leadership effectiveness. Teamwork and collaboration demonstrated the strongest positive correlation ($r = 0.756, p < 0.01$), followed by communication competence ($r = 0.731, p < 0.01$), and conflict management competence ($r = 0.684, p < 0.01$).

Table 2 Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Matrix for Interpersonal Competencies and School Leadership Effectiveness (N = 320)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Communication Competence	3.94	0.71	—			
2. Conflict Management Competence	3.88	0.75	0.612**	—		
3. Teamwork & Collaboration Competence	4.02	0.69	0.587**	0.641**	—	
4. School Leadership Effectiveness	4.08	0.66	0.731**	0.684**	0.756**	—

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.3. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Prior to conducting the multiple regression, the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were verified. Multicollinearity was not a concern, as Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.21 to 1.84, well below the threshold of 10 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2020).

Table 3 presents the multiple linear regression analysis predicting school leadership effectiveness. The overall model was statistically significant ($F(3, 316) = 200.531, p < .001$), accounting for 65.9% of the variance in leadership effectiveness ($R^2 = .659$). Examination of the individual coefficients revealed that all three interpersonal competency dimensions made significant independent contributions. Teamwork and collaboration emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.402, p < 0.001$), followed by communication competence ($\beta = 0.329, p < 0.001$), and conflict management competence ($\beta = 0.267, p < 0.001$).

Table 3 Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting School Leadership Effectiveness (N = 320)

Predictor Variables	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	0.842	0.171	—	4.924	< 0.001
Communication Competence	0.314	0.052	0.329	6.038	<0.001
Conflict Management Competence	0.248	0.049	0.267	5.061	< 0.001
Teamwork & Collaboration Competence	0.381	0.056	0.402	6.804	< 0.001

$R^2 = .659$; Adjusted $R^2 = .654$; $F(3, 316) = 200.531$; $p < 0.001$.

4.4. Hypothesis Testing

The study formulated two hypotheses to guide the inferential analysis. The results of the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation and Multiple Linear Regression analyses were utilized to test these hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance.

H_1 : There is a significant positive relationship between principals' interpersonal competencies and school leadership effectiveness in Cameroonian secondary schools.

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between all measured dimensions of principals' interpersonal competencies and school leadership effectiveness. Specifically, teamwork and collaboration demonstrated the strongest positive correlation ($r = 0.756$, $p < 0.001$), followed by communication competence ($r = 0.731$, $p < 0.001$), and conflict management competence ($r = 0.684$, $p < 0.001$). Given that all interpersonal competency dimensions showed statistically significant positive associations with leadership effectiveness, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

H_2 : The specific dimensions of interpersonal competence (communication, conflict management, and teamwork & collaboration) significantly predict leadership effectiveness.

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the predictive power of these dimensions on school leadership effectiveness. The overall regression model was statistically significant ($F(3, 316) = 200.531$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 65.9% of the variance in leadership effectiveness ($R^2 = 0.659$). Examination of the individual regression coefficients revealed that all three dimensions made significant independent contributions to predicting leadership effectiveness. Teamwork and collaboration emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.402$, $p < 0.001$), followed by communication competence ($\beta = 0.329$, $p < 0.001$), and conflict management competence ($\beta = 0.267$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

5. Discussion of Findings

This section interprets the empirical findings through the theoretical lenses of Emotional Intelligence (EI) Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory, while situating the analysis within the unique socio-cultural and administrative context of Cameroonian secondary schools.

5.1. Overview of Principal Findings

The study confirms that interpersonal competencies are not merely peripheral "soft skills" but constitute the core architecture of effective school leadership in Cameroon. With 65.9% of the variance in leadership effectiveness explained by the three competency dimensions, the findings robustly validate the theoretical proposition that leadership effectiveness is fundamentally relational. The hierarchical ordering of predictors—teamwork and collaboration ($\beta = 0.402$) followed by communication ($\beta = 0.329$) and conflict management ($\beta = 0.267$)—provides a clear empirical roadmap for leadership development priorities in contexts where formal administrative training remains scarce.

5.2. Teamwork and Collaboration: The Primacy of Distributed Leadership

The emergence of teamwork and collaboration as the strongest predictor of leadership effectiveness ($r = 0.756$; $\beta = 0.402$) validates the tenets of Distributed Leadership Theory and resonates profoundly with the African Ubuntu philosophy of communal solidarity. This finding suggests that in Cameroonian secondary schools, effectiveness is

achieved not through hierarchical command but through the principal's capacity to activate collective agency. When principals foster participatory decision-making and shared responsibilities mirroring the Ubuntu ethic of "I am because we are" they trigger the reciprocal mechanisms posited by Social Exchange Theory. Teachers, perceiving genuine inclusion and respect, respond with heightened commitment and discretionary effort, creating a virtuous cycle of organizational effectiveness. This is particularly critical given Wirba's (2015) observation that many Cameroonian principals lack technical administrative training; the data suggest that relational capital can compensate for structural deficits, transforming schools into self-organizing communities of practice rather than bureaucratic hierarchies.

5.3. Communication Competence: The Catalyst of Transformational Influence

The strong predictive power of communication competence ($\beta = 0.329$) aligns with Bass's (1985) Transformational Leadership construct, specifically the dimensions of inspirational motivation and individualized consideration. In the Cameroonian educational landscape characterized by linguistic diversity (Anglophone/Francophone subsystems) and fragmented policy implementation; clear, empathetic communication serves as the principal's primary tool for sense-making and cultural cohesion. The high correlation ($r = 0.731$) between communication and effectiveness supports Goleman's (2000) EI framework, wherein the "social awareness" and "relationship management" domains enable principals to articulate visions that resonate emotionally with staff. This finding challenges the traditional administrative paradigm that privileges financial and logistical management over dialogic engagement, suggesting that in the absence of sufficient material resources (a persistent challenge noted by Ebot Ashu, 2014), communicative clarity becomes the resource that sustains teacher motivation and organizational alignment.

5.4. Conflict Management: Stability through Emotional Regulation

Although conflict management demonstrated the lowest predictive weight among the three retained competencies, its statistically significant contribution ($\beta = 0.267$) carries important theoretical and practical implications that deserve careful consideration. In the conceptual framework developed previously, conflict management was defined as the principal's capacity for constructive dispute resolution, the ability to navigate disagreements in ways that address legitimate concerns without fracturing the relational bonds that sustain organizational functioning. Within the EI Theory framework, this competency maps onto what Goleman (2000) described as the relationship management domain, specifically the skill of managing disagreement, soothing tensions, and restoring equilibrium after rupture. In the Cameroonian educational context, where principals must simultaneously mediate between government policy mandates, parental expectations, community pressures, and teacher welfare concerns, often under severely resource-constrained conditions, the capacity to manage conflict constructively is not a secondary consideration. It is, as the data confirm, a genuine contributor to leadership effectiveness.

Theoretically, this finding can be understood through the lens of what the literature describes as a "hygiene factor" in organizational dynamics. While skillful conflict management may not, by itself, elevate a school to exceptional performance, its absence creates conditions of distrust, resentment, and fragmentation that systematically undermine every other leadership initiative. A principal who allows conflicts to fester unresolved, or who addresses them through coercion and authoritarian dismissal, erodes the reciprocity equilibrium that Social Exchange dynamics require. Teachers who perceive their principal as either unwilling or unable to manage disputes fairly will withdraw their discretionary effort and emotional investment, precisely the contributions most critical to school effectiveness.

5.5. Theoretical Synthesis: The Relational Architecture of School Leadership

The findings collectively illustrate the complementary functioning of the theoretical frameworks. EI Theory provides the intrapersonal mechanism (emotional awareness and regulation) that enables principals to enact Transformational Leadership behaviors (communication and inspiration), which in turn activate Social Exchange dynamics (trust and reciprocity) within the Ubuntu-informed cultural context. The 65.9% variance explained suggests that when these theories converge in practice when emotionally intelligent principals communicate visions clearly, collaborate authentically, and mediate conflicts fairly; they create the relational conditions necessary for school effectiveness, independent of infrastructural or material endowments.

5.6. Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

The hierarchical dominance of teamwork/collaboration over individualistic administrative skills carries profound implications for the Cameroon Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL). Current standards emphasizing pedagogic, administrative, and financial functions must be rebalanced to prioritize "interpersonal effectiveness" as a distinct domain requiring systematic cultivation. The finding that these competencies explain nearly two-thirds of leadership effectiveness variance suggests that teacher promotion policies based solely on seniority or subject expertise (Wirba, 2015) are insufficient. Instead, pre-service and in-service leadership curricula should foreground collaborative

governance, empathetic communication, and mediation skills, recognizing these as the "hard skills" of relational leadership.

Limitations

While the findings are robust, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference; the relationships identified are correlational and predictive rather than definitively causal. Additionally, reliance on teacher perceptions, while methodologically sound for assessing leader behavior, may introduce single-source bias. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs and multi-rater assessments (including student and parent perspectives) to triangulate these findings.

6. Conclusion

This study conclusively establishes that interpersonal competencies are not merely supplementary "soft skills," but fundamental, measurable drivers of leadership effectiveness among secondary school administrators in Cameroon. The finding that communication, conflict management, and teamwork collectively explain 65.9% of the variance in leadership effectiveness demonstrates that a principal's relational acumen is the primary mechanism for institutional success. Notably, teamwork and collaboration emerged as the most potent predictor, reinforcing the reality that effective school leadership in Cameroon is fundamentally a shared, communal endeavor deeply resonant with Ubuntu philosophies of interconnectedness. Consequently, the study concludes that in an educational landscape where formal administrative training is often lacking, a principal's capacity to communicate clearly, resolve conflicts fairly, and foster collaborative cultures serves as the most critical catalyst for teacher motivation, positive school climate, and overall educational achievement.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- For Educational Policymakers. The Cameroon Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL) should be revised to explicitly elevate interpersonal competencies particularly teamwork, communication, and conflict management from peripheral attributes to core, mandatory evaluation criteria for school principals. Furthermore, appointment criteria for school leadership should shift from relying solely on teaching seniority to including assessments of emotional intelligence and relational capabilities.
- For Teacher Training Institutions and Professional Development Programs: Pre-service and in-service training modules for school administrators must be restructured. Programs should move beyond traditional financial and administrative management to incorporate targeted, evidence-based training in emotional intelligence, collaborative decision-making, empathetic communication, and culturally responsive conflict mediation.
- For School Administrators (Principals and Vice Principals): Current administrators should proactively cultivate a culture of distributed leadership by establishing regular platforms for teacher participation in decision-making, maintaining transparent communication channels, and approaching conflicts as opportunities for collaborative problem-solving rather than disciplinary exercises.
- For Future Research: Future studies should employ longitudinal research designs to assess how interpersonal competency development impacts school effectiveness over time. Additionally, incorporating multi-rater feedback such as perspectives from students, parents, and community stakeholders would provide a more holistic understanding of leadership effectiveness across both Anglophone and Francophone subsystems in Cameroon.
- While the subordinate-rating approach was deliberately employed to mitigate well-documented self-rating inflation biases, future research would benefit from a multi-method triangulation strategy. Such an approach could integrate teacher perceptions with principal self-assessments and objective performance indicators.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author(s) declare that they have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest related to the conduct of this research or the publication of this manuscript.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Prior to data collection, respondents were provided with a clear overview of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. The online survey was designed with a mandatory consent button on the introductory page; participants had to explicitly affirm their voluntary agreement before proceeding to the questionnaire. Respondents were assured of their anonymity, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

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