

School Leadership in Times of Change: Analyzing Principals' Competencies in Implementing Vietnam's 2018 General Education Curriculum

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Abstract

Introduction: School principals are critical in leading educational change, yet research on their change management competencies in Vietnam remains limited. This study examines principals' abilities to implement the 2018 General Education Curriculum reform, identifying key competencies and challenges.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach was employed, surveying 240 principals from primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools across four Vietnamese regions. Data were collected using the Educational Change Implementation Questionnaire (ECIQ) and analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS.

Results: Principals exhibit strong awareness of external change drivers, such as policy mandates and socio-economic factors, but limited recognition of internal factors like innovation and technology integration. Strategic planning is underutilized, perceived mainly as time management rather than a transformative tool. While forecasting competencies are moderate, resource management and adaptive planning remain weak.

Discussion: The study highlights a reactive approach to change, with principals prioritizing policy compliance over internal reform. Gaps in strategic planning and leadership suggest a need for targeted professional development in change management and resource allocation. Addressing these deficiencies is vital for effective reform implementation.

Conclusion: Strengthening leadership training programs is essential to equip principals with skills for sustainable educational reform. Enhancing their change management competencies through structured professional development can improve long-term curriculum reform success.

Keywords: school leadership, change management, educational reform, principal competencies, strategic planning

1. Introduction

1.1 Opening

Principals need more than administrative capacity and expertise as instructional leaders; they require the ability to redesign schools and manage change effectively (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). According to Duong et al. (2021), research on developing school leadership competencies, particularly in the context of fundamental and comprehensive education reform in Vietnam, remains limited. Enhancing school principals' change management competencies is crucial for ensuring successful educational reforms and fostering sustainable institutional development. There is widespread recognition that the effectiveness of schools significantly depends on the leadership of school principals in managing change (Bush, 2007). Additionally, prioritizing the continuous development of principal change leadership is essential for effective change management (Tai et al., 2017).

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 International Studies on Leadership and Leadership Competencies

Tai et al. (2017) examined various aspects of leadership, including leadership styles, core qualities, and essential skills required for effective leadership. Their study, which focused on high school principals, explored the relationship between principals' change leadership competencies and teachers' attitudes toward change. The findings demonstrated that a principal's ability to lead change directly influences teachers' willingness to adopt educational reforms. Acton (2020) further emphasized that school principals play a central role as change agents in educational reform. However, many principals lack adequate training to effectively lead organizational change, which can hinder the success of reform initiatives.

Similarly, Sanders and Harvey (2002) conducted a case study examining the leadership of a school principal and its role in fostering strong school-community collaboration. Their findings emphasized that effective principal leadership enhances a school's reputation, supports teacher performance, and contributes to student success. According to Sanders and Harvey (2002), a principal's proactive approach in maintaining an academically rigorous and supportive learning environment plays a crucial role in shaping the school's image and reputation.

Building on this foundation, Papin (1995) asserted that next-generation managers must develop key competencies to adapt to dynamic environments. These competencies include the ability to react quickly, make prompt decisions, and encourage colleagues to think and respond efficiently. Additionally, the ability to plan and forecast, requiring intellectual curiosity, effective information exchange, sensitivity, and intuition, was highlighted as crucial. The ability to manage short-, medium-, and long-term tasks simultaneously was also emphasized, necessitating the capacity to detach from daily operations, set priorities, and strategically plan multiple steps ahead.

Furthermore, research on leadership competencies extends to the realm of managing change. The book *Leading Change: A Handbook for School Reform* (Wagner et al., 2011) identifies several key competencies for change leadership. These include the ability to create and convey a clear vision, analyze and assess institutional capacity, design and implement professional development programs, evaluate change processes, cultivate a positive culture of change, and communicate effectively. These findings align with the work of Auren Uris, who emphasized essential leadership attributes such as problem-solving, understanding personnel, flexibility, communication, and the strategic use of authority (Uris, 1995).

1.2.2 Studies on Leadership Competencies in Vietnam

Nguyen (2005) conducted an institute-level study on the theoretical foundations of high school principals' leadership, analyzing essential competencies in school management and proposing a framework for leadership development. Similarly, Dang (2011) examined leadership competencies in small and medium-sized organizations in Vietnam, contributing valuable insights into the broader leadership landscape.

Additionally, Vietnamese research has explored the nature of management competencies required for educational leaders. Russian psychologist A.I. Kitop (1985) defined management competencies in terms of diagnostic, creative, and organizational capacities. These competencies align with contemporary research, which identifies decision-making, organizational execution, and control as core elements of educational leadership (Nguyen, 2017). In a related study, Tran (2016) emphasized the dynamic nature of educational leadership, highlighting the need for adaptive strategies to manage institutional change effectively.

Notably, research by Đặng Xuân Hải (2005, 2015) explored educational change management in Vietnam, outlining six critical questions that educational leaders must address when implementing change: (1) identifying necessary changes, (2) assessing the current organizational state, (3) determining the gap between present and future conditions, (4) evaluating readiness and resistance, (5) defining leadership objectives and feasibility, and (6) ensuring alignment with organizational goals. These findings reinforce the need for structured professional development programs that enhance the capacity of Vietnamese principals to lead educational reforms effectively.

1.3 Research Gap

The existing literature highlights the crucial role of school principals in managing educational change, yet it reveals significant gaps in research on their change management competencies, particularly in the context of Vietnam's 2018 General Education Program reform. While studies such as those by Tai et al. (2017) and Acton (2020) emphasize the importance of developing change leadership competencies, there is limited research on how Vietnamese principals acquire and apply these skills in practice. Furthermore, prior research (e.g., Duong et al., 2021) has primarily focused on general managerial competencies rather than the specific abilities required for leading systemic educational reforms. Additionally, studies in Vietnam, including those by Nguyen (2017) and Tran et al. (2021), recognize the necessity of leadership training but lack an in-depth analysis of structured professional development programs for change management. This study addresses these gaps by evaluating school principals' change management

competencies in response to educational reform demands and identifying strategies to enhance their leadership effectiveness.

1.4 Objectives & Research Questions

This study aims to assess the current state of change management competency among school principals in response to the 2018 General Education Curriculum reform in Vietnam. Specifically, it seeks to examine principals' ability to identify internal and external drivers of change, their capacity to formulate and implement strategic plans for educational transformation, and the barriers they encounter in executing reforms. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and in-depth interviews, to provide empirical insights into the challenges and opportunities for enhancing leadership effectiveness in educational innovation.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to both theoretical and practical knowledge by providing empirical insights into the change management competencies of school principals in the context of Vietnam's 2018 General Education Curriculum reform. By integrating international best practices and local research findings, the study offers a framework for developing effective change leadership programs tailored to the Vietnamese educational landscape.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

This study surveyed 240 school principals from primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools in Vietnam. The participants were recruited from four regions: Hanoi, Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City, and Lam Dong. Data collection was conducted between January 2022 and December 2023 using a convenience sampling method. The inclusion of participants from different educational levels and geographical locations aimed to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

2.2 Measurements

The Educational Change Implementation Questionnaire (ECIQ) was developed to assess the factors influencing change implementation in schools under the General Education Program 2018. The questionnaire consists of 30 items designed to assess various factors influencing change in schools, including internal and external drivers, self-perception of change planning, fundamental components of change implementation, and competencies in change planning. The questionnaire consists of five sub-scales corresponding to key dimensions of change implementation: (1) Internal Drivers of Change (e.g., educational process innovation, technology integration, and quality assurance), (2) External Drivers of Change (e.g., policy influence, economic-social demands, and globalization factors), (3) Perceived Importance of Change Planning (e.g., proactive management, staff motivation, and evaluation criteria), (4) Key Components of Change Planning (e.g., objectives, tasks, stakeholders, timeline, and resource allocation), and (5) Competencies for Change Implementation (e.g., contextual analysis, forecasting, and strategic planning). Items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). The reliability of this scale has been empirically validated among Vietnamese educational administrators and stakeholders.

2.3 Procedure

Participants were recruited through in-person solicitation. Prior to participation, they were provided with an informed consent form outlining the study's objectives, procedures, confidentiality measures, and voluntary nature. Only those who provided consent proceeded with the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was administered via paper-based format. Participants were instructed to complete the survey independently, ensuring that responses reflected their genuine perspectives without external influence. The estimated time for completion was 20-25 minutes.

This study adhered to ethical guidelines set forth by the Ethics Committee of Hanoi National University of Education, under the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, and received approval under protocol number B2022-SPH-10.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistic including mean, standard deviation. To ensure data quality, responses with incomplete or inconsistent answers were identified and excluded from the final analysis. Participants were assured of their anonymity and that their data would be used solely for research purposes. Upon completion, the collected data were securely stored and later analyzed using SPSS for Windows 22.0.

3. Results

Table 1. Current Identification of Internal Factors Driving Change in Schools According to the General Education Program 2018

No.	Identified Content	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Innovation in educational process components (objectives, content, methods, forms, and assessment)	2.28	0.56
2	Enhancing education quality, linking teaching with innovation in educational components according to the General Education Program 2018	4.71	0.7
3	Integration of information technology in teaching, education, and management	2.33	0.59
4	Innovation in management approaches towards autonomy and accountability	2.32	0.65
5	Implementation of quality assurance and accreditation in teaching and education	2.31	0.5
6	Implementation of innovation policies in the education process	2.32	0.53
7	Inadequacies in teaching and education activities compared to new requirements	2.87	0.6

The survey results presented in Table 1 reveal that school principals exhibit varying levels of recognition regarding internal factors that drive change in schools under the requirements of the 2018 General Education Curriculum (GEC). The findings suggest that most internal change-driving factors are perceived at a relatively low level, with means clustering around the lower end of the Likert scale. The exception is the recognition of "Enhancing the quality of education and teaching in alignment with the renewal of educational components according to the requirements of the 2018 GEC," which received a notably high mean ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.70$). This suggests that principals acknowledge the necessity of improving education quality as a crucial internal factor in implementing change.

Conversely, other aspects such as "Innovation in educational process components" ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.56$), "Integration of information technology in teaching, education, and management" ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 0.59$), and "Implementing a quality assurance and accreditation process" ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.50$) received relatively low scores. This indicates that school principals may not fully recognize these elements as internal drivers of change or may perceive difficulties in implementing them. The standard deviation values suggest moderate dispersion, indicating some variability in responses.

The data suggest that school leaders may adopt a passive stance in driving internal school changes unless there is a direct and immediate need for adaptation. This limited recognition of internal change-driving factors may result from challenges such as a lack of collaboration with colleagues, inadequate infrastructure for practical implementation, and pressure associated with executing curriculum changes. These barriers highlight the need for increased support, training, and resource allocation to strengthen internal change management capacities.

Table 2 presents findings on school principals' recognition of external factors driving educational change in Vietnam's primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools, as outlined in the 2018 General Education Program (GEC). The data show that all external factors identified by respondents received high means, indicating a strong awareness among principals of the external pressures shaping educational transformation.

The highest mean was recorded for "Vietnam's education policies for new-stage development linked to standardization, modernization, socialization, diversification, and integration" ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.61$), suggesting that principals recognize the importance of national policies in guiding educational reform. Other factors related to governmental influence, such as "Educational development requirements" ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.80$) and "State policies on educational development" ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.79$), also garnered high ratings, reflecting the prominent role of top-down policies in driving change at the school level.

Additionally, factors related to broader societal and economic demands, such as "Economic and social development requirements" ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.67$) and "International integration requirements" ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.72$), underscore that principals are highly attuned to the external environment, including economic and global trends, which

necessitate educational reforms.

Table 2. Current Identification of External Factors Driving Change in Schools According to the General Education Program 2018

No.	Identified Content	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Change management mechanisms	4.02	0.7
2	Economic and social development requirements	4.06	0.67
3	International integration requirements	4.05	0.72
4	Educational development requirements	4.13	0.8
5	State policies on educational development	4.11	0.79
6	Strengthening standardization, modernization, socialization, and diversification for integration with multi-sector investment	4.09	0.67
7	Financial management requirements linked to educational efficiency	4.09	0.56
8	Vietnam's education policies for new-stage development linked to standardization, modernization, socialization, diversification, and integration	4.19	0.61

However, while these external factors are crucial, the findings suggest a possible overemphasis on reactive responses to external drivers, rather than proactive, internally driven initiatives. This could indicate a gap in school leadership capacity to initiate change from within. To address this, it may be beneficial to design professional development programs that enhance principals' abilities to lead change internally, fostering a more balanced approach to school transformation that combines both external and internal factors.

Table 3. Self-Perception Survey Results of School Principals on the Significance of Change Planning

No.	Significance	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Helps individuals proactively manage time for organization, administration, and other activities	2.98	0.78
2	Provides direction to motivate staff to implement changes in teaching and education	2.38	0.53
3	Helps staff establish a foundation for effectively implementing changes in teaching and education	2.27	0.91
4	Serves as a basis for evaluating and self-assessing the change implementation process in teaching and education	1.95	0.22

Table 3 presents the self-perceptions of school principals regarding the significance of planning for change implementation in response to the 2018 General Education Curriculum (GEC) in Vietnam. The results show that principals generally have a low level of recognition about the importance of planning, with an overall mean of 2.39 on a five-point Likert scale. This indicates that many principals may not fully recognize the role of strategic planning in facilitating educational change.

Among the specific aspects evaluated, the highest-rated item was "Helps individuals proactively manage time for organization, administration, and other activities" ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.78$), reflecting that principals see planning primarily as a tool for personal time management. The item "Provides direction to motivate staff to implement changes in teaching and education" ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 0.53$) was also rated slightly above the overall mean, suggesting that some principals understand planning's role in fostering staff motivation. However, these scores are still relatively low, indicating a lack of widespread recognition of the broader benefits of planning.

Conversely, the lowest-rated items were "Helps staff establish a foundation for effectively implementing changes in teaching and education" ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.91$) and "Serves as a basis for evaluating and self-assessing the change implementation process in teaching and education" ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 0.22$). The particularly low mean for the evaluation aspect suggests that principals may not view planning as an essential tool for monitoring or assessing the success of educational changes. The high standard deviation ($SD = 0.91$) for the item related to staff implementation

indicates a wide variation in responses, signaling differing levels of understanding or experience among principals.

The findings highlight a limited perception of the role of planning in educational change. This suggests a need for further professional development to help principals better understand how planning can support effective implementation, staff motivation, and evaluation of educational reforms under the 2018 GEC.

Table 4. Awareness of Fundamental Components in Change Implementation Planning According to the General Education Program

No.	Plan Components	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Objectives of implementing change	2.43	0.95
2	Necessary tasks for change implementation	2.42	0.45
3	Implementing entities and participants	2.84	0.49
4	Alternative implementation plans for change	2.98	0.48
5	Expected outcomes of change implementation	2.51	0.34
6	Timeline for change implementation	2.81	0.69
7	Conditions and resources for implementation	2.4	0.56
8	Necessary adjustments to the change implementation plan	2.4	1.03

Table 4 presents the perceptions of school principals regarding the essential components of planning for change implementation in response to the 2018 General Education Curriculum (GEC). The overall mean ($M = 2.60$) indicates a moderate level of awareness among principals regarding the key elements of a change implementation plan. However, there is noticeable variation in their recognition of specific components.

Among the components assessed, "Alternative implementation plans for change" received the highest mean ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.48$), suggesting that principals feel most confident in understanding different approaches to implementing changes. This is followed by "Implementing entities and participants" ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.49$) and "Timeline for change implementation" ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.69$), which were also rated relatively higher, reflecting that principals recognize the importance of clearly defining responsibilities and establishing timelines in the change process.

Conversely, the lowest-rated aspects were "Conditions and resources for implementation" ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.56$) and "Necessary adjustments to the change implementation plan" ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.03$). These findings suggest that principals may face challenges in identifying the specific resources and conditions required to support effective change. The high standard deviation for "Necessary adjustments to the change implementation plan" further indicates considerable variability in responses, implying differing levels of experience or confidence in adapting plans based on evolving needs.

The findings highlight a gap between the awareness of the theoretical components of change planning and the practical challenges of implementing those plans effectively. A principal's comment about the difficulties in managing changes due to uncertainties in resources and conditions supports these results.

Overall, the data suggests that while principals are somewhat aware of the core components of change planning, there is a need for further professional development and support, especially in areas like resource allocation and plan adaptability. Addressing these gaps could enhance their ability to manage change more effectively, aligning school operations with the evolving demands of the 2018 GEC.

Table 5. Assessment of Competencies in Planning Change Implementation According to the General Education Program

No.	Competencies	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Ability to analyze context and resources	3.13	0.95
2	Ability to forecast changes when implementing change	3.4	0.45
3	Ability to identify alternative plans for change implementation	2.84	0.49

Table 5 presents the assessment of school principals' competency levels in planning for change implementation in response to the 2018 General Education Curriculum (GEC). The results show that principals' competencies in this

area are rated at a moderate level, with means ranging from 2.84 to 3.40. This indicates that while school principals generally possess the ability to plan for change, their competencies are not yet fully developed or consistent across all aspects.

Among the specific competencies evaluated, "Ability to forecast changes when implementing change" received the highest mean ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.45$), suggesting that principals have a relatively strong ability to anticipate the potential consequences of changes. This indicates a level of proactivity in considering how educational reforms will affect their schools. However, despite being the highest-rated competency, this score still falls within the "moderate" category, indicating room for further development.

The "Ability to analyze context and resources" received a mean of 3.13 ($SD = 0.95$), reflecting a moderate ability to assess the conditions and resources needed for successful change implementation. The relatively high standard deviation suggests that there is some variation in principals' responses, implying differing levels of expertise and experience in this area.

The lowest-rated competency was "Ability to identify alternative plans for change implementation" ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.49$), indicating that principals may find it challenging to select or design effective strategies for change execution. This aligns with previous findings that suggest while school leaders recognize the necessity of change, they may struggle with the specific skills needed to develop structured and effective implementation plans.

Overall, the findings suggest that while school principals have a reasonable understanding of planning for change, there is a need for further professional development to enhance their competencies, particularly in identifying and structuring effective methods for change implementation. The lack of significant discrepancies between competencies ($P < 0.05$) suggests a generally consistent, though moderate, competency level across different aspects of planning. Targeted training and strategic support aimed at strengthening these competencies may enhance principals' effectiveness in leading educational transformations under the 2018 GEC.

4. Discussion

The primary finding of this study highlights that school principals exhibit a limited recognition of internal factors driving educational change under the 2018 General Education Curriculum (GEC) reform. While improving education quality is acknowledged as a key internal driver, other crucial aspects such as innovation, technology integration, and quality assurance receive significantly less attention. This finding supports previous research indicating that school leaders often focus on immediate instructional concerns rather than broader systemic improvements (Nguyen, 2005; Tran, 2016). The lack of emphasis on internal change factors suggests that principals may adopt a reactive approach to reform, responding to external mandates rather than proactively driving transformation from within (Đặng, 2015). Moreover, the challenges of limited collaboration, infrastructure constraints, and reform pressures further hinder the ability of school leaders to initiate internal change (Duong et al., 2021). To address this gap, professional development programs should emphasize leadership training that enhances principals' capacity for internal strategic planning and innovation (Wagner et al., 2011). Future research should explore strategies to strengthen school principals' proactive leadership in fostering sustainable educational transformation.

The second main finding of this study highlights that school principals demonstrate a strong awareness of external factors driving educational change under the 2018 General Education Curriculum (GEC) reform. This aligns with research emphasizing that policy-driven reforms significantly shape leadership practices in centralized education systems (Nguyen, 2017; Tran, 2016). However, the reliance on external mandates suggests that principals may adopt a reactive approach to change rather than proactively initiating reforms within their schools (Đặng, 2015; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Effective leadership requires balancing external policy compliance with internal strategic planning to foster sustainable school improvement (Dang, 2011). The limited focus on internal initiatives highlights a gap in leadership competencies, which may hinder long-term institutional adaptation (Tai et al., 2017). To address this, professional development programs should equip principals with the skills needed to integrate external influences with internally driven innovation. Future research should explore strategies for strengthening proactive leadership among school principals to enhance institutional autonomy and long-term reform success.

The third main finding of this study highlights that school principals have a limited recognition of the significance of strategic planning in implementing the 2018 General Education Curriculum (GEC) reform. While some principals acknowledge its role in managing administrative tasks, they underestimate its broader function in guiding and sustaining educational change. This aligns with Papin's (1995) argument that effective leaders must develop planning and forecasting abilities to navigate complex reforms successfully. The lack of emphasis on planning as a tool for

evaluating and assessing change suggests a gap in strategic leadership competencies among principals (Nguyen, 2005; Tran, 2016). Without a structured approach to planning, school leaders may struggle to align institutional goals with broader reform initiatives (Đặng, 2015). To address this challenge, professional development programs should equip principals with essential planning skills to enhance long-term school improvement (Wagner et al., 2011). Future research should examine how strengthening planning competencies can empower school leaders to proactively manage educational transformation.

The fourth main finding of this study highlights that while school principals demonstrate moderate awareness of the key components of change planning, they struggle with resource allocation and plan adaptability. This aligns with research suggesting that strategic planning must be accompanied by the ability to adjust implementation based on changing conditions (Kotter, 1996; Nguyen, 2017). The low recognition of resource planning indicates a gap between theoretical understanding and practical application, which can hinder effective change management (Đặng, 2015). Additionally, the variability in responses regarding plan adaptability suggests differing levels of confidence in adjusting strategies to meet emerging challenges (Papin, 1995). As adaptive leadership is crucial for managing educational reforms, targeted training programs should focus on enhancing principals' ability to assess resources and modify plans accordingly (Wagner et al., 2011). Addressing these gaps could improve school leaders' capacity to implement change successfully while aligning with the evolving demands of the 2018 General Education Curriculum.

The fifth main finding of this study highlights that while school principals demonstrate a moderate level of competency in planning for change, there are inconsistencies across different aspects of this skill set. This aligns with previous research suggesting that effective school leadership requires not only forecasting and contextual analysis but also the ability to design alternative implementation strategies (Nguyen, 2005; Tran, 2016). The lower competency levels in identifying alternative plans indicate that while principals can anticipate change, they may lack the strategic flexibility needed to navigate complex reform processes (Fullan, 2007). Additionally, the variability in principals' ability to assess context and resources suggests disparities in leadership experience and training, a concern emphasized in studies on leadership development (Đặng, 2015). As strategic adaptability is crucial for effective change implementation, targeted professional development should focus on enhancing principals' capacity to evaluate multiple pathways for reform execution (Kotter, 1996). Strengthening these competencies could enable school leaders to implement change more effectively and align school operations with the evolving demands of the 2018 General Education Curriculum.

5. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the convenience sampling method may limit the generalizability of findings, as the sample may not fully represent the broader population of school principals in Vietnam. Future research should use random or stratified sampling for a more representative sample. Second, self-reported data from the Educational Change Implementation Questionnaire (ECIQ) may be subject to social desirability bias, and incorporating qualitative methods like interviews or focus groups could provide deeper insights. Third, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships. Longitudinal studies could offer more comprehensive understanding. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable evidence on school principals' competencies in planning for change under the 2018 General Education Curriculum (GEC).

6. Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for educational leadership, policy-making, and professional development in Vietnam's school system. Principals' limited recognition of internal factors, such as innovation and technology integration, suggests a need for targeted professional development programs focused on fostering internal school improvements. While principals are aware of external factors, such as government policies and socio-economic shifts, this external awareness may lead to a reactive approach, emphasizing the need for greater autonomy in school leadership (Duong et al., 2021). The study also reveals a low recognition of strategic planning for change implementation, which limits principals' ability to evaluate and adjust reform efforts, highlighting the need for training programs focused on planning as an evaluative tool. Furthermore, gaps in resource management and plan adaptability underline the importance of capacity-building programs in real-world problem-solving and contingency planning. Establishing professional learning communities and case-based training models would be beneficial for strengthening principals' competencies in strategic planning and leadership (Tai et al., 2017). These

findings point to the necessity for systemic reforms in leadership training to prepare school principals for the effective implementation of the 2018 General Education Curriculum (GEC).

7. Conclusion

This study underscores the pressing need to enhance school principals' competencies in managing educational change under the 2018 General Education Curriculum (GEC) reform. The findings indicate that while principals are aware of external influences such as policy mandates and socio-economic developments, they often adopt a reactive stance, prioritizing compliance over proactive leadership. Additionally, there is a notable gap in recognizing and leveraging internal change drivers, including innovation, technology integration, and quality assurance, which are essential for fostering sustainable institutional development. The study also highlights principals' limited understanding of strategic planning, particularly in resource allocation, adaptability, and long-term visioning, which are critical for managing change effectively. These gaps suggest an urgent need for professional development programs that emphasize adaptive leadership, strategic decision-making, and capacity building in change management. Targeted training initiatives should focus on equipping school principals with the skills necessary to integrate both internal and external factors into a cohesive and sustainable reform strategy. Moving forward, systemic improvements in leadership training are essential to empower school principals with the competencies required to drive meaningful and lasting educational transformation.

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Authors contributions

DVD and NTBL were responsible for study design and revising. NTBL, LTYN, DVD, and NTNL was responsible for data collection. DVD and NTBL drafted the manuscript and LTYN va NTNL revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Competing interests

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Obtained.

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Transparency

The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

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No additional data are available.

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