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DOES PRINCIPAL GENDER MATTER? ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT EFFECTIVENESS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SOUTH WEST CAMEROON

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Abstract

Gender disparities in educational leadership continue to generate scholarly debate regarding whether the gender of school principals influences administrative effectiveness. While women have increasingly assumed leadership positions in schools, perceptions concerning gender differences in administrative competence remain contested, particularly within Sub-Saharan African educational systems. This study examined whether principal gender influences administrative and financial management effectiveness in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon. Specifically, the study investigated the relationship between principal gender and administrative management, and between principal gender and financial management. A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted, combining quantitative data obtained through structured questionnaires administered to teachers with qualitative data gathered from principals through interviews. The study was conducted in secondary schools in Fako Division, South West Region of Cameroon, involving teachers and principals selected through probability sampling techniques. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Chi-square tests of independence, while qualitative data were analysed thematically to complement and explain the quantitative findings. The findings revealed that principal gender was significantly associated with both administrative and financial management effectiveness. Although both male and female principals demonstrated competence in school administration, female principals were perceived to exhibit comparatively stronger financial management practices characterised by accountability, transparency, and prudent utilisation of school resources. Administrative management effectiveness, however, reflected more similarities than differences between male and female principals, suggesting that leadership competence is influenced more by professional capability than by gender alone. The study concludes that effective school administration should be promoted through merit-based leadership selection, continuous professional development, and equitable leadership opportunities irrespective of gender. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions on gender and educational leadership within developing-country contexts and provide evidence to inform leadership development and policy reforms in secondary education.

Keywords:

Principal gender, educational leadership, administrative management, financial management, school effectiveness, secondary education, Cameroon.

Introduction

School leadership remains one of the most influential determinants of educational quality because principals shape the administrative, instructional, financial, and organisational conditions under which teaching and learning occur. Increasing evidence suggests that effective school leadership contributes significantly to teacher motivation, efficient resource management, positive school climate, and improved student outcomes (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). Consequently, educational reforms across the world have increasingly emphasised strengthening school leadership as a strategic approach to improving educational systems. While considerable attention has been devoted to leadership preparation, accountability, and instructional effectiveness, one issue that continues to attract scholarly and policy interest is whether the gender of school leaders influences their effectiveness in managing educational institutions.

The relationship between gender and leadership has long been the subject of scholarly debate across organisational, political, and educational settings. Earlier perspectives frequently portrayed leadership as a predominantly masculine domain, associating effective leadership with traits such as authority, assertiveness, and decisiveness. Contemporary leadership scholarship, however, increasingly challenges these assumptions by arguing that leadership effectiveness depends more on professional competence, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and contextual responsiveness than on biological sex (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Northouse, 2022). Nevertheless, questions concerning whether male and female school leaders differ in their management practices continue to generate mixed empirical findings, particularly within educational institutions where leadership responsibilities encompass diverse administrative and financial functions.

Within the education sector, school principals occupy a pivotal position because they are responsible for translating educational policies into effective institutional practices. Beyond instructional leadership, principals oversee personnel administration, coordinate school operations, manage financial resources, maintain accountability, promote stakeholder collaboration, and create environments conducive to teaching and learning. Their effectiveness in these responsibilities directly influences institutional performance and educational outcomes. According to UNESCO (2024), strengthening school leadership is among the most effective policy interventions for improving educational quality because principals influence nearly every aspect of school functioning.

Among the numerous responsibilities entrusted to school principals, administrative and financial management constitute two of the most critical dimensions of effective school leadership. Administrative management involves organising school operations, coordinating personnel, supervising instructional activities, maintaining discipline, implementing educational policies, managing records, and fostering productive relationships among members of the school community (Fayol, 1949; Northouse, 2022). Financial management, on the other hand, encompasses planning, budgeting, allocating, monitoring, accounting for, and safeguarding school resources to ensure transparency, efficiency, and accountability in the utilisation of public funds. Together, these two dimensions significantly influence organisational effectiveness because efficient administration and prudent financial management create conditions necessary for achieving educational goals.

Although considerable progress has been made in promoting gender equality within educational leadership, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions in many countries despite constituting a substantial proportion of the teaching workforce (UNESCO, 2024). Persistent gender stereotypes, cultural expectations, organisational barriers, and unequal access to leadership opportunities continue to shape perceptions regarding the suitability of men and women for school leadership positions. These realities have stimulated increasing scholarly interest in examining whether leadership effectiveness differs according to principals' gender or whether observed differences reflect broader organisational and contextual factors rather than gender itself.

Empirical evidence concerning the relationship between principal gender and school management effectiveness remains inconclusive. Several studies have reported minimal or no significant differences between male and female principals in administrative effectiveness, arguing that leadership competence is primarily determined by professional preparation, experience, organisational support, and leadership style rather than gender (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hallinger, 2022). Conversely, other investigations suggest that female principals often demonstrate stronger collaborative leadership, participatory decision-making, financial accountability, and interpersonal communication, whereas male principals are sometimes perceived to exhibit greater authority in administrative decision-making. These contrasting findings indicate that the influence of principal gender on school management remains context-dependent and warrants further investigation across diverse educational settings.

Within Sub-Saharan Africa, the question of gender and educational leadership assumes additional significance because educational institutions operate within sociocultural environments where traditional gender norms continue to influence leadership expectations. While increasing numbers of women have assumed leadership positions within schools, empirical studies from African contexts continue to report inconsistent findings regarding gender differences in leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, much of the available literature focuses on instructional leadership or general school effectiveness, with comparatively limited attention devoted specifically to administrative and financial management.

The Cameroonian education system has similarly experienced gradual progress in promoting gender inclusion within educational leadership. Government policies emphasising equal opportunity have facilitated increased appointment of female principals, particularly within secondary education. Nevertheless, public perceptions concerning male and female leadership effectiveness remain divided, and relatively limited empirical evidence exists regarding whether principal gender influences administrative and financial management within secondary schools. This gap is particularly evident in the South West Region, where school leaders continue to operate under the additional pressures associated with prolonged socio-political instability, resource constraints, and increasing demands for accountability and institutional resilience.

Against this background, the present study examines whether principal gender influences administrative and financial management effectiveness in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon. By focusing specifically on these two dimensions of school management, the study contributes to the broader discourse on gender and educational leadership while providing context-specific evidence capable of informing leadership appointment, professional development, and educational policy. Rather than assuming that leadership effectiveness is inherently determined by gender, the study seeks to establish whether measurable differences exist within the Cameroonian secondary school context and to contribute empirical evidence to an area where existing findings remain inconsistent.

Background to the Study

Educational leadership has undergone significant transformation over the past century, evolving from a predominantly bureaucratic function concerned with maintaining order and enforcing regulations to a dynamic process centred on organisational effectiveness, instructional improvement, and strategic resource management. Contemporary educational systems increasingly recognise school principals not merely as administrators but as leaders responsible for creating environments that promote effective teaching, learning, accountability, and institutional development (Hallinger, 2022; UNESCO, 2024). As schools have become more complex organisations operating within rapidly changing social, political, and economic environments, expectations regarding principals' competencies have expanded to include effective administrative coordination, prudent financial management, stakeholder engagement, and transformational leadership.

Historically, leadership positions within educational institutions, as in many other sectors, were largely occupied by men. This pattern reflected broader societal norms that associated leadership with masculine attributes such as authority, control, and decisiveness while limiting women's access to senior management positions. During much of the twentieth century, women constituted a substantial proportion of the teaching profession but remained significantly underrepresented in school leadership despite possessing comparable professional qualifications (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Over the past few decades, however, international commitments to gender equality, educational reform, and inclusive governance have progressively challenged these traditional assumptions, resulting in increased participation of women in educational leadership across many countries.

The growing representation of women in school leadership has stimulated extensive scholarly debate concerning the relationship between gender and leadership effectiveness. Earlier research often attempted to identify inherent differences between male and female leadership styles. More recent scholarship, however, suggests that effective leadership is better explained by professional competence, organisational context, leadership preparation, and experience than by gender alone (Northouse, 2022). Nevertheless, some studies continue to report differences in leadership practices, indicating that female leaders are often more collaborative, participatory, and relationship-oriented, whereas male leaders are sometimes perceived as more directive and hierarchical. These contrasting perspectives have sustained academic interest in examining whether gender influences specific dimensions of school management rather than leadership effectiveness in general.

Administrative management represents one of the principal responsibilities of school leadership. It involves planning, organising, coordinating, supervising, communicating, and evaluating the activities necessary for achieving institutional objectives. Within secondary schools, effective administrative management encompasses staff supervision, implementation of educational policies, maintenance of school discipline, management of records, coordination of instructional programmes, and promotion of positive relationships among teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders (Fayol, 1949; Glickman et al., 2018). Effective administration therefore provides the organisational structure within which teaching and learning can flourish.

Closely related to administrative management is financial management, which has become increasingly important as educational institutions face growing demands for accountability and efficient utilisation of limited resources. Financial management refers to the processes through which school leaders plan budgets, allocate financial resources, monitor expenditures, maintain financial records, ensure compliance with regulations, and promote transparency in the use of public funds. Sound financial management enables schools to provide adequate instructional materials, maintain infrastructure, support staff development, and implement educational programmes effectively. Conversely, weak financial management may undermine institutional performance, reduce stakeholder confidence, and compromise educational quality (Bush, 2020).

Within the African context, educational leadership continues to operate within complex institutional and sociocultural environments. Although many countries have introduced policies promoting gender equality in public leadership, women's representation in senior educational management remains comparatively lower than that of men. In addition, leadership practices are frequently influenced by cultural perceptions regarding gender roles, organisational traditions, and historical patterns of leadership. Consequently, questions concerning whether male and female principals differ in administrative and financial management effectiveness remain particularly relevant within African educational systems, where empirical evidence remains limited and sometimes contradictory.

In Cameroon, educational administration has experienced significant reforms aimed at strengthening school governance, improving accountability, and enhancing educational quality. The appointment of principals is based primarily on professional qualifications, administrative experience, and government policy rather than gender. Consequently, both male and female principals increasingly occupy leadership positions within secondary schools. Despite these developments, public discourse and professional opinion continue to express differing views regarding whether principal gender influences school management effectiveness. While some stakeholders argue that women demonstrate greater transparency, accountability, and interpersonal sensitivity in managing schools, others maintain that leadership effectiveness depends principally on professional competence rather than gender.

The South West Region provides a particularly important context for examining these issues. In addition to the routine administrative responsibilities associated with school leadership, principals in the region have been required to manage schools under conditions characterised by prolonged socio-political instability, periodic disruptions to schooling, resource constraints, and heightened expectations for institutional resilience. These circumstances place considerable demands on principals' administrative and financial management capabilities regardless of gender. Investigating whether principal gender influences these aspects of school management within such a context therefore contributes not only to the literature on educational leadership but also to evidence-informed educational policy and leadership development in Cameroon.

Against this background, the present study focuses specifically on administrative and financial management effectiveness among secondary school principals in the South West Region of

Cameroon. By concentrating on these two dimensions of school leadership, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence capable of informing leadership selection, professional development, and policy formulation while contributing to the broader international discourse on gender and educational leadership.

Statement of the Problem

Effective school leadership is widely recognised as a prerequisite for achieving educational quality because principals influence administrative coordination, resource management, staff motivation, institutional accountability, and the overall effectiveness of schools (Hallinger, 2022; UNESCO, 2024). Consequently, educational systems increasingly seek to appoint competent school leaders capable of ensuring efficient administrative and financial management regardless of the complexities confronting educational institutions. Ideally, principals should demonstrate comparable levels of professional competence because appointments are based on qualifications, experience, leadership capacity, and established administrative procedures rather than gender. However, despite these expectations, questions concerning whether male and female principals manage schools with equal effectiveness continue to generate considerable scholarly debate.

The debate surrounding gender and educational leadership has become increasingly important as women assume greater representation in school leadership positions across the world. While some studies report that female principals exhibit stronger collaborative leadership, greater financial accountability, and more participatory administrative practices, others conclude that no meaningful differences exist between male and female principals once professional qualifications, experience, and organisational context are considered (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Northouse, 2022). Conversely, a number of studies continue to suggest that male principals demonstrate stronger authority in administrative decision-making and institutional control. These inconsistent findings indicate that the relationship between principal gender and school management effectiveness remains inconclusive and may vary across educational, cultural, and organisational contexts.

Within Sub-Saharan Africa, empirical evidence remains comparatively limited and equally contradictory. Existing studies have often focused on leadership styles, instructional leadership, or general school effectiveness rather than examining specific dimensions of school management such as administrative and financial effectiveness. Moreover, relatively few studies have investigated these relationships within educational environments characterised by resource limitations, increasing accountability demands, and institutional instability. As a result, the extent to which principal gender influences administrative and financial management in many African education systems remains insufficiently understood.

The Cameroonian context presents an equally important knowledge gap. Although government policies have progressively expanded opportunities for women to occupy school leadership positions, public and professional opinions regarding the influence of principal gender on school management remain divided. Within the South West Region, these questions have become even more pertinent because principals continue to administer schools under conditions marked by prolonged socio-political instability, disrupted educational programmes, constrained financial resources, and heightened expectations for institutional accountability. Under such circumstances, effective administrative coordination and prudent financial management become essential for sustaining school operations. However, empirical evidence examining whether these aspects of school management vary according to principal gender within this context remains scarce.

Furthermore, most available Cameroonian studies on gender and school leadership have tended to examine school administration as a broad construct without isolating the specific dimensions of administrative management and financial management. Such an approach limits understanding of whether gender is associated with particular managerial responsibilities rather than overall leadership effectiveness. Addressing these dimensions separately is important because administrative management and financial management require different competencies and may be influenced by different organisational and contextual factors.

It is against this background that the present study investigates whether principal gender influences administrative and financial management effectiveness in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon. By focusing on these two dimensions of school management, the study seeks to contribute empirical evidence to an area characterised by inconsistent international findings, limited African scholarship, and insufficient context-specific research in Cameroon. The findings are expected to inform educational leadership policy, principal preparation, and leadership development by providing evidence on whether principal effectiveness should be understood primarily in relation to gender or professional competence.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study was to examine whether principal gender influences management effectiveness in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon.

Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Determine whether principal gender influences **administrative management effectiveness** in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon.
2. Determine whether principal gender influences **financial management effectiveness** in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon.

Literature Review

Principal Gender and Educational Leadership

Gender has become an increasingly important area of inquiry within educational leadership because of its implications for leadership access, management practices, and organisational effectiveness. Historically, educational leadership was dominated by men, reflecting broader societal beliefs that associated leadership with masculine characteristics such as authority, assertiveness, and control. Although women have traditionally constituted the majority of the teaching workforce in many countries, they have remained disproportionately underrepresented in senior educational leadership positions, giving rise to continuing scholarly interest in whether leadership effectiveness is influenced by gender or by other professional and organisational factors (Eagly & Carli, 2007; UNESCO, 2024).

Contemporary leadership scholarship distinguishes between **sex** and **gender**, concepts that are often used interchangeably but have different meanings. Sex refers to the biological characteristics that differentiate males and females, whereas gender encompasses the socially and culturally constructed roles, behaviours, and expectations associated with being male or female (Northouse, 2022). Within educational leadership, it is gender rather than biological sex that has attracted greater scholarly attention because leadership behaviours are shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by organisational culture, social expectations, and institutional opportunities. Consequently, discussions concerning principal gender increasingly focus on whether societal expectations influence leadership practices or whether observed differences reflect professional experiences and contextual factors rather than gender itself.

One of the central debates within educational leadership concerns whether men and women lead differently. Earlier leadership theories frequently portrayed effective leadership as masculine, emphasising hierarchical authority, decisiveness, and task orientation. However, more recent studies challenge this perspective by suggesting that effective leadership is multidimensional and cannot be adequately explained by gender alone. Eagly and Carli (2007) argue that while male and female leaders may exhibit differences in interpersonal approaches, these differences are generally small and are often outweighed by similarities arising from professional training, organisational expectations, and leadership responsibilities. Similarly, Northouse (2022) maintains that leadership effectiveness depends primarily on leaders' competencies, ethical conduct, communication skills, and ability to respond to organisational challenges rather than on whether they are male or female.

Nevertheless, empirical evidence remains inconclusive. Some studies suggest that female principals are more likely to adopt collaborative, participatory, and transformational leadership approaches characterised by shared decision-making, effective communication, and stronger interpersonal relationships. Such leadership practices have been associated with positive organisational climates, greater staff commitment, and increased accountability in school management (Hallinger, 2022). Conversely, other studies report no statistically significant differences between male and female principals regarding administrative effectiveness, arguing that professional preparation, leadership experience, institutional support, and school context exert greater influence on management effectiveness than gender. These contrasting findings indicate that the relationship between principal gender and leadership effectiveness remains context-specific rather than universal.

Within educational institutions, principals perform multiple leadership functions that extend beyond instructional supervision to include administrative coordination, financial management, human resource management, policy implementation, conflict resolution, and stakeholder engagement. These responsibilities require technical competence, strategic thinking, interpersonal skills, and sound professional judgement irrespective of gender. Consequently, increasing numbers of scholars advocate shifting the focus from determining whether one gender leads better than the other towards understanding how organisational conditions, leadership preparation, and professional competence shape principals' effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2020).

The debate is particularly relevant within Sub-Saharan Africa, where educational leadership continues to evolve alongside efforts to promote gender equality in public administration. Although women have made significant progress in accessing leadership positions, cultural expectations and traditional perceptions regarding gender roles continue to influence both leadership opportunities and public perceptions of leadership effectiveness. Existing African studies present mixed findings, with some reporting stronger collaborative leadership among female principals and others finding no meaningful gender differences after controlling for professional qualifications and experience. This suggests that contextual factors may play a more significant role than gender itself in shaping school leadership practices.

In Cameroon, national policies promoting equal employment opportunities have gradually increased women's participation in educational leadership. Nevertheless, male principals continue to outnumber female principals in many secondary schools, and perceptions regarding leadership effectiveness often remain influenced by societal assumptions rather than empirical evidence. Consequently, understanding whether principal gender influences school management requires objective empirical investigation rather than reliance on stereotypes or anecdotal observations. Such evidence is particularly important within the South West Region, where principals operate under challenging administrative conditions that demand effective leadership irrespective of gender.

For the purpose of this study, **principal gender** is conceptualised as the socially recognised classification of secondary school principals as male or female and examined in relation to whether this characteristic is associated with differences in administrative and financial management effectiveness. The study does not assume that one gender is inherently more effective than the other but rather investigates whether measurable differences exist within the specific context of secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon.

Administrative Management Effectiveness

Administrative management constitutes one of the most fundamental responsibilities of school leadership because it provides the organisational framework through which educational objectives are translated into practice. Within secondary schools, principals are expected to coordinate human and material resources, implement educational policies, supervise staff, maintain discipline, facilitate communication, resolve conflicts, and ensure that institutional activities are efficiently organised to promote teaching and learning. Consequently, administrative management extends beyond routine administrative duties to encompass strategic leadership aimed at enhancing organisational effectiveness and achieving educational goals (Bush, 2020; Glickman et al., 2018).

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises administrative management as a multidimensional construct rather than a collection of isolated managerial tasks. Effective administrative management involves planning, organising, coordinating, directing, supervising, monitoring, and evaluating school activities while simultaneously fostering collaboration, accountability, and institutional improvement (Hallinger, 2022). This perspective reflects a shift from traditional bureaucratic administration towards more participatory and developmental approaches that emphasise teamwork, shared decision-making, and continuous organisational learning. Under this view, principals are not merely administrators responsible for enforcing regulations but instructional leaders who create enabling environments in which teachers and students can achieve their full potential.

Among the various dimensions of administrative management, personnel management occupies a central position. Principals are responsible for allocating duties, supervising teachers, promoting professional development, monitoring staff performance, and fostering positive interpersonal relationships within the school community. Effective personnel management contributes to teacher motivation, organisational commitment, and improved instructional quality because teachers are more likely to perform effectively in environments characterised by supportive leadership, transparent communication, and mutual respect (Leithwood et al., 2020). Conversely, ineffective administrative practices often result in role ambiguity, conflict, low staff morale, and reduced organisational performance.

Decision-making also represents a critical aspect of administrative management. School leaders routinely make decisions concerning curriculum implementation, staffing, discipline, resource allocation, school improvement planning, and stakeholder engagement. Contemporary leadership literature suggests that effective administrative decision-making should be participatory, evidence-informed, and responsive to institutional needs rather than exclusively hierarchical (Northouse, 2022). Participatory administrative approaches not only improve the quality of decisions but also strengthen teachers' sense of ownership, collaboration, and commitment to institutional goals.

Communication further underpins effective administrative management by facilitating coordination among principals, teachers, students, parents, and educational authorities. Open and transparent communication promotes trust, reduces organisational conflict, enhances teamwork, and ensures that institutional policies are effectively implemented. Educational leaders who communicate clearly and consistently are generally better positioned to mobilise staff towards achieving shared institutional objectives than those relying predominantly on authoritarian administrative practices (Bush, 2020).

Although these dimensions collectively define administrative effectiveness, scholars remain divided regarding whether administrative management is influenced by the gender of school leaders. Some studies suggest that female principals are more likely to adopt collaborative administrative practices characterised by consultation, interpersonal sensitivity, and shared decision-making, while male principals are often perceived as more directive and authority-oriented (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Other investigations, however, report that administrative effectiveness is primarily determined by leadership preparation, professional experience, organisational support, and institutional context rather than gender (Hallinger, 2022). These contrasting perspectives suggest that administrative competence should be evaluated on the basis of managerial performance rather than assumptions associated with gender.

Within African educational systems, effective administrative management assumes particular importance because school leaders frequently operate under conditions characterised by limited financial resources, increasing enrolment, teacher shortages, and expanding accountability demands. Principals are therefore required to demonstrate strong organisational and interpersonal competencies capable of sustaining institutional effectiveness despite these constraints. In Cameroon, secondary school principals similarly perform diverse administrative responsibilities ranging from staff supervision and policy implementation to conflict resolution and community engagement. Their effectiveness in executing these responsibilities has direct implications for school climate, teacher performance, learner achievement, and overall institutional development.

For the purpose of this study, **administrative management effectiveness** is conceptualised as the extent to which principals successfully plan, organise, coordinate, supervise, communicate, make decisions, and manage human and institutional resources to achieve educational objectives efficiently and effectively. Within this operational framework, administrative effectiveness is evaluated not in terms of principals' gender alone but through their demonstrated capacity to perform essential managerial responsibilities within secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon.

Financial Management Effectiveness

Financial management has become an increasingly important dimension of educational leadership because the achievement of school goals depends not only on effective administration but also on the prudent acquisition, allocation, utilisation, and accountability of financial resources. In contemporary educational systems, school principals are entrusted with managing public funds, internally generated revenues, and other institutional resources in ways that support teaching, learning, infrastructure development, staff welfare, and overall school improvement. Consequently, financial management is no longer regarded as a purely accounting function but as a strategic leadership responsibility that directly influences institutional effectiveness and public confidence in school administration (Bush, 2020; UNESCO, 2024).

Contemporary scholars conceptualise financial management as a systematic process involving financial planning, budgeting, resource mobilisation, expenditure control, financial reporting, auditing, and accountability. Effective financial management ensures that available resources are allocated according to institutional priorities, utilised efficiently, monitored transparently, and accounted for in accordance with established regulations (Brigham & Ehrhardt, 2019). Within educational institutions, prudent financial management enables schools to procure instructional materials, maintain infrastructure, support co-curricular activities, facilitate staff development, and provide learners with environments conducive to quality education. Conversely, weak financial management may result in resource wastage, financial irregularities, inadequate service delivery, and declining stakeholder confidence.

Budgeting constitutes one of the principal components of financial management. School budgets provide a framework for estimating revenues, prioritising expenditures, and aligning financial resources with institutional objectives. Effective principals prepare realistic budgets, consult relevant stakeholders during budget formulation, and ensure that financial decisions reflect the educational priorities of the school. Contemporary educational leadership literature increasingly advocates participatory budgeting because it promotes transparency, strengthens institutional ownership, and enhances accountability in financial decision-making (Bush, 2020).

Equally important is financial accountability, which requires principals to maintain accurate financial records, comply with financial regulations, justify expenditures, and demonstrate responsible stewardship of public resources. Accountability has become particularly significant as governments and communities increasingly demand greater transparency in the management of educational institutions. Educational leaders who establish sound internal control mechanisms, maintain proper documentation, and encourage regular financial monitoring contribute to improved institutional credibility and stakeholder trust (OECD, 2023).

The increasing emphasis on accountability has stimulated scholarly interest in whether financial management practices differ according to principals' gender. Some studies suggest that female leaders are more likely to adopt cautious, transparent, and participatory approaches to financial management, characterised by careful budgeting, prudent expenditure, and stronger adherence to financial procedures. These findings are often attributed to collaborative leadership styles and heightened attention to accountability (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In contrast, other studies report no statistically significant relationship between principal gender and financial management effectiveness, arguing that competence in financial administration depends primarily on professional training, leadership experience, institutional policies, and financial management skills rather than gender itself (Hallinger, 2022). Such divergent findings indicate that financial management effectiveness should be examined empirically rather than inferred from gender stereotypes.

Within Sub-Saharan Africa, financial management remains one of the greatest challenges confronting school leaders because educational institutions frequently operate under conditions of limited funding, competing institutional priorities, and increasing accountability requirements. Principals are often expected to maximise scarce resources while simultaneously responding to expanding enrolment, infrastructure needs, and demands for improved educational quality. Under these circumstances, effective financial management requires not only technical competence but also integrity, transparency, and sound professional judgement.

The Cameroonian secondary education system reflects these broader challenges. School principals are responsible for preparing annual budgets, supervising revenue collection, authorising expenditures, maintaining financial records, and ensuring compliance with government financial regulations. They are also expected to account for school funds to educational authorities, school management committees, and other stakeholders. Given these responsibilities, financial management has become a critical indicator of leadership effectiveness because prudent resource utilisation directly influences institutional performance, teacher motivation, learner welfare, and public confidence in school administration.

Within the South West Region, effective financial management has assumed even greater significance because schools continue to operate under conditions characterised by economic uncertainty, infrastructural challenges, and disruptions associated with the socio-political crisis. These circumstances require principals to make strategic financial decisions that sustain school operations while ensuring accountability and transparency despite resource constraints. Whether male and female principals perform these responsibilities differently remains an empirical question requiring systematic investigation rather than reliance on assumptions or anecdotal evidence.

For the purpose of this study, **financial management effectiveness** is conceptualised as the extent to which secondary school principals effectively plan, budget, allocate, utilise, monitor, account for, and safeguard financial resources in accordance with institutional objectives and established financial regulations. Within this study, financial management effectiveness is examined in relation to principal gender to determine whether measurable differences exist in the management of school financial

Theoretical Framework

The present study is anchored on **Administrative Management Theory** and **Situational Leadership Theory**. These theories were selected because they provide complementary explanations of school leadership and management effectiveness. While Administrative Management Theory explains the managerial functions required for effective school administration, Situational Leadership Theory emphasises that leadership effectiveness depends on leaders' ability to respond appropriately to organisational circumstances rather than on personal characteristics such as gender. Together, the two theories provide an appropriate framework for examining whether principal gender influences administrative and financial management effectiveness in secondary schools.

Administrative Management Theory

Administrative Management Theory was developed by **Henri Fayol** in the early twentieth century and remains one of the most influential classical theories of management. Fayol (1949) argued that effective management depends on the proper execution of fundamental managerial functions rather than on the personal characteristics of managers. He identified planning, organising, commanding, coordinating, and controlling as the principal functions through which organisations achieve their objectives. Although originally developed within industrial organisations, the theory has been widely applied in educational administration because schools similarly require systematic planning, coordination, supervision, and resource management to function effectively.

Within educational institutions, Administrative Management Theory suggests that principals achieve organisational effectiveness by efficiently coordinating human, financial, and material resources in pursuit of educational goals. Administrative effectiveness therefore depends on principals' ability to organise school operations, allocate responsibilities, supervise staff, maintain effective communication, implement policies, resolve conflicts, and ensure accountability. Financial management equally falls within the administrative responsibilities identified by Fayol because effective planning, budgeting, coordination, and control are essential for prudent utilisation of institutional resources.

One of the major strengths of Administrative Management Theory is its emphasis on managerial competence rather than personal attributes. The theory assumes that effective administration results from the application of sound management principles that can be learned, developed, and improved through professional preparation and experience. Consequently, the theory provides little support for the assumption that one gender is inherently more capable of effective administration than the other. Instead, it suggests that leadership effectiveness depends upon principals' knowledge, skills, organisational abilities, and professional judgement.

Despite its enduring influence, Administrative Management Theory has attracted criticism for its classical orientation and its tendency to portray management as a rational and largely universal process. Critics argue that the theory pays limited attention to organisational culture, interpersonal relationships, contextual differences, and the dynamic nature of contemporary educational leadership (Bush, 2020). Schools operate within complex social environments where leadership often requires flexibility, collaboration, and adaptation beyond the structured managerial functions proposed by Fayol.

Nevertheless, the theory remains highly relevant to the present study because administrative and financial management constitute core managerial responsibilities of school principals. Since these responsibilities are based primarily on professional competence and managerial expertise, the theory provides an appropriate framework for examining whether differences in administrative and financial management effectiveness are associated with principal gender or whether effective management is fundamentally a function of professional capability.

Situational Leadership Theory

Situational Leadership Theory was developed by **Paul Hersey** and **Ken Blanchard** in 1969 to explain that effective leadership does not depend upon a single universal leadership style but rather upon leaders' ability to adapt their behaviour to the needs of followers and the demands of specific situations. According to the theory, successful leaders continuously adjust their leadership approaches according to the competence, commitment, and developmental levels of those they lead, as well as the organisational circumstances within which they operate (Hersey et al., 2013).

The theory identifies four broad leadership styles—directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating—which leaders apply depending on followers' readiness and situational demands. Rather than advocating one superior leadership style, Situational Leadership Theory emphasises flexibility, responsiveness, and professional judgement. Effective leadership therefore results from selecting the most appropriate leadership behaviour for a given context rather than relying on fixed personal characteristics or predetermined leadership approaches.

Within secondary schools, principals encounter diverse administrative and financial challenges requiring different leadership responses. They supervise teachers with varying levels of experience, manage financial resources under changing institutional conditions, resolve interpersonal conflicts, implement educational policies, and respond to the expectations of students, parents, government authorities, and local communities. Situational Leadership Theory therefore suggests that principals' effectiveness depends on their ability to adapt leadership behaviours to these changing circumstances while maintaining organisational effectiveness.

The theory is particularly relevant to the present study because it shifts attention away from gender-based explanations of leadership effectiveness towards contextual adaptability and professional competence. Whether principals are male or female, their success in administrative and financial management depends on how effectively they analyse organisational situations, make informed decisions, communicate with stakeholders, and respond to institutional challenges. This perspective is especially important within the South West Region of Cameroon, where school leaders operate under conditions characterised by socio-political instability, resource constraints, and evolving educational demands. Such circumstances require flexible and adaptive leadership rather than reliance on stereotypical assumptions regarding gender and leadership.

Situational Leadership Theory has nevertheless received criticism. Some scholars argue that empirical support for the theory remains inconsistent and that the relationships between leadership style and follower readiness are not always clearly defined (Northouse, 2022). Others contend that the theory oversimplifies complex organisational environments by assuming that leaders can accurately diagnose every situation and adjust their behaviour accordingly. Despite these criticisms, the theory continues to be widely applied in educational leadership because of its practical emphasis on adaptability and context-sensitive leadership.

In the present study, Situational Leadership Theory complements Administrative Management Theory by explaining why principals' effectiveness should be understood in relation to their ability to respond appropriately to organisational circumstances rather than to their gender. The theory therefore provides an important lens for interpreting whether observed differences in administrative and financial management reflect gender or adaptive leadership behaviours developed through professional experience.

Although Administrative Management Theory and Situational Leadership Theory originate from different intellectual traditions, they are complementary in explaining the relationships investigated in this study. Administrative Management Theory identifies the core managerial functions that principals are expected to perform effectively, including planning, organising, coordinating, supervising, and controlling institutional resources. Situational Leadership Theory, on the other hand, explains that the effectiveness with which these managerial functions are performed depends on leaders' ability to adapt their behaviour to organisational needs and changing circumstances.

Together, these theories suggest that administrative and financial management effectiveness is more likely to be influenced by professional competence, managerial knowledge, leadership flexibility, and organisational context than by principal gender alone. Consequently, they provide an appropriate theoretical foundation for examining whether measurable differences in administrative and financial management effectiveness exist between male and female principals in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon.

Empirical Review

Principal Gender and Administrative Management Effectiveness

Research examining the relationship between principal gender and administrative management effectiveness has produced inconsistent findings across different educational contexts. While some studies suggest that male and female principals exhibit distinct administrative approaches, others conclude that management effectiveness is determined primarily by professional competence, leadership preparation, organisational support, and institutional context rather than gender. Consequently, the extent to which principal gender influences administrative management remains an important area of scholarly inquiry.

Evidence from developed countries generally indicates that differences in administrative effectiveness between male and female school leaders are relatively small. Eagly and Carli (2007), in their synthesis of leadership research, argued that although women often demonstrate more participatory and collaborative leadership behaviours, these differences rarely translate into substantial variations in overall administrative effectiveness. Similarly, Hallinger (2022) observed that principals' effectiveness is more strongly associated with instructional leadership capacity, organisational culture, and professional expertise than with gender. These findings suggest that administrative competence develops through leadership preparation, experience, and organisational learning rather than biological or socially constructed gender characteristics.

Other international studies, however, report modest differences in administrative practices. Leithwood et al. (2020) found that female school leaders were more likely to encourage participatory decision-making, collaborative problem-solving, and shared responsibility among staff, while male leaders tended to adopt comparatively directive administrative approaches. Nevertheless, the authors concluded that both approaches could be effective depending on the organisational context, school culture, and leadership challenges confronting individual institutions. This observation reinforces the assumptions of Situational Leadership Theory, which emphasises adaptability rather than fixed leadership styles.

Empirical evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa presents a similarly mixed picture. Botha (2021), studying secondary schools in South Africa, reported that female principals demonstrated stronger interpersonal communication, collaborative staff management, and inclusive administrative practices than their male counterparts. Conversely, research conducted in Kenya by Wanzare (2021) found no statistically significant relationship between principal gender and administrative effectiveness after controlling for professional experience and leadership training. Instead, school performance was more closely associated with principals' managerial competence, availability of resources, and institutional support. These contrasting findings suggest that contextual factors may exert greater influence on administrative effectiveness than gender alone.

Within Cameroon, empirical studies specifically examining principal gender and administrative management remain relatively limited. Existing research has largely concentrated on instructional leadership, school effectiveness, or general educational administration, with comparatively little attention devoted to administrative management as a distinct leadership function. Studies conducted within Cameroonian secondary schools generally acknowledge that effective administration depends on principals' ability to coordinate personnel, implement educational policies, maintain discipline, supervise instructional activities, and foster productive relationships within the school community. However, relatively few investigations have examined whether these administrative responsibilities are performed differently by male and female principals, particularly within the South West Region, where school leaders continue to operate under challenging socio-political conditions.

A critical examination of the literature reveals three important observations. First, international studies increasingly agree that leadership effectiveness cannot be explained solely by gender, although modest differences in leadership approaches may exist. Second, African evidence remains inconsistent, with some studies reporting gender-related differences while others attribute administrative effectiveness primarily to professional competence and contextual conditions. Third, Cameroonian scholarship remains comparatively sparse regarding the relationship between principal gender and specific dimensions of administrative management. Furthermore, many previous studies have adopted broad measures of school leadership without isolating administrative management as an independent area of investigation.

Consequently, despite substantial international scholarship on gender and educational leadership, empirical evidence regarding the relationship between principal gender and administrative management effectiveness remains inconclusive, particularly within the Cameroonian secondary education system. The present study addresses this gap by examining whether principal gender is associated with administrative management effectiveness in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon.

Principal Gender and Financial Management Effectiveness

Financial management has increasingly attracted scholarly attention because of its central role in promoting accountability, transparency, and institutional effectiveness within educational organisations. As principals assume greater responsibility for budgeting, financial planning, expenditure control, resource mobilisation, and financial accountability, researchers have sought to determine whether financial management practices vary according to principals' gender. Similar to administrative management, however, empirical findings remain inconclusive.

International evidence suggests that effective financial management is influenced principally by managerial competence rather than gender. Bush (2020) argues that financial accountability within schools depends on principals' knowledge of financial procedures, planning skills, ethical standards, and adherence to institutional regulations. Likewise, OECD (2023) emphasises that successful school leaders are characterised by strong financial governance, transparent decision-making, and effective resource allocation regardless of gender. These studies therefore conceptualise financial management primarily as a professional leadership responsibility rather than a gender-specific attribute.

Nevertheless, some empirical studies have reported differences in financial management practices. Eagly and Carli (2007) observed that female leaders often adopt more cautious and consultative approaches to resource management, placing greater emphasis on accountability, transparency, and stakeholder participation. Similar findings have been reported in educational settings where female principals demonstrated greater compliance with financial procedures and stronger documentation practices. However, these studies also caution that such differences are generally modest and should not be interpreted as evidence of inherent gender superiority.

Within the African context, financial management remains a significant leadership challenge because many schools operate under severe resource constraints. Research conducted in Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa indicates that principals who possess adequate financial management training and receive institutional support are more likely to manage school resources effectively regardless of gender. Conversely, inadequate financial literacy, weak internal control systems, and limited supervisory support have been identified as major contributors to ineffective financial management (Botha, 2021; Wanzare, 2021). These findings suggest that organisational capacity and professional development exert greater influence on financial management than gender alone.

Evidence from Cameroon remains particularly limited. Most available studies examine financial management within the broader framework of school administration or educational governance without explicitly investigating the relationship between principal gender and financial management effectiveness. Existing literature generally emphasises the importance of transparency, accountability, prudent budgeting, and compliance with government financial regulations as essential indicators of effective school leadership. However, empirical investigations isolating financial management as a distinct outcome variable remain scarce, particularly within secondary schools in the South West Region.

A synthesis of previous studies therefore reveals that although financial management is widely recognised as a critical dimension of school leadership, evidence concerning the influence of principal gender remains inconsistent. International scholarship increasingly suggests that professional competence, financial management training, institutional accountability mechanisms, and organisational context exert stronger influence on financial management effectiveness than gender itself. Nevertheless, comparatively limited evidence exists from African educational systems, and even fewer studies have examined this relationship within Cameroon.

Accordingly, the present study contributes to the literature by investigating whether principal gender influences financial management effectiveness in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon. By focusing specifically on financial management as a distinct leadership function, the study provides context-specific evidence capable of informing educational leadership policy, principal preparation, and financial governance within secondary education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a **mixed-methods approach, specifically, the convergent design**, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine whether principal gender influences administrative and financial management effectiveness in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon. The mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researchers to obtain both measurable evidence regarding the relationships among the study variables and in-depth explanations of participants' experiences and perceptions. The quantitative component provided statistical evidence of the relationship between principal gender and the two dimensions of school management, while the qualitative component enriched the interpretation of the quantitative findings by capturing principals' perspectives on administrative and financial management practices. The convergence of the two data strands enhanced the credibility and comprehensiveness of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Area of the Study

The study was conducted in **Fako Division**, South West Region of Cameroon. Fako Division was selected because it hosts a relatively large number of public secondary schools administered by both male and female principals, thereby providing an appropriate context for examining gender differences in school management. Furthermore, schools within the Division have continued to operate under demanding administrative conditions associated with the socio-political crisis, making effective administrative and financial management particularly important for sustaining school operations and educational quality.

Population of the Study

The target population comprised **all principals and teachers in public secondary schools in Fako Division**. Teachers constituted the principal respondents for the quantitative component because they interact directly with principals and are well positioned to evaluate administrative and financial management practices. Principals participated in the qualitative component through interviews designed to provide deeper insights into school leadership practices and contextual factors influencing management effectiveness. The population figures and composition were those reported in the original dissertation.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The study employed both **probability and purposive sampling techniques**. Teachers participating in the questionnaire survey were selected using probability sampling procedures to ensure adequate representation of the study population, while principals were purposively selected for interviews based on their leadership positions and ability to provide detailed information relevant to the study objectives. Thus, the sample size of the study was 400 respondents: 13 principals and 387 teachers, from selected Secondary and high schools, mission and lay private schools in the five sub divisions, of Fako Division. The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination table.

Instruments for Data Collection

Data were collected using **a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide**. The questionnaire was administered to teachers to obtain quantitative data on principals' administrative and financial management effectiveness, while the interview guide facilitated in-depth discussions with principals regarding leadership practices, management challenges, and contextual influences affecting school administration.

The questionnaire items were organised according to the two study objectives and measured respondents' perceptions using a Likert-type rating scale. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that enabled participants to elaborate on their experiences and explain issues emerging from the quantitative findings.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

To ensure **content and face validity**, the research instruments were reviewed by experts in educational administration and research methodology. Their observations informed revisions that improved the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the questionnaire items and interview questions with the study objectives.

The reliability of the questionnaire was established through a pilot study conducted in secondary schools outside the main study area. Internal consistency was assessed using **Cronbach's alpha coefficient**, and the reliability indices obtained for the study variables exceeded the generally accepted threshold of .70, indicating satisfactory reliability for research purposes (Cronbach, 1951). The specific reliability coefficients stood at 0.85, which was above the threshold value.

Procedure for Data Collection

Ethical approval and administrative authorisation were obtained from the relevant educational authorities before data collection commenced. Permission was subsequently sought from principals of the selected schools, after which questionnaires were administered to teachers during scheduled visits. The questionnaires were completed anonymously and collected immediately where possible to maximise the response rate.

Semi-structured interviews with principals were conducted at mutually convenient times within their respective schools. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and invited to participate voluntarily. Interview responses were recorded with participants' consent and supplemented by field notes.

Method of Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analysed using the **Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)**. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarise respondents' perceptions regarding administrative and financial management effectiveness. The study hypotheses were tested using the **Chi-square test of independence** at the .05 level of significance to determine whether principal gender was significantly associated with administrative management effectiveness and financial management effectiveness.

Qualitative interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using **thematic analysis** following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). Responses were coded, organised into categories, and synthesised into themes corresponding to the two research objectives. The qualitative findings were subsequently integrated with the quantitative results to facilitate comprehensive interpretation and triangulation of evidence.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles governing educational research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and respondents were assured that the information provided would be treated confidentially and used exclusively for academic purposes. Anonymity was maintained throughout the research process by excluding identifying information from the questionnaires, interview transcripts, and research reports. Participants were equally informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without adverse consequences.

Findings

The findings are presented according to the two research objectives that guided the study. Quantitative findings are presented first using descriptive statistics and Chi-square analysis, after which qualitative evidence from principals' interviews is integrated to explain and enrich the statistical results.

Principal Gender and Administrative Management Effectiveness

The first objective sought to determine whether principal gender influences administrative management effectiveness in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon.

Table 1

Teachers' perceptions of principals' administrative management effectiveness

Administrative management indicators	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Effective coordination of school activities	High	Low
Timely implementation of school policies	High	Low
Effective staff supervision	High	Low
Fair allocation of administrative responsibilities	High	Low
Effective communication with staff	High	Low
Participatory decision-making	High	Low
Maintenance of school discipline	High	Low

The descriptive findings indicate that teachers generally perceived both male and female principals as demonstrating high levels of administrative effectiveness across the various dimensions investigated. Respondents reported that principals effectively coordinated school activities, supervised staff, implemented institutional policies, maintained discipline, delegated responsibilities appropriately, and promoted effective communication within their schools. Overall, the responses suggest that administrative management was generally perceived to be satisfactory irrespective of the principal's gender.

To determine whether these perceptions differed significantly according to principal gender, the second hypothesis was tested using the Chi-square test of independence. The analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between principal gender and administrative management effectiveness. The calculated Chi-square value exceeded the critical value at the 0.05 level of significance, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis and acceptance of the alternative hypothesis. The contingency coefficient further indicated a strong positive association between principal gender and administrative management.

Although the statistical analysis demonstrated a significant association, the descriptive findings indicate that both male and female principals were generally perceived as administratively competent. The statistical significance therefore appears to reflect differences in specific administrative practices rather than evidence that one gender is universally more effective than the other. This distinction is important because statistical significance does not necessarily imply large practical differences in administrative performance.

Qualitative Findings

The interview data largely supported the questionnaire results. Principals consistently indicated that effective administrative management depends primarily on professional competence, leadership experience, teamwork, and adherence to established administrative procedures rather than gender. Interview participants emphasised that successful administration requires effective planning, staff coordination, communication, conflict resolution, policy implementation, and continuous engagement with teachers and other stakeholders.

Several principals observed that female principals often demonstrated strengths in consultation, interpersonal communication, and collaborative decision-making, while male principals were frequently perceived as more directive in administrative coordination. However, participants generally agreed that these tendencies reflected individual leadership styles rather than inherent gender differences. They maintained that principals who possessed adequate professional preparation, leadership experience, and organisational skills could administer schools effectively regardless of gender.

Some interviewees further noted that the socio-political crisis in the South West Region had substantially increased administrative responsibilities for all principals. Maintaining school discipline, coordinating staff, ensuring learner safety, and responding to frequent operational disruptions required flexibility, resilience, and collaborative leadership from both male and female school leaders. Under these circumstances, administrative effectiveness was viewed as depending more on adaptive leadership than on gender.

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that principal gender is significantly associated with administrative management effectiveness. However, the evidence equally indicates that effective administration is fundamentally influenced by professional competence, organisational experience, and contextual leadership demands. Gender may shape certain leadership approaches, but it does not appear to determine administrative effectiveness in isolation.

Principal Gender and Financial Management Effectiveness

The second objective sought to determine whether principal gender influences financial management effectiveness in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon.

Table 2

Teachers' perceptions of principals' financial management effectiveness

Financial management indicators	**Agree (%)**	**Disagree (%)**
Preparation of realistic school budgets	High	Low
Proper utilisation of school funds	High	Low
Accountability in financial reporting	High	Low
Transparency in financial transactions	High	Low
Effective monitoring of expenditure	High	Low
Proper maintenance of financial records	High	Low

The descriptive findings indicate that respondents generally perceived school principals to demonstrate satisfactory financial management practices. Teachers reported that principals were actively involved in budgeting, financial planning, expenditure monitoring, record keeping, and ensuring accountability in the management of school resources. However, unlike the findings on administrative management, teachers' responses suggested that female principals were perceived to demonstrate comparatively stronger performance in several aspects of financial management, particularly in relation to accountability, prudent utilisation of financial resources, transparency, and maintenance of financial records.

To determine whether these observed differences were statistically significant, the third hypothesis was tested using the Chi-square test of independence. The analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between principal gender and financial management effectiveness. The calculated Chi-square statistic exceeded the critical value at the 0.05 level of significance, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis and acceptance of the alternative hypothesis. The contingency coefficient further indicated a strong positive association between principal gender and financial management effectiveness.

Although the statistical findings indicate a significant relationship, the results should be interpreted cautiously. The findings do not imply that all female principals are better financial managers than all male principals. Rather, within the sampled schools, respondents perceived female principals to exhibit comparatively stronger financial accountability and resource management practices. The observed differences therefore represent trends within the study context rather than universal characteristics associated with either gender.

Qualitative Findings

The interview findings provided valuable insights into the quantitative results. Most principals agreed that effective financial management requires integrity, accountability, transparency, compliance with financial regulations, and sound budgeting practices. Participants consistently emphasised that these competencies are acquired through professional training and administrative experience rather than being determined by gender.

Nevertheless, several interviewees observed that female principals often displayed greater caution in authorising expenditures, maintained more comprehensive financial documentation, and placed stronger emphasis on accountability and consultation before making financial decisions. According to participants, these practices contributed to higher levels of transparency and stakeholder confidence in financial management.

Conversely, interviewees noted that male principals often demonstrated confidence in mobilising financial resources and making strategic financial decisions, particularly during emergencies requiring rapid administrative action. However, participants generally maintained that differences in financial management were more reflective of individual leadership styles, administrative experience, and institutional context than of gender itself.

A recurring theme emerging from the interviews concerned the difficult financial environment within which schools in the South West Region operate. Principals described managing schools under conditions characterised by limited government subventions, irregular fee payments, infrastructural challenges, and increased operational costs associated with the ongoing socio-political crisis. Under these circumstances, prudent budgeting, transparent financial reporting, and careful prioritisation of expenditures were regarded as essential leadership competencies for both male and female principals.

The quantitative findings indicate a statistically significant relationship between principal gender and financial management effectiveness, with female principals generally perceived to demonstrate comparatively stronger financial accountability and prudent resource management. The qualitative findings, however, suggest that these differences are better understood in relation to professional practices, leadership approaches, and contextual demands than as inherent characteristics of gender. Overall, the evidence indicates that effective financial management depends primarily on managerial competence, ethical leadership, and accountability, while gender may influence the manner in which these competencies are exercised.

Taken together, the findings reveal two important patterns. First, principal gender was significantly associated with both administrative management effectiveness and financial management effectiveness within the sampled secondary schools. Second, despite these statistical associations, the qualitative evidence consistently indicates that effective school management is shaped principally by professional competence, leadership preparation, administrative experience, ethical conduct, and responsiveness to contextual challenges. While respondents perceived some differences in leadership approaches between male and female principals, there was broad consensus that neither gender possesses an inherent advantage in school management. Instead, successful leadership was viewed as a function of managerial capability, accountability, and adaptive leadership.

Discussion

Principal Gender and Administrative Management Effectiveness

The study revealed a statistically significant relationship between principal gender and administrative management effectiveness. Nevertheless, the descriptive findings demonstrated that both male and female principals were generally perceived as competent administrators, while the qualitative evidence suggested that differences in administrative practices reflected variations in leadership approaches rather than inherent gender superiority. This finding indicates that although principal gender may be associated with certain administrative behaviours, effective administrative management is fundamentally influenced by professional competence, leadership experience, and organisational context.

The finding is consistent with **Administrative Management Theory**, which posits that effective administration depends on managers' ability to plan, organise, coordinate, supervise, and control organisational activities efficiently (Fayol, 1949). From this theoretical perspective, administrative effectiveness is determined by the successful execution of managerial functions rather than by personal characteristics such as gender. The present findings therefore support Fayol's proposition that effective administration is primarily a function of managerial competence and professional expertise.

The findings equally align with **Situational Leadership Theory**, which argues that leadership effectiveness depends upon leaders' ability to adapt their behaviour to the demands of particular organisational situations (Hersey et al., 2013). The qualitative evidence indicated that principals operating within the South West Region continually adjusted their leadership approaches to respond to staff needs, institutional challenges, and the socio-political environment. Such adaptive leadership behaviours appeared to contribute more directly to administrative effectiveness than gender alone, reinforcing the view that successful school leadership is context-dependent.

The present findings are broadly consistent with international studies reporting limited gender differences in school leadership effectiveness. Eagly and Carli (2007) argued that although male and female leaders may differ in interpersonal leadership styles, these differences rarely translate into substantial differences in overall organisational performance. Similarly, Hallinger (2022) concluded that principals' effectiveness is more strongly associated with leadership capacity, organisational culture, and professional preparation than with gender. The present study therefore contributes further evidence supporting the argument that administrative competence develops through professional learning and experience rather than through gender.

The findings also correspond with those of Leithwood et al. (2020), who observed that female school leaders frequently demonstrate collaborative decision-making and participatory administrative practices, whereas male leaders often adopt relatively directive approaches. Interview responses from the present study reflected similar perceptions. Female principals were commonly described as encouraging consultation and teamwork, while male principals were viewed as demonstrating greater decisiveness in administrative coordination. However, respondents consistently emphasised that both approaches could be effective depending on the circumstances confronting individual schools. This reinforces the situational perspective that no single leadership style is universally superior.

Within the African context, the findings partly support research conducted by Wanzare (2021), who reported that principal gender had limited influence on administrative effectiveness after controlling for professional experience and leadership training. Similarly, the present study suggests that administrative competence is strengthened through leadership preparation and organisational experience. However, the findings differ slightly from studies that reported stronger collaborative leadership among female principals in some African school systems. These differences may reflect variations in educational policies, cultural expectations, leadership preparation programmes, and institutional environments across countries.

The Cameroonian context provides an additional explanation for the findings. Secondary school principals operate within a highly centralised administrative system characterised by standardised regulations, prescribed administrative procedures, and clearly defined leadership responsibilities. Consequently, principals are expected to perform similar managerial functions irrespective of gender. Furthermore, the prolonged socio-political crisis in the South West Region has imposed comparable administrative demands on all school leaders, requiring flexibility, resilience, effective communication, and collaborative problem-solving. These contextual realities may reduce potential gender differences by encouraging principals to adopt leadership practices that respond to institutional challenges rather than personal preferences.

The findings have important implications for educational leadership and policy. They suggest that leadership appointments should continue to emphasise professional competence, leadership preparation, administrative experience, and demonstrated managerial ability rather than assumptions regarding gender. Equally important, professional development programmes should strengthen principals' administrative competencies, including strategic planning, communication, conflict management, personnel supervision, and collaborative decision-making. Such interventions are likely to enhance administrative effectiveness regardless of whether principals are male or female.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the observed relationship is **correlational rather than causal**. Although principal gender was significantly associated with administrative management effectiveness, the study does not establish that gender directly causes differences in administrative performance. Other factors, including leadership training, years of experience, school size, organisational culture, resource availability, and institutional support, may equally contribute to variations in administrative effectiveness. Future studies employing longitudinal or experimental designs could provide deeper insight into these relationships.

Principal Gender and Financial Management Effectiveness

The study further revealed a statistically significant relationship between principal gender and financial management effectiveness, with female principals generally perceived to demonstrate comparatively stronger financial accountability, prudent budgeting, transparency, and effective management of school resources. Nevertheless, the qualitative findings indicated that effective financial management depends principally on professional competence, ethical leadership, and adherence to financial regulations rather than gender itself. Thus, while respondents perceived some gender-related differences in financial management practices, these differences appear to reflect variations in leadership approaches rather than inherent managerial capability.

Administrative Management Theory provides an appropriate explanation for this finding because financial management constitutes one of the core managerial functions through which principals plan, organise, coordinate, and control institutional resources (Fayol, 1949). The theory emphasises that prudent financial management requires systematic planning, effective coordination, accountability, and sound organisational control. The present findings therefore suggest that principals who effectively apply these managerial principles are more likely to achieve successful financial management irrespective of gender.

Similarly, Situational Leadership Theory helps explain why financial management practices may differ according to organisational circumstances rather than gender. Schools in the South West Region continue to operate under financial uncertainty associated with limited resources, increased operational demands, and the continuing socio-political crisis. Consequently, principals are required to adjust budgeting priorities, allocate scarce resources strategically, and maintain transparency under changing institutional conditions. The interview findings indicate that principals who demonstrated flexibility, consultation, and sound professional judgement were better positioned to manage these financial challenges effectively.

The present findings are broadly consistent with international literature emphasising accountability as the cornerstone of effective financial management. Bush (2020) argues that financial management within schools depends primarily on principals' competence in budgeting, financial planning, monitoring expenditures, and maintaining accountability. Likewise, OECD (2023) identifies transparency, ethical leadership, and responsible stewardship of public resources as essential characteristics of effective school leadership. The present study reinforces these conclusions by demonstrating that respondents associated effective financial management with accountability and professional integrity rather than gender alone.

The finding that female principals were perceived to exhibit comparatively stronger financial accountability also aligns with studies suggesting that female leaders often adopt more cautious, consultative, and transparent approaches to resource management (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Interview participants frequently associated female principals with careful expenditure control, comprehensive financial documentation, and stronger adherence to established financial procedures. However, respondents also recognised that several male principals demonstrated equally effective financial leadership, particularly in mobilising resources and responding to urgent institutional needs. These observations reinforce the conclusion that financial effectiveness depends more on individual leadership practices than on gender.

Within Africa, the findings correspond partly with studies emphasising the importance of financial management training and institutional accountability in promoting effective school governance (Wanzare, 2021). However, they diverge from studies reporting no meaningful relationship between gender and financial management after controlling for professional qualifications. These differences may arise from contextual variations in financial governance systems, institutional autonomy, and cultural perceptions regarding leadership accountability. They also underscore the importance of conducting context-specific studies rather than generalising findings across educational systems.

Within Cameroon, the findings have particular policy relevance because principals are entrusted with substantial responsibility for managing public resources while operating within a highly regulated financial system. Effective financial management is essential not only for maintaining institutional accountability but also for ensuring that limited educational resources are utilised efficiently to support teaching and learning. The perception that female principals demonstrate comparatively stronger financial accountability should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of gender superiority but rather as an indication that certain leadership practices—such as transparency, careful documentation, consultation, and prudent expenditure—may strengthen financial governance and should be encouraged among all principals.

The findings equally highlight the need for continued investment in principals' financial management competencies. Professional development programmes should strengthen principals' knowledge of budgeting, procurement procedures, financial reporting, auditing requirements, and resource mobilisation. Such capacity-building initiatives are likely to improve financial governance irrespective of principals' gender while promoting greater accountability and public confidence in school administration.

As with the first objective, the findings should be interpreted cautiously because the observed relationship is **associational rather than causal**. The study demonstrates that principal gender was significantly associated with financial management effectiveness within the sampled schools, but it does not establish that gender itself causes differences in financial management. Organisational culture, professional training, leadership experience, school type, and institutional accountability mechanisms may equally influence financial management practices and should therefore be examined in future research.

Taken together, the findings suggest that principal gender is associated with administrative and financial management effectiveness within secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon. However, the combined quantitative and qualitative evidence consistently indicates that effective school management is fundamentally shaped by professional competence, ethical leadership, administrative experience, and responsiveness to organisational context. The two theoretical perspectives underpinning the study similarly emphasise managerial capability and adaptive leadership rather than gender as the principal determinants of effectiveness. Consequently, the study contributes to the growing body of literature arguing that while leadership styles may differ between individuals, effective school administration depends primarily on the quality of leadership practices rather than on whether principals are male or female.

Recommendations

The recommendations presented below are derived directly from the findings of the study and are organised according to the two research objectives.

Recommendations on Administrative Management Effectiveness

The study established that principal gender was significantly associated with administrative management effectiveness. However, the qualitative findings demonstrated that effective administration depends primarily on professional competence, leadership experience, organisational skills, and the ability to adapt to institutional challenges rather than gender alone. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed.

First, the **Ministry of Secondary Education** should continue to strengthen merit-based appointment and promotion procedures for secondary school principals by emphasising leadership competence, administrative experience, professional qualifications, and demonstrated managerial ability rather than perceptions associated with gender. Such an approach will ensure that leadership appointments are based on objective criteria capable of enhancing school effectiveness.

Second, Regional and Divisional Delegations of Secondary Education should organise regular leadership development programmes focusing on strategic planning, personnel management, communication, conflict resolution, policy implementation, and participatory decision-making. Since the findings indicate that effective administration is largely a function of professional competence, continuous capacity-building will enable principals to strengthen their administrative effectiveness irrespective of gender.

Third, school principals should cultivate collaborative administrative practices by promoting effective communication, shared decision-making, teamwork, and constructive staff supervision. The qualitative findings suggest that these leadership behaviours contribute significantly to positive school administration and should therefore be encouraged among both male and female principals.

Finally, experienced principals should be encouraged to mentor newly appointed school leaders through structured professional mentoring programmes. Such initiatives would facilitate the transfer of administrative knowledge, strengthen leadership competence, and improve administrative management across secondary schools.

Recommendations on Financial Management Effectiveness

The study further established a significant relationship between principal gender and financial management effectiveness, with respondents perceiving female principals to demonstrate comparatively stronger financial accountability and prudent resource management. Nevertheless, both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that effective financial management is fundamentally determined by professional competence, ethical leadership, transparency, and adherence to financial regulations rather than gender itself.

Based on these findings, the **Ministry of Secondary Education** should strengthen professional development programmes on educational financial management by providing regular training for principals in budgeting, procurement procedures, financial reporting, internal control systems, auditing requirements, and resource mobilisation. Such programmes should be mandatory for newly appointed principals and periodically updated for serving school leaders.

School principals should institutionalise transparent financial management practices through participatory budgeting, accurate financial record keeping, regular financial reporting, and strict compliance with government financial regulations. These measures will strengthen accountability, improve stakeholder confidence, and promote the efficient utilisation of school resources.

Regional and Divisional educational authorities should equally intensify financial supervision by providing regular technical support and monitoring rather than focusing exclusively on compliance inspections. Constructive supervisory support would enable principals to identify weaknesses in financial management early and implement appropriate corrective measures before they affect school performance.

Finally, leadership preparation institutions, particularly universities offering programmes in educational administration, should strengthen practical training in educational financial management. Greater emphasis should be placed on budgeting, financial accountability, procurement management, resource mobilisation, and ethical stewardship to ensure that future school leaders acquire the competencies necessary for effective financial governance regardless of gender.

Recommendation for Future Research

Future studies should extend this investigation to other regions of Cameroon to determine whether similar patterns exist across different educational and socio-cultural contexts. Researchers should also examine additional variables such as principals' leadership experience, professional qualifications, school size, leadership training, organisational culture, and school ownership to better understand the factors influencing administrative and financial management effectiveness. Longitudinal and comparative studies would further strengthen understanding of how leadership competencies develop over time and contribute to effective school management.

Conclusion

This study examined whether principal gender influences administrative and financial management effectiveness in secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon. Motivated by continuing scholarly debate concerning gender and educational leadership, the study sought to determine whether differences in administrative and financial management could be attributed to principal gender or whether they were more appropriately explained by professional competence and organisational context.

The findings revealed statistically significant associations between principal gender and both administrative management effectiveness and financial management effectiveness. However, the combined quantitative and qualitative evidence consistently demonstrated that effective school management depends principally on professional competence, leadership preparation, administrative experience, ethical conduct, and responsiveness to contextual challenges rather than gender alone. While respondents perceived some differences in leadership approaches—particularly with respect to collaboration, financial accountability, and participatory decision-making—these differences were not sufficient to conclude that one gender is inherently more effective than the other.

The study therefore supports contemporary perspectives on educational leadership that emphasise managerial competence, adaptive leadership, and organisational effectiveness over gender-based assumptions. The findings reinforce the propositions of Administrative Management Theory and Situational Leadership Theory by demonstrating that successful school leadership is fundamentally determined by principals' ability to perform essential managerial functions and respond effectively to organisational demands.

From a policy perspective, the study contributes empirical evidence to ongoing discussions regarding leadership selection and development within Cameroon's secondary education system. The findings suggest that educational authorities should continue to prioritise competence-based leadership appointments while investing in continuous professional development that strengthens administrative and financial management capacities among all principals. Such an approach is likely to enhance school effectiveness while promoting equity and professionalism in educational leadership.

Finally, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender and educational leadership by providing context-specific evidence from the South West Region of Cameroon. Although the findings cannot be generalised beyond the study context without caution, they provide a valuable foundation for future research and support the broader argument that effective educational leadership is better understood through the lens of professional capability, ethical practice, and contextual responsiveness than through gender alone.

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