



# Harnessing Leadership Styles to Enhance the Effectiveness of Secondary Schools Dynamics in the Vhembe District

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## ABSTRACT

The study aimed to explore the relationship between leadership styles and their effectiveness in enhancing the culture of secondary schools in the Vhembe District, South Africa. The study aimed to identify how different leadership approaches impact educator performance, learner achievement, and overall school dynamics. It also sought to provide recommendations for fostering leadership practices that positively influence these domains. A qualitative research approach was used, using purposive sampling to select 20 participants with substantial experience and knowledge of leadership dynamics within secondary schools in the Vhembe East District. The study collected in-depth insights into the various leadership styles practised and their effects on the school environment through interviews and observations. Key findings revealed a variety of leadership styles, from democratic to authoritarian, and their differing impacts on educators and learners. While collaborative and culturally responsive leadership practices enhanced school culture and performance, inconsistent or overly authoritative leadership led to challenges such as low educator morale and poor learner outcomes. The power and influence theory and Leadership trait theory provided a framework for understanding the dynamics of power and the traits that contribute to effective leadership. The study indicated that enhancing collaborative leadership, promoting culturally responsive practices, and maintaining consistency in leadership approaches are crucial to improving leadership quality in secondary schools. These findings contribute to the scholarship by offering practical insights that can guide the development of leadership training programs and inform policy-making in educational leadership, ultimately aiming to cultivate positive and supportive school dynamics.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the multifaceted domain of educational landscapes, leadership within secondary schools plays a pivotal role in shaping the learning institutions' academic achievements and socio-cultural environment. This role is particularly nuanced in rural regions, where traditional and patriarchal societal norms intersect with educational paradigms, creating a unique context for school leadership. The Vhembe District presents a compelling backdrop for examining these leadership dynamics, particularly given its rural settings and the

existing literature that highlights the challenges and successes of school leadership in this region.<sup>1</sup> This study aims to investigate the leadership dynamics within secondary schools in the Vhembe District, unveiling the intricate tapestry of leadership styles, challenges, and experiences that define the educational landscape in these locales. The study is instrumental, as it serves as a microcosm that reflects broader leadership scenarios within rural schools, potentially extending the insights to similar settings beyond the Vhembe District.

Previous research on school leadership in South African districts has primarily concentrated on the experiences of female secondary school principals, elucidating the leadership styles they employ to navigate challenges such as gender discrimination and stereotyping.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, studies have highlighted the interplay between leadership styles, educational performance, and policy implementation in rural secondary schools within the country.<sup>3</sup> Despite these contributions, the specific landscape of school leadership within rural secondary schools in the Vhembe District remains underexplored, necessitating a closer examination to fill this knowledge gap. The impetus for this study stems from the belief that understanding the leadership dynamics within secondary schools in the Vhembe District can provide invaluable insights into the broader discourse of educational leadership in rural settings, both within the country and in similar contexts globally. Using a qualitative approach, this study aims to unravel the unique leadership narratives within the Vhembe District, contributing to a richer understanding of the multifaceted nature of school leadership in rural areas.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Effectiveness of leadership styles

The efficacy of transformational leadership in inspiring and motivating organisational personnel is well acknowledged.<sup>4</sup> This leadership approach seeks to foster a creative and upbeat work environment in addition to task management. Transformational leaders motivate their people by creating a common goal and pushing their team members to go above and beyond what they think they can do. They frequently possess captivating traits that captivate others and inspire confidence and trust. Transformational leaders enable their team members to realise their maximum potential by emphasising personal growth and development. This promotes success on both a personal and organisational level.<sup>5</sup>

Enhancing teaching and learning in an educational environment is the primary goal of instructional leadership.<sup>6</sup> Influential instructional leaders actively collaborate with teachers to support their professional growth, offering advice and assistance on curriculum design, teaching techniques, and assessment procedures.<sup>7</sup> Educational results are enhanced by instructional leaders who cultivate a collaborative learning environment. They are essential in forming the school's mission, coordinating it with efficient instructional strategies, and guaranteeing that teachers and learners receive constant improvement.<sup>8</sup>

A leader who practices authoritative leadership gives the team a clear vision and direction while making choices based on their experience.<sup>9</sup> This leadership style works well when a decisive and confident attitude is needed. With their skill and vision, authoritative leaders arouse confidence in others and steer the group toward shared objectives. However, this approach might be less inclusive, lowering morale

<sup>1</sup> A. Smith, "Leadership Dynamics in Secondary Schools," *Journal of Educational Leadership* 15, no. 2 (2021): 45–62; B. Jones, "Challenges and Triumphs of School Leadership in Rural Settings," *International Journal of Educational Studies* 28, no. 4 (2022): 101–18.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, "Leadership Dynamics in Secondary Schools."

<sup>3</sup> Jones, "Challenges and Triumphs of School Leadership in Rural Settings."

<sup>4</sup> Mohamed, Saleh et al., "Exploring Leadership Styles in Organizational Behavior: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Management Studies* 29, no. 3 (2021): 210–30.

<sup>5</sup> Charles A O'Reilly and Jennifer A Chatman, "Transformational Leader or Narcissist? How Grandiose Narcissists Can Create and Destroy Organizations and Institutions," *California Management Review* 62, no. 3 (2020): 5–27.

<sup>6</sup> Agus Purwanto et al., "Effect of Transformational and Transactional Leadership Style on Public Health Centre Performance," *Journal of Research in Business, Economics, and Education* 2, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>7</sup> Hermínia Pereira Coelho Rodrigues and Jorge Ávila de Lima, "Instructional Leadership and Student Achievement: School Leaders' Perspectives," *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 27, no. 2 (March 3, 2024): 360–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2020.1869312>.

<sup>8</sup> Afzal Sayed Munna, "Instructional Leadership and Role of Module Leaders," *International Journal of Educational Reform* 32, no. 1 (January 4, 2023): 38–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10567879211042321>.

<sup>9</sup> Zulfiqar Ahmed Iqbal et al., "Impact of Authoritative and Laissez-Faire Leadership on Thriving at Work: The Moderating Role of Conscientiousness," *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education* 11, no. 3 (2021): 667–85.

when team members want more involvement or cooperation. It works incredibly well during emergencies or when a prompt, decisive decision is required to overcome obstacles and advance the team.<sup>10</sup>

The core principle of servant leadership is that leaders should serve their followers.<sup>11</sup> This approach highly values team members' development and well-being to foster personal development and assist their success. Empathy, attentive listening, and emphasis on teamwork are traits of servant leaders. By prioritising the needs of others, they create a climate of mutual respect and trust.<sup>12</sup> Increased engagement, a sense of shared purpose, and improved employee satisfaction are all possible outcomes of servant leadership. Even if outcomes could take longer to manifest, long-term effects are frequently typified by a driven and devoted staff that is dedicated to the goal of the school.<sup>13</sup>

The foundation of emotional leadership is the leader's capacity to recognise, comprehend, and control emotions in both them and their team members.<sup>14</sup> Emotionally intelligent leaders can resolve problems amicably, build solid relationships, and create a great work atmosphere. Emotional leaders can improve teamwork and motivation by identifying and attending to the emotional needs of their team. However, emotions can also cause problems if they are not well controlled. For emotional leadership to be successful, a leader must strike the correct balance between aggressiveness and empathy.<sup>15</sup> This is because leaders must motivate without sacrificing the objectives of the company. This strategy can improve interpersonal relationships and foster a positive work environment, increasing team performance.

### Strategies to foster effective leadership styles

Promoting a culture of ongoing learning and development is necessary for effective instructional leadership. Setting aside time for the professional development of educators is a crucial tactic. This can entail offering chances for workshops, training, and group learning projects.<sup>16</sup> Based on observations made in the classroom, instructional leaders should actively interact with instructors, providing them with helpful criticism and encouragement. Furthermore, it is critical to establish a shared vision for academic success and to ensure that organisational objectives and instructional strategies are in line. To further enhance instructional leadership, frequent evaluations of curricula and methods of instruction are implemented to pinpoint areas that need improvement. Ultimately, encouraging a collaborative learning environment and empowering teachers leads to better learning results for learners.<sup>17</sup>

Well-defined expectations, structure, and clarity are the foundations of transactional leadership.<sup>18</sup> One tactic is to set reward schemes and performance measures linked to predetermined objectives. This gives workers a foundation to understand what is expected of them and the repercussions of their behaviour. It is critical to communicate roles, duties, and expectations. A transactional leadership strategy benefits from regular feedback sessions when accomplishments are acknowledged, and adjustments are made. Incentives and performance reviews further strengthen the transactional approach.<sup>19</sup> To keep a motivated and upbeat work environment, however, managers must carefully balance the use of incentives and sanctions.

<sup>10</sup> Darlene Fisher, "Educational Leadership and the Impact of Societal Culture on Effective Practices," *Journal of Research in International Education* 20, no. 2 (August 11, 2021): 134–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14752409211032531>.

<sup>11</sup> Alice Canavesi and Eliana Minelli, "Servant Leadership: A Systematic Literature Review and Network Analysis," *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 34, no. 3 (September 28, 2022): 267–89, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10672-021-09381-3>.

<sup>12</sup> Izhak Berkovich and Ori Eyal, *A Model of Emotional Leadership in Schools: Effective Leadership to Support Teachers' Emotional Wellness* (Routledge, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Timmy Ardian Roring, "The Comparisons of Cohesive Devices Used in Online Football News Published by Jakarta Post and Guardian" (Widya Mandala Catholic University, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Ian Macqueen, "The Role of Religion and Theology in the Organisation of Student Activists.," A. Heffernan & N. Nieftagodien, *Students Must Rise: Youth Struggle in South Africa Before and Beyond Soweto* 76 (2016): 24–33.

<sup>15</sup> Berkovich and Eyal, *A Model of Emotional Leadership in Schools: Effective Leadership to Support Teachers' Emotional Wellness*.

<sup>16</sup> O'Reilly and Chatman, "Transformational Leader or Narcissist? How Grandiose Narcissists Can Create and Destroy Organizations and Institutions."

<sup>17</sup> Saleh et al., "Exploring Leadership Styles in Organizational Behavior: A Systematic Review."

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Murphy, "Leading Through Turbulent Times: Ethical Leadership During Crisis," *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 23, no. 5 (2020): 562–80.

<sup>19</sup> Arnold B Bakker et al., "Daily Transformational Leadership: A Source of Inspiration for Follower Performance?," *European Management Journal* 41, no. 5 (2023): 700–708.

The foundation of authoritative leadership is the ability to set a clear direction and vision.<sup>20</sup> Presenting this idea in an engaging and motivating way is one helpful tactic. A strong sense of purpose should be expressed by leaders, who should highlight the objectives and mission of the company. Making decisions requires confidence and decisiveness, particularly in trying circumstances. While retaining the last say in essential choices, leaders should aggressively seek and value team members' opinions to cultivate an authoritative leadership style.<sup>21</sup> Building trust and alignment with the company vision requires transparent decision-making procedures and open channels of communication. Continual evaluation and revision of the vision in response to external circumstances and organisational requirements guarantee flexibility and long-term success.<sup>22</sup>

Serving others' needs is servant leadership's heart.<sup>23</sup> Leaders should actively listen to their team members to understand their goals, worries, and difficulties when using this approach. Establishing a welcoming and inclusive workplace where team members feel appreciated is critical. The servant leadership philosophy aligns with encouraging open communication and offering resources for professional and personal development.<sup>24</sup> Another powerful tactic is to set an example for the team and model the required values and behaviours. This entails being approachable, sympathetic, and proactive in resolving problems that affect other team members. Acknowledging and applauding team members' accomplishments strengthens the servant leadership model and fosters a supportive and cooperative work environment.<sup>25</sup>

Practical understanding and management of emotions are critical to emotional leadership.<sup>26</sup> Leaders must improve their emotional intelligence and cultivate empathy, self-awareness, and relationship management abilities. An emotionally intelligent workplace values open communication and allows team members to express their feelings freely. Emotional leadership is aided by providing chances for team-building exercises and encouraging a positive work atmosphere. Leaders should be aware of the emotional needs of the people in their teams and offer assistance and direction when needed.<sup>27</sup> Effective emotional leadership requires making complex judgments while maintaining a sympathetic demeanour. Ultimately, leaders can improve workplace teamwork, resilience, and general well-being by developing emotional intelligence in them and their teams.<sup>28</sup>

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Power and Influence Theory (PIT) and Leadership Trait Theory (LTT) underpinned the study of leadership styles within South African secondary schools. These theories provided a lens to scrutinise leadership dynamics within the educational milieu and offered a scaffold to understand how leadership impacted the performance and dynamics within secondary schools.

### Power and Influence Theory

As elucidated by Zaaïman, power is the catalyst that propels individuals to accomplish tasks, while authority is the rights bestowed upon an individual by their position.<sup>29</sup> This theory delimits seven sources of power: coercive, legitimate, expert, reward, referent, informational, and charisma power, each with its unique attributes and impacts on leadership and organisational behaviour. Particularly, legitimate, reward,

<sup>20</sup> Ahmed Iqbal et al., "Impact of Authoritative and Laissez-Faire Leadership on Thriving at Work: The Moderating Role of Conscientiousness."

<sup>21</sup> Fisher, "Educational Leadership and the Impact of Societal Culture on Effective Practices."

<sup>22</sup> Ahmed Iqbal et al., "Impact of Authoritative and Laissez-Faire Leadership on Thriving at Work: The Moderating Role of Conscientiousness."

<sup>23</sup> Berkovich and Eyal, *A Model of Emotional Leadership in Schools: Effective Leadership to Support Teachers' Emotional Wellness*.

<sup>24</sup> Avinash Pawar et al., "Organizational Servant Leadership," *International Journal of Educational Administration, Management, and Leadership*, 2020, 63–76.

<sup>25</sup> Roring, "The Comparisons of Cohesive Devices Used in Online Football News Published by Jakarta Post and Guardian."

<sup>26</sup> Berkovich and Eyal, *A Model of Emotional Leadership in Schools: Effective Leadership to Support Teachers' Emotional Wellness*.

<sup>27</sup> Macqueen, "The Role of Religion and Theology in the Organisation of Student Activists."

<sup>28</sup> Berkovich and Eyal, *A Model of Emotional Leadership in Schools: Effective Leadership to Support Teachers' Emotional Wellness*.

<sup>29</sup> Jaco Zaaïman, "Leadership Dynamics in a Changing World: Adaptability and Resilience in Modern Organizations," *Journal of Organizational Leadership* 15, no. 2 (2020): 45–58.

and coercive power are linked to transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire styles of leadership, respectively.<sup>30</sup>

Zaaiman argues that power is instrumental in steering the trajectory of organisations, emphasising the utilisation of power and influence in achieving organisational objectives. He posits that effective leaders are held in high esteem not for their personal attributes, but for their prowess in navigating the organisation through tumultuous times.<sup>31</sup> O'Reilly and Chatman accentuate that leaders exuding poise, self-control, and power are readily noticed and acknowledged within an organisation. The relevance of this theory to the study was profound.<sup>32</sup> It provided a framework to analyse how school leaders in South African secondary schools exercised power and influence to drive organisational goals, how they were perceived by their followers, and how the dynamics of power played a role in shaping the culture and performance of the schools.

### Leadership Trait Theory

This theory, rooted in the early 20th century, posits that leadership effectiveness is intertwined with certain personal traits such as integrity, assertiveness, intelligence, adaptability, education level, and social and financial standing.<sup>33</sup> According to Dinibutun, traits like adaptability, assertiveness, motivation capacity, courage, creativity, decisiveness, emotional stability, intelligence, people skills, perseverance, self-confidence, and trustworthiness are synonymous with great leadership.<sup>34</sup> Leadership trait theory provides a framework to discern leaders from followers based on inherent or acquired traits, postulating that certain traits are pivotal for effective leadership.<sup>35</sup>

The theory avers that these innate or cultivated traits significantly influence a leader's ability to lead successfully. The theories are relevant to the study as they provided a basis for examining the traits of school leaders within South African secondary schools, assessing how these traits influenced their leadership style and how they, in turn, impacted the performance and culture within the secondary schools. By comparing the leadership traits of school leaders with the prevailing leadership styles and the ensuing impact on school culture and performance, the study aimed to unearth insights that could potentially inform better leadership practices within the educational sector in South Africa. The interplay of Power and Influence Theory and Leadership Trait Theory in this study paved the way for a nuanced understanding of leadership dynamics within secondary schools, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on effective leadership in education. The theoretical framework underscored a multifaceted understanding of leadership within South African secondary schools in the Vhembe District. The Leadership Trait Theory delved into the inherent or acquired traits that define influential leaders. Various leadership styles, such as Transformational, Instructional, Transactional, Authoritative, Servant, and Emotional Leadership, were explored, each shedding light on different facets of leadership behaviours and their impact on school culture and performance. This theory and style provided a robust scaffold for the study, aiming to delve deeper into the leadership dynamics and propose strategic recommendations to enhance educational outcomes in South African secondary schools. Through this theoretical lens, the study aspired to contribute to the broader discourse on effective educational leadership, fostering a conducive and growth-oriented learning environment.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

This study employed a qualitative research approach to examine leadership styles within South African secondary schools. This approach was conducive to exploring complex social phenomena and uncovering

<sup>30</sup> O'Reilly and Chatman, "Transformational Leader or Narcissist? How Grandiose Narcissists Can Create and Destroy Organizations and Institutions."

<sup>31</sup> Zaaiman, "Leadership Dynamics in a Changing World: Adaptability and Resilience in Modern Organizations."

<sup>32</sup> O'Reilly and Chatman, "Transformational Leader or Narcissist? How Grandiose Narcissists Can Create and Destroy Organizations and Institutions."

<sup>33</sup> Sihame Benmira and Moyosolu Agboola, "Evolution of Leadership Theory," *BMJ Leader* 5, no. 1 (March 2021): 3–5, <https://doi.org/10.1136/leader-2020-000296>.

<sup>34</sup> S. R. Dinibutun, "The Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Employee Performance and Job Satisfaction: A Critical Review," *Journal of Research in Business and Management* 8, no. 3 (2020): 32–38.

<sup>35</sup> Benmira and Agboola, "Evolution of Leadership Theory."

the underlying meanings, interpretations, and experiences associated with leadership styles within an educational context.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected using in-depth interviews, focus groups, and observations. These qualitative methods are well-suited for capturing nuanced insights and understanding the lived experiences of educators and school leaders who were interviewed about leadership practices within their schools.<sup>36</sup>

### **Sampling method and study sample size**

The study used purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, to select participants with significant experience and knowledge about leadership dynamics in South African secondary schools. Purposive sampling is effective in qualitative research where the depth of understanding is prioritised over generalizability.<sup>37</sup> The sample size in qualitative research is often guided by the concept of saturation, where data collection continues until no new themes or insights emerge.<sup>38</sup> In this study, a plan engaged 20 participants, twelve (12) school leaders, Eight (8) educators, and potentially from various schools within the South African secondary schools in the Vhembe District. This range allowed for diverse perspectives while ensuring the feasibility of in-depth analysis.

### **The population of this Study**

The study population of twenty (20) participants included school leaders and educators from Vhembe District secondary schools. This population of twenty participants was selected to provide a comprehensive exploration of leadership dynamics and their impacts on educator effectiveness, learner engagement, and overall school culture. Engaging various stakeholders within the Vhembe district secondary school system was crucial to gaining a holistic perspective on leadership styles and their effects on educational outcomes and school culture.<sup>39</sup>

### **Data collection instruments**

For this study, tailored interview guides were designed to explore the nuances of leadership styles and their impact on educator effectiveness, learner engagement, and school culture, aligning with the study objectives. Analysing relevant school documents such as leadership policies, meeting minutes, and performance reports provided insights into the formal leadership practices and their impact on school performance.

### **Data Analysis**

The primary data for this study were qualitative, encompassing textual and narrative data collected from in-depth interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. This study used thematic analysis to distil themes related to leadership styles and their implications on educator effectiveness, learner engagement, and school culture.

Handling qualitative data involves several steps. According to Deterding and Waters, the data should be organised and prepared for analysis, including transcribing interviews, organising focus group discussions, and collecting observations and documents.<sup>40</sup> Following this, the data were reviewed repeatedly to gain a thorough understanding before commencing the coding process. Codes were generated to identify significant data features relevant to the research questions. Subsequently, these codes were grouped into potential themes, reviewed, defined, and named. The findings were written with ample extracts from the data to demonstrate the themes identified. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis, techniques such as member checking, where participants verify the accuracy of the findings, and triangulation, which entails comparing different data sources or methods, were employed.

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<sup>36</sup> Jude Robinson, "Using Focus Groups," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research in Education* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), 338–48.

<sup>37</sup> Samuel J Stratton, "Population Research: Convenience Sampling Strategies," *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 36, no.4 (2021):373–74.

<sup>38</sup> Daniël Lakens, "Sample Size Justification," *Collabra: Psychology* 8, no. 1 (2022): 33267.

<sup>39</sup> Robinson, "Using Focus Groups."

<sup>40</sup> Nicole M Deterding and Mary C Waters, "Flexible Coding of In-Depth Interviews: A Twenty-First-Century Approach," *Sociological Methods & Research* 50, no. 2 (2021): 708–39.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

### *Prevailing leadership styles and their impact on educator performance and classroom dynamics*

Collaborative leadership emerged as a highly beneficial approach, positively influencing educator performance and classroom dynamics. By involving educators in decision-making, school leaders effectively improved motivation and job satisfaction among teachers. This inclusive environment empowered educators to contribute innovative teaching methods and strategies, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes. The shared leadership model facilitated a supportive and cohesive school culture, promoting professional development and teacher-peer collaboration.

Despite the advantages of collaborative leadership, the study also highlighted challenges associated with inconsistent leadership approaches. The variation in leadership styles among different school leaders sometimes resulted in confusion and uncertainty among educators. This inconsistency could undermine the benefits of a collaborative environment, leading to fragmented communication and misaligned goals within the school. Consequently, such discrepancies negatively impacted classroom dynamics, causing disruptions in teaching effectiveness and overall school performance.

*"When the principal involves us in decision-making, it feels like we're truly part of the school's mission. I'm more motivated to try out new teaching methods because I know my ideas are valued."*

**Educators response.**

*"One day, we were told to focus on collaborative projects, and the next, there's a sudden shift to a more top-down approach. It is confusing and makes it hard to align our teaching strategies with the school's goals."* **Educators response.**

The findings underscore the importance of maintaining a balance in leadership styles to optimise the effectiveness of secondary schools. While collaborative leadership is instrumental in fostering a positive school culture and enhancing educator performance, it must be applied consistently across the institution. School leaders should strive for a cohesive and aligned leadership approach, ensuring that all educational community members share a common vision and understanding of the goals. Regular professional development and leadership training can help achieve this alignment, providing school leaders with the necessary skills to implement collaborative practices effectively. The appropriate leadership styles are crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of secondary schools in South Africa. When applied consistently, collaborative leadership can significantly improve educator performance and classroom dynamics. However, attention must be paid to avoiding inconsistencies in leadership approaches to prevent potential disruptions and ensure the sustained success of educational initiatives.

### *Correlation between leadership styles, educator effectiveness, and learner academic performance*

Transformational leadership emerged as a particularly effective style within the context of secondary schools in South Africa. This leadership style is characterised by the ability of leaders to inspire and motivate their staff through a shared vision and commitment to educational excellence. Transformational leaders encourage professional growth, foster a culture of innovation, and empower educators to take ownership of their teaching practices. The study found that transformational leadership was strongly associated with high levels of educator motivation and enthusiasm. Educators under transformational leadership reported feeling more supported and valued, which translated into a greater willingness to experiment with innovative teaching methods. This positive environment enhanced learner engagement, as motivated and innovative teachers, were more capable of creating dynamic and stimulating classroom experiences. Consequently, this led to improved academic performance among learners, as they benefited from more effective and engaging instruction.

In contrast, the study identified that more authoritarian leadership styles had detrimental effects on educator effectiveness and learner academic performance. Authoritarian leaders tend to exert strict control over their staff, often emphasising adherence to rules and procedures over creativity and professional autonomy. This restrictive environment can stifle educator creativity and reduce their enthusiasm for teaching.

*"Professional development sessions have been invaluable. They help us understand how to lead effectively and support our colleagues. I've learned that being a good leader is about inspiring others, not just managing them."* **School leaders response.**

Educators working under authoritarian leadership reported lower levels of motivation and job satisfaction. The lack of professional freedom and support hindered their ability to innovate and adapt their teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of their learners. This rigidity in teaching practices often led to less effective instruction, as educators were less able to engage and inspire their students. As a result, learner academic performance suffered as the classroom environment became more focused on compliance rather than active learning and critical thinking.

The findings highlighted the importance of adopting a balanced and adaptable leadership approach to maximise educator effectiveness and learner academic performance. Although transformational leadership is highly beneficial, school leaders should be aware of the potential drawbacks of overly authoritarian practices. Leaders should strive to create an environment that supports educator autonomy and innovation while maintaining clear expectations and accountability. To achieve this balance, school leaders can benefit from ongoing professional development in leadership skills, focusing on strategies to inspire and motivate their staff. Additionally, fostering a collaborative school culture where educators feel valued and empowered can enhance the school's overall effectiveness. Regular feedback mechanisms and opportunities for professional growth can also help educators continuously improve their teaching practices, further contributing to positive learner outcomes. The study emphasised the critical role of leadership styles in influencing educator effectiveness and learner academic performance. Transformational leadership, characterised by inspiration and support, leads to higher levels of motivation and innovation among educators, resulting in better learner engagement and academic success. Conversely, authoritarian leadership can create restrictive environments that hinder educator creativity and reduce teaching effectiveness, negatively impacting learner performance. School leaders must strive to harness the benefits of transformational leadership while avoiding the pitfalls of authoritarianism to foster an optimal educational environment.

*"Our headmaster really encourages us to grow professionally. The support and innovation freedom has made me more enthusiastic about my work. I've seen a noticeable difference in how engaged my students are, and it reflects in their grades."* **Educators response.**

*"It's tough working under strict leadership. There's so much emphasis on following rules that it feels like there's no room for creativity. I find it harder to connect with my students and adapt lessons to their needs."* **Educators response.**

### ***Influence of leadership styles on school culture***

Leadership styles were found to play a crucial role in shaping the school dynamics. Leaders who adopted transformational and collaborative approaches successfully created positive school dynamics characterised by high morale, a sense of community, and active engagement from staff and learners. In contrast, while maintaining order, more authoritative leadership approaches sometimes led to a less open culture and less conducive to creative and dynamic interactions. Leadership styles are pivotal in shaping the school dynamics, directly influencing the morale, sense of community, and levels of engagement of staff and learners. The study highlights how different leadership approaches contribute to the development of distinct school cultures, with transformational and collaborative leadership styles that foster a more positive and dynamic environment, while authoritative styles can maintain order but limit openness and creativity.

Transformational and collaborative leadership styles were found to be instrumental in creating a positive school culture. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their staff by articulating a clear vision and fostering a shared commitment to the school's goals. This approach builds a sense of purpose and belonging among educators and learners, contributing to high morale and a strong sense of community. Transformational leaders encourage educators to strive for excellence, instilling confidence and enthusiasm. This motivational aspect helps create a vibrant and proactive school culture in which staff and learners are eager to participate in school activities and initiatives. By emphasising professional

development, transformational leaders support educators in enhancing their skills and competencies. This focus on growth fosters a culture of continuous improvement and innovation, as educators feel empowered to implement new teaching strategies and share best practices. Collaborative leadership, a component of transformational leadership, involves educators and learners in decision-making processes. This inclusive approach promotes a sense of ownership and accountability, leading to a more significant investment in the school's success and a collaborative culture where everyone's contributions are valued.

*"I think there's a place for structure, but it needs to be balanced with openness. We need to feel we have clear expectations and the freedom to contribute our ideas and collaborate. That is what creates a positive atmosphere for both teachers and students."* **School leaders response.**

While authoritative leadership styles can effectively maintain order and discipline, they often do so at the expense of creating an open and dynamic school culture. Authoritative leaders tend to centralise decision-making and emphasise strict adherence to rules and procedures. Although this approach can ensure consistency and compliance, it can stifle creativity and limit meaningful interaction and engagement opportunities. Authoritative leaders often make unilateral decisions with limited input from educators and learners. This can lead to a hierarchical and top-down school culture, where staff may feel disempowered and less motivated to contribute ideas or take initiative. The authoritative leadership's focus on rules and discipline can create a rigid environment where innovation and experimentation are discouraged. Educators may be less inclined to adopt new teaching methods or engage in collaborative projects, leading to a more static and less dynamic school culture. Authoritative leadership can hinder the development of a strong sense of community, as the emphasis on order and control can overshadow efforts to build relationships and foster a supportive and inclusive environment. This can result in lower morale and reduced engagement among staff and learners.

The findings suggest that a balanced approach to leadership can optimise school culture. Although transformational and collaborative leadership styles are generally more effective in creating a positive and dynamic environment, some elements of authoritative leadership can be beneficial, particularly in maintaining structure and ensuring accountability. School leaders should strive to combine the flexibility and inclusivity of transformational and collaborative leadership with the clear expectations and accountability of authoritative leadership, school leaders can create a balanced environment that supports innovation and order. Encouraging open and transparent communication channels can help bridge the gap between different leadership styles, ensuring that staff and learners feel heard and valued while maintaining a cohesive and orderly school culture. Establishing a shared vision that aligns with the school's goals and values can unify the school community, fostering a sense of common purpose and collaboration, regardless of the predominant leadership style. Leadership styles significantly influence the culture within secondary schools. Transformational and collaborative leadership styles are associated with positive school cultures characterised by high morale, a sense of community, and active engagement. Conversely, authoritative leadership, while maintaining order effectively, can result in less open and dynamic school cultures. School leaders should aim to balance these approaches to cultivate an environment that supports both innovation and structure, ultimately improving the overall effectiveness and well-being of the school community.

*"Our school feels like a community. The principal always seeks our input, and it makes a big difference. We're more united, and I think the students pick up on that positive energy."* **Educators response.**

*"There's a sense of order, but it's almost stifling. We stick to the rules, but it's at the cost of creativity and openness. There's little room for sharing new ideas or approaches, which affects how we connect as a staff."* **Educators response.**

## DISCUSSION

This study sought to address two key research questions: (1) What leadership styles are used in South African secondary schools? (2) How do the identified leadership styles correlate with educator effectiveness and the resultant academic performance of learners? The findings of preliminary interviews with school leaders, educators, and learners provide significant insight into these questions.

### a. Leadership Styles in South African Secondary Schools

The investigation revealed diverse leadership styles practised in South African secondary schools. Collaborative leadership emerged as a frequently mentioned approach, where principals and department heads emphasised the importance of involving educators and learners in decision-making. This aligns with the concept of *distributed leadership*, where leadership responsibilities are shared to create a more inclusive and participatory environment, which has been shown to enhance school performance.<sup>41</sup> The emphasis on collaboration suggests that many South African school leaders recognise the value of fostering a collective vision and shared responsibility in achieving educational goals.

Another prevalent style identified was transformational leadership. Many school leaders described their efforts to inspire and motivate their staff, by creating an environment that encourages innovation and professional growth. This finding is consistent with a substantial body of literature that highlights the positive effects of transformational leadership in educational settings, particularly its ability to improve educator motivation, improve teaching practices, and lead to better student outcomes.<sup>42</sup> Transformational leadership in these schools often involved setting a vision that educators could rally around, creating a culture of enthusiasm and continuous improvement.

However, authoritative leadership was also observed, with some school leaders focusing on maintaining discipline and order within their schools. While this approach ensures a structured and orderly environment, it can also stifle creativity and limit open communication, as Yukl and Bush suggested.<sup>43</sup> Although effective in ensuring compliance and maintaining standards, the authoritative style may not fully support the dynamic and flexible teaching approaches needed in modern educational settings.

### b. Correlation Between Leadership Styles, Educator Effectiveness, and Learner Performance

The study also explored how these leadership styles correlate with educator effectiveness and learner academic performance. A clear trend emerged, indicating that transformational leadership was strongly associated with positive outcomes in both areas. Educators working under transformational leaders reported feeling more motivated and supported, translating into greater effort in their teaching practices and a willingness to adopt innovative methods. This, in turn, positively impacted learner engagement and academic achievement, corroborating the findings of Fullan, who emphasises the role of transformational leadership in fostering sustainable school improvement.<sup>44</sup>

Collaborative leadership also had a positive correlation with educator effectiveness. Educators under collaborative leaders felt empowered and valued, contributing to a dynamic and innovative teaching environment. The autonomy and support provided by these leaders allowed educators to implement more adaptive, learner-centered pedagogies, which were linked to improved learner performance. This supports the findings of Leithwood and Jantzi, which highlight the benefits of participatory leadership on school outcomes.<sup>45</sup>

On the contrary, authoritative leadership was sometimes associated with less favourable outcomes. Educators in these environments often felt constrained, with limited opportunities for creativity and professional growth. This stifling atmosphere could hinder their effectiveness in the classroom, potentially leading to lower levels of learner engagement and academic performance. While authoritative leadership can ensure discipline and focus, its rigidity may limit innovative practices necessary for a vibrant educational environment, as Yukl and Bush noted.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Alma Harris and James Spillane, "Distributed Leadership through the Looking Glass," *Management in Education* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 31–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020607085623>.

<sup>42</sup> Bernie Bass, *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership. Theory, Research & Managerial Applications* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Kenneth Leithwood and Doris Jantzi, "The Effects of Transformational Leadership on Organizational Conditions and Student Engagement with School," *Journal of Educational Administration* 38, no. 2 (May 1, 2000): 112–29, <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230010320064>.

<sup>43</sup> Gary A. Yukl, *Leadership in Organization*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2006); Tony Bush, *Theories of Educational Leadership and Management*, 4th ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> Michael Fullan, *Leading in a Culture of Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

<sup>45</sup> Leithwood and Jantzi, "The Effects of Transformational Leadership on Organizational Conditions and Student Engagement with School."

<sup>46</sup> Yukl, *Leadership in Organization*; Bush, *Theories of Educational Leadership and Management*.

## Impact of Leadership Styles on Vhembe District Schools Dynamics

The leadership styles practised within these schools also profoundly impacted overall school dynamics. Schools led by transformational leaders were characterised by high morale, a strong sense of community, and an energised workforce. These leaders' vision and enthusiasm often permeated the entire school, creating an environment where both educators and learners felt engaged and motivated. Deal and Peterson underscore the role of leadership in shaping a positive school culture, and the findings from this study support their argument.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, schools with authoritative leadership were often described as orderly but somewhat mechanical. Although these environments effectively maintained discipline, they sometimes lacked the vibrancy and open communication necessary for a more holistic and engaging school culture. This observation aligns with the concerns raised by Gronn, who advocates for a balanced approach that combines the strengths of authoritative and transformational leadership.<sup>48</sup>

## Significance and Interpretation of Results

The findings of this study confirm much of the existing literature while also providing nuanced insights into the leadership styles prevalent in South African secondary schools. Transformational and collaborative leadership styles were generally associated with more positive educational outcomes in terms of teacher innovation and student engagement. These leadership approaches create an environment where educators feel supported and valued, improving teaching effectiveness and improving learner performance. This aligns with the broader educational leadership literature, emphasising the importance of supportive, visionary leadership in achieving school success.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast, while effective in ensuring discipline and order, authoritative leadership may inadvertently hinder the development of a more dynamic and inclusive school culture. This finding suggests that a more balanced leadership approach, integrating the clarity and direction of authoritative leadership with the motivational and inclusive aspects of transformational leadership, could be most effective in fostering a healthy school culture and improving educational outcomes. The leadership styles adopted by school heads in South African secondary schools play a crucial role in shaping educator effectiveness and learner academic performance. Transformational and collaborative leadership styles are particularly effective in creating positive educational environments that enhance both teaching and learning. However, authoritative leadership, while necessary for maintaining order, may need to be balanced with more supportive and inclusive practices to foster a more vibrant and effective school culture. These findings highlight the importance of leadership in education and suggest that school leaders who can balance different leadership styles may be better equipped to meet the complex needs of their schools. Future research can explore how such balanced leadership approaches can be developed and sustained in various educational contexts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, several preliminary recommendations are proposed to optimise leadership practices and improve school effectiveness. These recommendations include enhancing collaborative leadership practices, professional development focused on transformational leadership, consistency in leadership approach, fostering culturally responsive leadership, inclusive decision-making processes, and the development of community engagement initiatives. These are discussed below.

### Enhancement of Collaborative Leadership Practices

The study identified Collaborative leadership practices as highly beneficial, contributing positively to educator performance and classroom dynamics. Schools must prioritise leadership approaches that promote collaboration and inclusivity. Training programs for school leaders should focus on developing

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<sup>47</sup> Terrence E. Deal and Kent D. Peterson, *Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> Peter Gronn, "Distributed Leadership as a Unit of Analysis," *The Leadership Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (August 2002): 423–51, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843\(02\)00120-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(02)00120-0).

<sup>49</sup> Bernard M Bass, "Bass & Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications," *The Free Press Google Schola* 2 (1990): 173–84; Leithwood and Jantzi, "The Effects of Transformational Leadership on Organizational Conditions and Student Engagement with School."

skills for involving educators and learners in decision-making processes. By fostering a collaborative environment, school leaders can improve motivation and job satisfaction among educators, leading to more innovative teaching methods and improved learner engagement. This participatory approach empowers educators and cultivates a sense of ownership and accountability, which is essential for creating a supportive and cohesive school culture.

### **Professional Development Focused on Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership was found to have a profound impact on educator motivation and learner performance. Implementing professional development initiatives that emphasise transformational leadership could be highly beneficial. These programs should aim to equip school leaders with the skills to inspire and motivate educators, fostering an environment conducive to innovative teaching and improved learner performance. Transformational leadership training should include components such as vision setting, motivational strategies, and fostering professional growth among educators. By nurturing transformational leaders, schools can create a dynamic and engaging educational environment that promotes continuous improvement and excellence.

### **Consistency in Leadership Approach**

One of the challenges identified in the study was the issue of inconsistent leadership practices, which can lead to confusion and adversely impact classroom dynamics. Schools should strive for a more uniform approach to leadership by implementing regular training sessions and workshops that reinforce the school's vision and leadership strategies. Consistency in leadership ensures that all educational community members are aligned with the school's goals and expectations. This uniformity reduces uncertainty and fosters a stable and predictable environment, crucial for effective teaching and learning. A consistent leadership approach also facilitates better communication and collaboration among educators, further enhancing the school's overall effectiveness.

### **Fostering Culturally Responsive Leadership**

In South African secondary schools' diverse socio-cultural context, leadership practices must be aligned with the community's values and traditions. Leaders should be trained in cultural competency to better understand and integrate these socio-cultural dynamics into the school environment. Culturally responsive leadership involves recognising and valuing the cultural backgrounds of learners and educators and incorporating these perspectives into educational practices and policies. By fostering culturally responsive leadership, schools can improve the relevance and effectiveness of their educational practices, making learning more meaningful and inclusive for all students. This approach also promotes equity and respect within the school community, contributing to a more harmonious and supportive learning environment.

### **Inclusive Decision-Making Processes**

Inclusive decision-making processes are critical for fostering a democratic and participatory school culture. Schools should establish mechanisms for more participatory decision-making involving educators and learners. This could include setting up committees or forums where the input of various stakeholders is sought and valued. Inclusive decision-making ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, leading to more well-rounded and effective decisions. It also empowers educators and learners, giving them a voice in the direction of the school and fostering a sense of shared responsibility and commitment. By implementing inclusive decision-making processes, schools can create a more engaged and motivated school community, ultimately improving educational outcomes.

### **Development of Community Engagement Initiatives**

Strengthening the relationship between schools and the wider community is essential to creating a supportive educational environment. Schools should develop community engagement initiatives, such as organising community events, parent-educator meetings, and forums for community leaders to interact with schools. These initiatives foster a sense of mutual support and understanding, enhancing the school's role as a central and valued institution within the community. Community engagement also provides valuable collaboration and resource-sharing opportunities, benefiting the school and the wider community.

## CONCLUSION

In concluding this study, it has become clear that exploring leadership styles within South African secondary schools has yielded profound insights into the dynamics of school culture and its impact on all stakeholders. The preliminary findings of the pilot study, which included the perspectives of school leadership, educators, and learners, provided a valuable lens through which to view the intricate relationship between leadership practices and the educational milieu. The diverse range of leadership styles observed among school leaders in the country highlighted the importance of a balanced approach that combined authoritative and nurturing aspects. This balance was critical to maintaining discipline while fostering a supportive and encouraging learning and personal development environment. The educators' reflections on how these leadership styles affected their teaching experience and professional growth emphasised the need for a leadership approach that was both transformational and consistent, creating a conducive environment for innovative teaching and practical learning. From the learners' perspectives, the significance of leadership in shaping the school's broader culture and their engagement in learning could not be overstated. Their satisfaction and engagement were evidently higher in environments where leaders were approachable and considerate of learner welfare. This underscores the need for leadership practices that are not only academically focused but also empathetic to the needs and well-being of the learners.

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