

The Migration from Compliance to Collaboration: Remodelling Accountability Frameworks in Unionized School Settings



Thembinkosi Zwane ¹  & David Matsepe ¹ 

¹ University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

The study critically examines the contestation and reimagining of accountability frameworks within unionized public-school environments. The study used collaboration theory to explore the conditions under which principals, deputy principals (DPs), departmental heads (DHs), school governing body (SGB) members, and teacher unions develop inclusive and participatory approaches to school governance. A qualitative inquiry was conducted involving 16 purposefully selected participants, comprising principals (n=4), school management team members (n=4), SGB members (n=4), and teacher unionists (n=4). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically to identify themes, patterns, power negotiations, and common understandings. The study indicated that while compliance continues to be a prominent topic, particularly with the growing recognition of the value of collaboration in maintaining school functionality and legitimacy, it is crucial to work together to facilitate accountability measures. The study recommended the institutionalization of multi-stakeholder forums, co-authored frameworks, and professional development models that prioritize relational leadership and dialogic conversation. Therefore, this provides a pathway toward democratic, equitable, and contextually responsive school governance practices in unionized educational settings. The study examined how collaborative accountability is practiced and experienced across different provinces and school types. The study makes a profound contribution to a national knowledge base that informs adaptive policy reform and best practices, central dialogue, collective decision-making, and inclusive governance.

Correspondence

Thembinkosi Zwane
Email:

zwanetrevor01@gmail.com

Publication History

Received: 10th July, 2025

Accepted: 11th

November, 2025

Published online:

30th December, 2025

To Cite this Article:

Zwane, Thembinkosi, and David Matsepe. "The Migration from Compliance to Collaboration: Remodelling Accountability Frameworks in Unionized School Settings." *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 6, no. 14 (2025): 3959 - 3973, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.202561443>.

Keywords: Accountability frameworks, Collaborative frameworks, Participatory leadership, School governance, Stakeholder engagement, South African education

INTRODUCTION

Accountability in schools is a complex and multi-dimensional construct that has evolved gradually in recent years. The traditional model of accountability reinforces hierarchical compliance, external oversight, and standardization, which largely marginalizes local voices and reduces governance structures to technocratic processes.¹ In many educational contexts, particularly those marked by documented inequities and socio-economic challenges in South Africa, such models have demonstrated limitations in

¹ J. S. Benninga and S. Garcia, "Rethinking Accountability in Education: A Sociocultural Perspective," *Educational Review* 72, no. 1 (2020): 23–40; R. Hill and L. Stoll, "Accountability, Trust, and Professional Development," *Teachers College Record* 121, no. 3 (2019): 1–20.

addressing the emerging realities within schools and communities.² This study aims to reframe accountability through the lens of collaboration theory, conceptualizing it as a negotiated, interactive process involving multiple stakeholders working towards a shared goal.³

In South African public schools, the involvement of teacher unions has become significant in shaping governance and professional management issues. Their active involvement intersects with the development of policy frameworks, governance structures such as SGBs, and school leadership practices.⁴ Teacher unions have historically been perceived as adversarial entities advocating for their members, while at times being viewed as potential collaborators in enhancing educational outcomes.⁵ However, tension appears to persist concerning power imbalances, role clarity, and accountability mechanisms in unionized school settings.⁶ This research aims to analyse the dynamics and explore the conditions under which the accountability framework transitions from compliance to collaboration.

Accountability in education pertains to the mechanisms by which schools, educators, and other stakeholders are held responsible for providing quality education and achieving equitable outcomes.⁷ Traditionally, accountability has been linked to top-down mechanisms, including performance targets, inspections, and standardized testing, which are designed to ensure compliance with mandatory standards.⁸ While these measures serve as a clear benchmark, critics argue that they may undermine professional autonomy, foster a culture of blame, and overlook the complex social dimensions of schooling.⁹ Emerging contemporary scholarship has advocated for distributed and relational models of accountability that acknowledge the interdependencies among principals, teachers, policy advocates, and communities.¹⁰ These models emphasize collaborative accountability, involving stakeholders in decision-making, joint problem-solving, and fostering clear and transparent communication to enhance educational quality.¹¹

Collaboration theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how interaction can be structured to enhance trust, collective effectiveness, and mutual respect.¹² The education system in South Africa is characterized by a unique socio-political context and ongoing efforts to address historical imbalances.¹³ Teacher unions have played a significant role in shaping educational policies and labour relations, positioning themselves as influential stakeholders in advocating for teachers' rights, professional recognition, and conditions of service.¹⁴ Prominent unions, including the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), are central to the social and political landscape, influencing governance frameworks at multiple levels.¹⁵

² M. Mokhele and J. Stewart, "Accountability and School Governance in Disadvantaged Communities," *Journal of Education Policy* 35, no. 1 (2020): 68–84.

³ Chris Ansell and Alison Gash, "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 18, no. 4 (October 1, 2008): 543–71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum032>; G. K. T. Oduro and J. MacBeath, "School Leadership for Learning: Perspectives from Ghana and Scotland," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 49, no. 3 (2021): 430–48.

⁴ M. Mahlangu and B. Mhlongo, "The Role of Teacher Unions in Educational Governance in South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. 4 (2019): 1–12; S. Nyoni, "School Leadership and Teacher Unions: Collaboration or Conflict?," *International Journal of Educational Development* 88 (2022): 102525.

⁵ S. Sithole, "The Influence of Teacher Unions on Education Reform in South Africa," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 29, no. 54 (2021): 1–22.

⁶ S. Mokoena and R. Daniels, "Teacher Unions and School Governance: Exploring Tensions in Accountability," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 49, no. 2 (2021): 234–51.

⁷ H. Braun, "Accountability in Education: International Perspectives," *Oxford Review of Education* 45, no. 3 (2019): 292–306.

⁸ W. Au, *Accountability, High-Stakes Testing, and the Promise of Educational Equity* (Routledge, 2020); L. Evans and S. O'Donnell, "Accountability and Professional Autonomy in Schools: Challenges and Opportunities," *Professional Development in Education* 47, no. 4 (2021): 579–95.

⁹ A. Harris and J. Spillane, "Distributed Leadership and Accountability: The Interconnection," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 17, no. 1 (2018): 1–19; Evans and O'Donnell, "Accountability and Professional Autonomy in Schools: Challenges and Opportunities."

¹⁰ D. Frost and J. Durrant, "Teacher Leadership and Accountability: A Review of Recent Policy," *School Leadership & Management* 39, no. 5 (2019): 465–81; T. Townsend, "Reimagining Accountability in Schools: The Role of Collaboration," *International Journal of Educational Management* 36, no. 1 (2022): 1–16.

¹¹ J. MacBeath, A. MacBeath, and S. Swaffield, "Collaborative Accountability: New Directions in School Leadership," *Journal of Educational Change* 22, no. 2 (2021): 207–26.

¹² Ansell and Gash, "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice."

¹³ N. Spaul, "Education Quality and Equity in South Africa: An Update on Progress and Challenges," *Development Southern Africa* 36, no. 5 (2019): 704–19.

¹⁴ Mahlangu and Mhlongo, "The Role of Teacher Unions in Educational Governance in South Africa."

¹⁵ Sithole, "The Influence of Teacher Unions on Education Reform in South Africa."

School governance in South Africa is decentralized according to the constitution, with SGBs facilitating increased community participation and local accountability.¹⁶ However, tensions appear to arise as teacher unions and SGBs must navigate overlapping roles and occasionally conflicting mandates, particularly concerning school financial management, professional oversight, and disciplinary procedures.¹⁷ Principals and SMTs should regularly mediate these tensions while striving to comply with national accountability requirements.¹⁸ Recent studies emphasize the dual role of teacher unions as both enablers and disablers of school governance, underscoring the complex nature of their influence on professional management, collaborative environments, and leadership stability.¹⁹ A shared understanding of these roles is essential to restructure the accountability framework to include union participation while maintaining educational quality. Consequently, the discourse on accountability in educational institutions primarily focuses on adherence to external regulations, performance assessment, and oversight.²⁰ The compliance paradigm frequently positions unions and educators in adversarial roles, resulting in mistrust, resistance, and diminished school autonomy.²¹

Conversely, emerging and developing scholarship suggests a shift towards collaborative accountability models that enhance union participation as constructive engagement in governance processes.²² Collaborative accountability reinforces dialogues, shared responsibility, and the development of advocacy policies and practices tailored to local contexts.²³ Thus, it is necessary for schools to establish mechanisms for inclusive participation, enabling unions, principals, SMTs, and SGBs to negotiate roles and address conflicts constructively.²⁴ These frameworks are more attuned to the realities of historically marginalized communities and serve to promote democratic principles.²⁵

Despite the promise of collaboration, persistent challenges remain; power asymmetries, historical distrust, and role ambiguity can hinder authentic partnerships among union and school leadership.²⁶ Union representatives may perceive accountability as a form of managerial imposition, whereas school leaders may experience limitations due to union activism.²⁷ Furthermore, resource constraints and policy volatility exacerbate tensions and have the potential to complicate sustained collaboration.²⁸ Nevertheless, there are success stories in South Africa and comparable contexts that demonstrate that with sufficient facilitative leadership, capacity building, and institutional support, collaborative frameworks may improve school climate, learner outcomes, and professional activities.²⁹ Trust-building activities, joint decision-making platforms, and professional learning communities (PLCs) serve as enablers.³⁰

Given the significant role that teacher unions play in school governance and the ongoing challenges of accountability in historically disadvantaged schools, there is a critical need to deepen empirical knowledge on how collaborative approaches to accountability can be institutionalized and sustained. This study addresses the need for research that goes beyond normative assertions to evaluate the lived experiences, power relations, and institutional contexts that shape accountability practices in unionized schools.³¹ Therefore, this study aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to the

¹⁶ Department of Education (DoE), *South African Schools Act (SASA), No. 84 of 1996* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 1996).

¹⁷ Mokoena and Daniels, "Teacher Unions and School Governance: Exploring Tensions in Accountability."

¹⁸ Nyoni, "School Leadership and Teacher Unions: Collaboration or Conflict?."

¹⁹ Mokoena and Daniels, "Teacher Unions and School Governance: Exploring Tensions in Accountability"; Sithole, "The Influence of Teacher Unions on Education Reform in South Africa."

²⁰ Benninga and Garcia, "Rethinking Accountability in Education: A Sociocultural Perspective."

²¹ Mahlangu and Mhlongo, "The Role of Teacher Unions in Educational Governance in South Africa."

²² Frost and Durrant, "Teacher Leadership and Accountability: A Review of Recent Policy"; D. Gurr, L. Drysdale, and B. Mulford, "Building Collaboration in Schools: The Role of Leadership," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 48, no. 3 (2020): 350–67.

²³ McBeath, MacBeath, and Swaffield, "Collaborative Accountability: New Directions in School Leadership."

²⁴ Townsend, "Reimagining Accountability in Schools: The Role of Collaboration."

²⁵ Oduro and MacBeath, "School Leadership for Learning: Perspectives from Ghana and Scotland."

²⁶ Mokoena and Daniels, "Teacher Unions and School Governance: Exploring Tensions in Accountability."

²⁷ Nyoni, "School Leadership and Teacher Unions: Collaboration or Conflict?"

²⁸ Spaul, "Education Quality and Equity in South Africa: An Update on Progress and Challenges."

²⁹ Gurr, Drysdale, and Mulford, "Building Collaboration in Schools: The Role of Leadership"; McBeath, MacBeath, and Swaffield, "Collaborative Accountability: New Directions in School Leadership."

³⁰ Ansell and Gash, "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice"; Oduro and MacBeath, "School Leadership for Learning: Perspectives from Ghana and Scotland."

³¹ Mokoena and Daniels, "Teacher Unions and School Governance: Exploring Tensions in Accountability"; Sithole, "The Influence of Teacher Unions on Education Reform in South Africa."

remodelling of accountability frameworks that are inclusive, contextually grounded, and dialogic, by focusing on insights from the principal, SMT members, SGB representatives, and union officials. Consequently, the findings inform policy and practice by providing actionable recommendations to enhance collaborative governance in South African public schools.

The study aims to analyse and reformulate the accountability framework within unionized public ordinary school environments by applying collaboration theory. It seeks to:

- To understand the development of inclusive governance practices involving principals, deputy principals, departmental heads, school governing body members, and teacher unions.
- To examine the disputes and negotiated understanding of accountability between school leaders and teacher unions within public school environments.
- To identify conditions and strategies that facilitate collaborative and inclusive governance practices and to assess their implications for the redesign of the school accountability framework.

The study is guided by this main question:

How can the accountability frameworks in unionised public ordinary schools be reimagined and reformulated through inclusive governance practice and collaborative measures involving school leaders and teacher unions?

The following sub-questions further guide the study:

- What are the procedures by which inclusive governance practices, as developed, are implemented by school leadership stakeholders and teacher unions in unionized public ordinary schools?
- What are the key disputes and negotiated agreements regarding accountability between school leadership and teacher unions within public school settings?
- What procedural conditions support or constrain collaborative governance practices, and how do these conditions inform the redesign of school accountability frameworks?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Compliance to Collaboration for Commendable Accountability

Conceptual and historical establishment of teacher unions

Teacher unions occupy a significant role within educational structures, having developed historically as collective stakeholders for the economic, professional, and political representation of educators. Consequently, teacher unions have evolved from traditional labour-bound structures to multifaceted organizations that engage in shaping educational policies, enhancing professional standards, and advocating for social justice in education.³² Their origins are closely linked to broader socio-political struggles for labor rights, collective and democratic participation, and the institutionalization of education systems, particularly in developing contexts.³³ Teacher unions disclosed the integration of public education and the autonomy of the teaching profession. Early teacher unions primarily focused on collective bargaining, improving working conditions, and negotiating for fair compensation.

In the late 20th century, unions have increasingly taken on roles as policy advocates, thereby actively influencing curriculum reforms, professional development standards, and frameworks within school governance.³⁴ In South Africa, the establishment of teacher unions like SADTU was a response not only to workplace inequalities but also to political interventions against apartheid-era educational injustices that were evident at the time.³⁵ The dual role of teacher unions as both professional and political

³² Nina Bascia and Howard Stevenson, "Organising Teaching: Developing the Power of the Profession," *Education International*, 2017, 1–74; D. Frost, "Empowering Teachers as Agents of Change: The Role of Teacher Leadership in Teacher Unions," *Educational Review* 72, no. 4 (2020): 462–78.

³³ V., Chikoko and C. Jorgensen, "Teacher Unions and the Politics of Educational Change in South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 40(Supplement 2) (2020): S1–9.

³⁴ John Bangs and John MacBeath, "Collective Leadership: The Role of Teacher Unions in Encouraging Teachers to Take the Lead in Their Own Learning and in Teacher Policy," in *Teacher Leadership and Professional Development* (Routledge, 2016), 186–98; W. L. Poole, "The Growing Importance of Teacher Unions in Education Policy-Making," *Policy Futures in Education* 17, no. 7 (2019): 881–95.

³⁵ L. Govender, "Professionalism versus Unionism: Re-Imagining Teacher Agency in South African Schools," *Perspectives in Education* 39, no. 1 (2021): 104–18.

entities continues to shape their agenda in the post-apartheid era, where they advocate for teacher rights and influence the direction of educational reform and governance.

The theoretical framing of unions has expanded beyond adversarial labour models to encompass collaborative and democratic unionism, suggesting that unions can function as equal partners in educational improvement rather than as oppositional forces.³⁶ This transition typically reflects a broader trend in governance theory that promotes partnership policies and shared accountability frameworks.³⁷

Despite this shift, public perception of teacher unions often remains unclear. Unions are regarded as significant stakeholders in safeguarding educators' rights and promoting professionalism; however, they are also perceived as obstructive, particularly when their demands clash with systemic reform initiatives.³⁸ The conceptual evolution of unions has been influenced by global educational reform discourses, including the new public management act and accountability structures, which have created tensions between institutional regulation and professional autonomy.³⁹ In unionized school environments, these tensions are further exacerbated by the political legacy of educational imbalances, primarily evident in disputes over professionalism, authority, and authenticity among unions, school management teams, and school governing bodies.

Collaborative governance and collective decision making in unionised school environments

Collaborative governance has emerged as a significant paradigm in public sector management, particularly in the education sector, where a complex, multi-stakeholder environment necessitates participative approaches to decision-making. According to Ansell and Gash, collaborative governance is a governing arrangement wherein public agencies directly involve non-governmental stakeholders in the collective decision-making process.⁴⁰ This approach emphasizes inclusivity and shared authority. In educational contexts, such models aim to address imbalances evident in governance structures and to foster a culture of reciprocity, trust, and joint accountability.⁴¹ In the context of school governance, collaborative decision-making is increasingly recognized as a fundamental tool for effective leadership and school reform.

Collaborative school governance is essential in a unionized environment, where various stakeholders possess diverse and occasionally conflicting interests.⁴² Collaborative frameworks encourage stakeholders to discuss differences, contribute to the creation of a school improvement agenda, and collectively monitor implementation outcomes.⁴³ The reinforcement shifts from compliance with administrative directives to a more dynamic process as stakeholders engage, grounded in mutual respect and shared objectives. Collective decision-making enhances authenticity and efficacy in school governance structures. For example, Hargreaves and O'Connor posit that professional collaboration contributes to a culture of collective efficacy, where educators feel empowered to make decisions that affect teaching, learning, and organizational outcomes.⁴⁴ In previously disadvantaged and active school environments, such collaboration provides opportunities for addressing past imbalances by embedding democratic principles in everyday governance practices.⁴⁵ However, collaborative governance presents several challenges. Trust gaps, unequal power relations, and policy incoherence primarily hinder meaningful participation.⁴⁶

³⁶ Bascia and Stevenson, "Organising Teaching: Developing the Power of the Profession"; A. Hargreaves and M. Fullan, *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*, 2nd ed. (Teachers College Press, 2020).

³⁷ Oduro and MacBeath, "School Leadership for Learning: Perspectives from Ghana and Scotland."

³⁸ T. A. Ngcobo and T. Netshitangani, "Teacher Unionism and Policy Contestation: Exploring SADTU's Role in Education Reform in South Africa," *Africa Education Review* 18, no. 2 (2021): 134–50.

³⁹ C. A. Spreen and S. Vally, "The Limits of Privatisation in Education: Education Reform and the Persistent Tensions of Teacher Union-State Relations in South Africa," *Journal of Education Policy* 35, no. 6 (2020): 767–82.

⁴⁰ Ansell and Gash, "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice."

⁴¹ Kirk Emerson, Tina Nabatchi, and Stephen Balogh, "An Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 22, no. 1 (2012): 1–29.

⁴² Oduro and MacBeath, "School Leadership for Learning: Perspectives from Ghana and Scotland."

⁴³ A., Harris and M. Jones, "Why Professional Collaboration Matters: Educational Lessons from a Pandemic," *School Leadership & Management* 38, no. 5 (2018): 447–56.

⁴⁴ Andy Hargreaves and Michael T O'Connor, *Collaborative Professionalism: When Teaching Together Means Learning for All* (Corwin Press, 2018).

⁴⁵ Ngcobo and Netshitangani, "Teacher Unionism and Policy Contestation: Exploring SADTU's Role in Education Reform in South Africa."

⁴⁶ Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh, "An Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance."

In South Africa, the legacy of adversarial labor relations between government entities and trade unions complicates collaborative discussions.⁴⁷ The professional culture in certain schools remains unwelcoming to shared governance, characterized by deeply entrenched hierarchies and persistent role confusion that hinder collaboration.⁴⁸ Despite these tensions, recent literature emphasizes the importance of facilitative leadership and institutional support in fostering collaborative governance. Facilitative leaders, including principals and union-affiliated SMT members, act as boundary spanners who mediate conflict, enable dialogue, and foster an environment where diverse voices are valued and shared.⁴⁹ These leaders facilitate the alignment of school-level decisions with overarching educational policies while remaining attuned to the contextual realities of institutions.

Supremacy, professionalism and accountability measures of unionised school settings

The dynamics of professionalism, supremacy, and accountability are grounded in the collaborative tension present in a unionized school environment. These precepts are founded on the existence of power, the distribution of responsibilities among key stakeholders, and the acknowledgment of roles. The collaborative theory advocates for shared authority and inclusive participation; however, in many public schools, the dominance of one stakeholder group over others often undermines collaborative intentions. Supremacy arises when a single stakeholder exerts control over the decision-making process within a professional environment, encompassing staff appointments, promotion recommendations, and resource allocation.⁵⁰ Power imbalances frequently destabilize the culture of shared governance and marginalize the voices of others.⁵¹ The observation of supremacy undermines the democratic methods embedded in school governance frameworks, such as the Schools Act, which advocates for participatory and representative school leadership.⁵²

Professionalism pertains to the ethical and pedagogical integrity of school stakeholders, including educators and leaders within the educational system. It includes continuous professional development, reflective practices, ethical leadership, and the ability to maintain educational standards in the face of socio-political pressures.⁵³ In collaborative stages, professionalism is important because when upheld, collaboration transcends transactional negotiations and becomes transformative, fostering environments conducive to innovation, inclusive leadership, and peer learning.⁵⁴ Accountability serves as the binding element between professionalism and collaboration within school governance.

While accountability primarily emphasizes compliance, collaborative governance reinterprets accountability as mutual and reciprocal.⁵⁵ In this perspective, all stakeholders are accountable not only for their specific roles but also for the overall outcome. This form of distributed accountability is essential and pertinent when examining under-resourced schools, where collaborative planning and transparent decision-making are critical tools for ensuring quality education.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, tension between union supremacy and the professional independence of school leaders frequently produces accountability vacuums. For example, Spreen and Vally highlight that union interference in school appointments and staff discipline undermines school-level authority, particularly for principals who are often reluctant to enforce standards due to concerns about political reprisal.⁵⁷ Similarly, Mncube and Mahlangu highlight

⁴⁷ Spreen and Vally, "The Limits of Privatisation in Education: Education Reform and the Persistent Tensions of Teacher Union-State Relations in South Africa."

⁴⁸ Chikoko and Jorgensen, "Teacher Unions and the Politics of Educational Change in South Africa."

⁴⁹ Gurr, Drysdale, and Mulford, "Building Collaboration in Schools: The Role of Leadership"; Hargreaves and Fullan, *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*.

⁵⁰ Spreen and Vally, "The Limits of Privatisation in Education: Education Reform and the Persistent Tensions of Teacher Union-State Relations in South Africa."

⁵¹ Ngcobo and Netshitangani, "Teacher Unionism and Policy Contestation: Exploring SADTU's Role in Education Reform in South Africa."

⁵² Department of Education (DoE), *South African Schools Act (SASA), No. 84 of 1996*.

⁵³ Hargreaves and O'Connor, *Collaborative Professionalism: When Teaching Together Means Learning for All*; Oduro and MacBeath, "School Leadership for Learning: Perspectives from Ghana and Scotland."

⁵⁴ Gurr, Drysdale, and Mulford, "Building Collaboration in Schools: The Role of Leadership."

⁵⁵ Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh, "An Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance."

⁵⁶ Chikoko and Jorgensen, "Teacher Unions and the Politics of Educational Change in South Africa."

⁵⁷ Spreen and Vally, "The Limits of Privatisation in Education: Education Reform and the Persistent Tensions of Teacher Union-State Relations in South Africa."

that collaboration can deteriorate into conflicts, resulting in blurred distinctions between professional standards and union allegiances.⁵⁸

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Towards collaboration theory

Collaboration theory, situated at the intersection of governance studies, organizational learning theory, and social constructivism, provides a structured framework for understanding how various institutional stakeholders organize and coordinate their efforts to address complex problems. As established within governance and public administration engagement, collaboration theory is characterized as a voluntary and interactive process through which independent stakeholders participate in collective decision-making to achieve common and defined goals.⁵⁹ Theoretical pillars of collaboration theory include common motivation, leadership, institutional design, and trust-building, all of which are essential for establishing authentic and sustainable collaborative governance.⁶⁰ In the educational context, collaboration theory has emerged as a significant tool for analysing inter-organizational partnerships, particularly in school systems undergoing transformation pressures.

Leading scholars in this field have utilized it to examine the cooperative relationship among schools, communities, families, and educational authorities, demonstrating that collaborative practices can enhance decision-making quality, professional development outcomes, and resource allocation efficiency.⁶¹ Collaborative theory challenges traditional hierarchical power structures, advocating for inclusive practices that reinforce joint ownership of goals, in contrast to top-down compliance models of accountability.⁶² Collaborative theory draws from social constructivism and organizational learning, asserting the necessity for sustainable change in complex environments, such as educational contexts, through shared inquiry, cooperative learning, and the utilization of diverse expertise.⁶³

Collaboration theory extends beyond mere technical arrangements; it serves as a normative imperative for implementing effective and distributed governance. This approach promotes collective decision-making and fosters professional learning communities across the school.⁶⁴ This is especially significant in unionized school environments characterized by entrenched power dynamics, policy ambiguities, and historical inequalities that frequently obstruct trust and collaborative dialogue. Teacher unions, SMT, SGB, and principals each embody distinct institutional interests and commitments. However, collaboration theory necessitates a re-evaluation of these relationships as a collective synergy, dependent on institutional mechanisms that foster transparency, reciprocity, and equity. Fullan asserts that authentic collaboration serves as a counterforce to hierarchical fragmentation and facilitates stakeholders' transition from compliance-based mandates to collaboration-based innovation in school governance and leadership.⁶⁵

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design to examine the influence of teacher unions on school leadership, specifically in the areas of school governance and professional management. The qualitative pathways were selected to reveal the situated, subjective, and relational meanings that school actors associate with union-led participation and institutional decision-making.⁶⁶ Framed under collaboration

⁵⁸ V. Mncube and V. Mahlangu, "Navigating the Tension between Democratic Governance and Union Influence in South African Schools," *Africa Education Review* 19, no. 3 (2022): 243–59.

⁵⁹ Ansell and Gash, "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice."

⁶⁰ Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh, "An Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance."

⁶¹ Gurr, Drysdale, and Mulford, "Building Collaboration in Schools: The Role of Leadership"; Oduro and MacBeath, "School Leadership for Learning: Perspectives from Ghana and Scotland."

⁶² Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh, "An Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance."

⁶³ Barbara Gray, *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems* (Jossey Bass, 1999); Donna J. Wood and Barbara Gray, "Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Collaboration," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 1991): 139–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886391272001>.

⁶⁴ Hargreaves and O'Connor, *Collaborative Professionalism: When Teaching Together Means Learning for All*.

⁶⁵ Michael Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, 5th ed. (Teachers college press, 2016).

⁶⁶ Linda Birt et al., "Member Checking: A Tool to Enhance Trustworthiness or Merely a Nod to Validation?," *Qualitative Health Research* 26, no. 13 (2016): 1802–11; Lorelli S Nowell et al., "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1609406917733847.

theory reinforcing trust, collective ownership, and distributed authority,⁶⁷ the study sought to comprehend how teacher unions and school stakeholders cooperate to create a culture of commendable governance in unionized and historically marginalized school environments.

Sampling

The study employed purposeful sampling, a method commonly utilized in qualitative research to select participants possessing substantial and pertinent knowledge regarding the issue being examined.⁶⁸ The sample consisted of 16 participants, including 4 principals, 4 SMT members, 4 SGB members, and 4 union members. All participants are drawn from no-fee public ordinary schools situated in Soweto, Gauteng, South Africa. This area exhibits active union involvement and a historically entrenched struggle for governance. This sample selection ensured data saturation while maintaining diversity in school roles.⁶⁹

Data Collection

This involved semi-structured interviews and document analysis, allowing for flexibility and consistency in exploring themes related to union influence, professionalism, collaboration, and governance⁷⁰ The interview protocols utilized were based on established literature. The inquiry examined aspects including the role functions of teacher unions, dynamics of school governance, lived experiences and perceptions of collaboration and conflict, as well as tensions related to accountability and leadership. All interviews were conducted in person, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participant consent. Transcripts were generated verbatim to maintain narrative integrity.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis in accordance with Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework.⁷¹ Data were coded inductively, facilitating the emergence of themes from participants' narratives. The identified themes include (1) reframing accountability from compliance to collaborative governance, (2) the possible dual role of teacher unions in school leadership, (3) school tensions and role negotiation among stakeholders, and (4) prospects for trust, capacity building, and sustaining collaborative accountability. Themes highlighted the contested and generative aspects of collaborative governance within South African unionized schools.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to stringent ethical protocols approved by the University of Johannesburg Ethics Committee. Further permission was secured from the Gauteng Department of Education. Participants were informed about their voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity, the right to withdraw from participation at any time, and secure data storage facilities. All participants were anonymized using pseudonyms, and information was stored in secure formats, in compliance with data protection standards.⁷²

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The distinction between data analysis and data interpretation is often blurred, yet it is important for scholarly engagement and methodological transparency. Potokri defines a distinct separation between these two interrelated yet different processes, contending that data analysis entails a systematic engagement with existing literature, whereas data interpretation is rooted in the voices and experiential

⁶⁷ Ansell and Gash, "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice."

⁶⁸ Lawrence A. Palinkas et al., "Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42, no. 5 (September 6, 2015): 533–44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>; Ilker Etikan, "Sampling and Sampling Methods," *Biometrics & Biostatistics International Journal* 5, no. 6 (May 4, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.15406/bbij.2017.05.00149>.

⁶⁹ Greg Guest, Emily Namey, and Mario Chen, "A Simple Method to Assess and Report Thematic Saturation in Qualitative Research," *PLOS ONE* 15, no. 5 (May 5, 2020): e0232076, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076>.

⁷⁰ William C. Adams, "Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews," in *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation* (Wiley, 2015), 492–505, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch19>.

⁷¹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis," *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019): 589–97.

⁷² BERA, "Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research" (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

accounts of participants.⁷³ These lenses serve as a methodological guide for researchers navigating complex qualitative data landscapes. Consequently, data interpretation will be addressed initially, organized by themes, followed by the explanation of data analysis.

Table 1: Themes that emerged for this study
• Reframing accountability from compliance to collaborative governance
• The dual role of teacher unions in school leadership
• School tensions and role negotiation among stakeholders,
• Prospects for trust, capacity building, and sustaining collaborative accountability.

Key: Principal of School 1 = Principal-1; member of the school management team. 2=SMT-2; member of the school governing body 3=SGB-3; Member of the school union 4 equals Unionist-4 and so forth.

Theme 1: Reframing accountability from compliance to collaborative governance.

Participants characterized teacher unions as significant stakeholders in promoting collaborative decision-making processes that extend beyond mere compliance enforcement. Numerous responses highlighted the significance of union involvement in educational management, as it directs policy implementation, collective bargaining, and fosters a shared understanding and accountability among school stakeholders. One SMT-1 observed that “*The influence of teacher unions in decision-making is beneficial as they provide comprehensive workshops for educators concerning policy and implementation guidance related to workplace conduct.*” A principal-3 highlighted the diverse functions of unions, stating, “*Collective bargaining, grievance handling, professional support, professional development and growth... school leadership and management partnership and collaboration, policy development and review, school governance.*” Furthermore, these assertions were corroborated by participants in SGB-3 who emphasized the unions' role in fostering collaboration. “*To promote collaboration in decision-making, it is essential to recognize that no individual operates in isolation.*” Teacher unions ensure the implementation of decisions made by the union.

These accounts indicate a notable shift towards collaborative governance, wherein teacher unions extend their role beyond mere enforcers of compliance to become active stakeholders in shaping school policies and upholding specific ethical standards. The emphasis on collective responsibility and teamwork underscores the significance of a restructured model of accountability that treats all school stakeholders equitably. However, these contributions were accompanied by tensions concerning compliance. As accountability evolves into collaborative practice, the challenge of balancing authority with partnership remains complex. The participants' responses indicated an evolving conceptualization of accountability, transitioning from rigid compliance to a more relational and collaborative governance model. Teacher unions have emerged as both enforcers of rules and co-constructors in school governance processes. Multiple participants emphasized the significance of teacher unions as key stakeholders in decision-making, policy implementation, workshop facilitation, and governance policy execution (SMT-1; Principal-1; SGB-1; Unionist-2).

This indicates the evolution of governance culture, where accountability extends beyond hierarchical command and control, thereby fostering collective ownership of school outcomes. Responses from SMT-3 and SGB-4 highlighted the role of the teacher union in ensuring fairness and the promotion of shared standards in school leadership. The assertion by SGB-4 that “*no one is an island*” encapsulates the understanding that accountability is shared and negotiated among various stakeholders. Nonetheless, challenges persist regarding overprotection and defensive union practices that undermine individual professional responsibility (SMT-1; Principal-2). This tension highlights the delicate balance between supportive accountability and the risk of complacency, indicating the necessity for a redefined governance framework that motivates both collective responsibility and individual performance.

Theme 2: The possible dual role of teacher unions in school leadership.

Participants observed that teacher unions fulfil a dual role within school leadership structures, acting both as advocates for teachers' rights and as potential disruptors of leadership effectiveness. Teacher unions are

⁷³ O. G. Potokri, *Qualitative Research Methods: From Data Collection to Data Analysis and Interpretation* (UNISA Press, 2016).

regarded as significant protectors of teachers' interests, providing professional support, career advancement opportunities, and serving as intermediaries in the decision-making process. A unionist from school 2 stated that *“the primary function of the teacher union is to advocate for teachers by negotiating employment terms and conditions, safeguarding their rights, and influencing school leadership through collective bargaining”*. The significant role was underscored by the principal of School 3, who stated, *“They ensure fair working environments, conditions, salaries, and benefits... and ensure that teachers' voices are considered in policies.”* In a related context, SGB from School 4 stated, *“Teacher unions serve as a voice for teachers in school governance and professional management.”* However, their role in protection is accompanied by tension. Some participants noted that unions occasionally undermine school leadership by defending and promoting unprofessional and unbecoming behaviour among the members they represent. An SMT member stated, *“They act as a buffer; the issue arises when they defend unprofessionalism,”* according to the SMT of school 2.

It is noted that teacher unions can influence school leadership and management practices in both positive and negative ways. At times, unions may undermine the leadership and management system by making unrealistic demands. These assertions indicate the urgent need for teacher unions to support school leadership rather than obstruct it. This highlights the necessity for clear role definitions and the promotion of mutual respect between union and school authorities to eliminate conflict and facilitate effective collaborative governance. Teacher unions are recognized for their significant role in safeguarding the rights of educators. Negotiate for equitable working conditions and support for professional development (Principal-1; Unionist-1, SMT-3). All these stakeholders were regarded as essential in facilitating professional growth through workshops, mentorship, and training programs that support school leadership capacity building (SGB-4; Unionist-3).

Furthermore, unions were perceived as improving decision-making processes and facilitating collaboration between management and staff, thereby promoting shared governance and stability within governance networks (Principal-3; SMT-3; SGB-2). Conversely, some participants expressed the view that teacher union protection, as a form of overprotection, inadvertently facilitates unprofessional behaviour, thereby impeding leadership authority and school leadership (SMT-2; Principal-1). The union's tendency to defend teachers irrespective of conduct generates tensions and can undermine management's capacity to enforce accountability (SMT-2; SMT-4). Furthermore, union demands can lead to conflicts with management goals, resulting in tension and the emergence of dual leadership structures, which typically complicate governance (SMT-4; SGB-2).

Theme 3: School tensions and role negotiation among stakeholders

The participants noted confusion regarding the assumptions of roles in school leadership involving teacher unions. They identified instances of communication breakdown, delayed notification, and conflict between union demands and management prerogatives. A union participant stated, *“Unions should promptly inform us if issues arise that require our attention.”* Unionist-1. School management views union actions as occasionally counterproductive, with SMT-1 observing that *“the excessive protection and support provided to educators by the teacher union has led to a sense of entitlement, resulting in reluctance to engage in self-motivated additional work”*. Similarly, a principal emphasized concerns regarding the union's reluctance to endorse disciplinary measures. The principal-1 observed that *“Teacher apathy, laziness, and despondency are not... addressed by teacher unions.”* This further complicates and exacerbates the existing governance dynamics. It was noted that conflict arises when unions impose agendas that are perceived to undermine established leadership structures. SMT-4 observed that *“there exists a conflict of interest when unions impose their own agendas on schools”*. Undermining the existing leadership.

Beyond power struggles, union representation may adversely marginalize non-union members. SGB-4 observed that *“Non-union staff members may experience suppression when decisions made by union representatives impact them in the workplace.”* Despite these structural challenges, participants acknowledged the potential for unions to enhance fairness and improve governance, particularly if their roles are clearly defined and effectively integrated into the framework of school leadership. The communication breakdown indicates gaps that impede trust and often exacerbate tensions between the teacher union and school management (Unionist-1; Unionist-2; Principal-2). The methods employed by

teacher unions to advocate for educators often conflict with management's disciplinary measures and performance expectations, necessitating continuous negotiations to prevent disintegration (SMT-2; SMT-4). The current role of unions as intermediaries highlights the inherently negotiated nature of their involvement. Effective governance necessitates clear boundaries and mutual respect to address competing interests while maintaining the school's objectives. Participants indicated a preference for an inclusive governance program in which trade unions, SGBs, and SMTs collaborate to plan, organize, and lead leadership functions for the benefit of the school (Principal-2; SMT-3). This collective and participatory approach sought to alleviate tension by fostering shared accountability and dialogue.

Theme 4: Prospects for trust, capacity building, and sustaining collaborative accountability

The participants identified potential strategies for strengthening mechanisms of trust, sustainable accountability, and professional capacity through improved collaboration among school stakeholders. Participants emphasized the beneficial role of teacher unions in mobilizing educators, promoting leadership standards, and facilitating participatory decision-making. The SMT-3 stated that *“they contribute to the development of a motivated workforce, promote high standards in teaching and leadership, and offer a platform for teacher involvement in decision-making”*. The principal of School 2 stated, *“Full participation of the teacher union supports the school staff in performing their best in daily activities.”* A union representative from School 2 remarked, *“If the engagement of the teacher union is optimal, it will highlight the importance of fostering self-fulfilled teachers, managing diversity, and achieving high levels of learner success.”* The involvement of the teacher union ensures that democratic processes are adhered to when pivotal decisions are made, thereby guaranteeing that ownership processes are followed in decision-making (SGB-4). Participants expressed the necessity for strategies aimed at bridging gaps and fostering common understanding through mentorship programs, training workshops, and improved communication platforms. The SMT-1 stated that *“If our members can cultivate a positive attitude towards the improvement program... they will develop and acquire the spirit of self-motivation.”* The principal-4 indicated that *“annual bosberaad may be initiated, along with common chat groups and a symposium for teacher union leaders and managers”*. Mentorship programs should be established to bridge the information gap.

Such interventions are proposed to have the potential to institutionalize collaborative accountability by empowering all stakeholders through shared knowledge, mutual trust, and aligned goals. This approach aims to transform historically adversarial relationships into professional competence and leadership capacity (Unionist-1; Principal-3; SGB-4). The participation of unions in grievance handling, welfare support, and conflict mediation promotes harmonious relations, reinforcing stability in the governance environment and underpinning trust (SMT-3; Unionist-3; SGB-4). Additionally, regular joint educational forums and mentorship programs involving teacher unions and school leadership are essential mechanisms for sustaining collaboration and knowledge exchange (Principal-1; SMT-1). A few participants advocated for enhanced communication channels, timely information sharing, and inclusiveness in decision-making to strengthen trust and promote collective responsibility (Unionist-1; Principal-2; SMT-1).

DISCUSSION

Regarding reframing accountability from compliance to collaborative governance

This discusses the shift from compliance-based accountability to models rooted in collaborative governance. Traditional accountability, characterized by inspection, standardization, and external oversight, receives criticism for undermining professional independence, community voices, and school-level agency.⁷⁴ These models are notably deficient in contexts characterized by historical inequality and socio-economic fragility, as exemplified by South African public schools.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Benninga and Garcia, “Rethinking Accountability in Education: A Sociocultural Perspective”; Hill and Stoll, “Accountability, Trust, and Professional Development”; Evans and O’Donnell, “Accountability and Professional Autonomy in Schools: Challenges and Opportunities.”

⁷⁵ Mokhele and Stewart, “Accountability and School Governance in Disadvantaged Communities”; Nic Spaul and Jonathan D. Jansen, *South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality* (Cham: Springer, 2019).

The empirical evidence indicates the necessity for alternative framing through collaboration theory, suggesting that accountability is a multi-stakeholder process rather than a compliance checklist.⁷⁶ This reframing and repositioning fosters joint problem-solving, clear communication, and collective responsibility.⁷⁷

Some scholars assert that the standardising imperative of collaboration reinforces school design, collective motivation, and trust-building as essential conditions for distributed accountability and school innovation.⁷⁸ This reconceptualization aligns with the principles of democratic governance and collective participation, thereby advancing beyond technocratic oversight towards sustainable, context-sensitive practices.

Regarding the dual role of teacher unions in school leadership

Teacher unions hold a historically and institutionally complex role in school governance, simultaneously serving as professional advocates and policy influencers.⁷⁹ In the South African educational context, teacher unions have evolved from labour unions into stakeholders in educational change, advocating for both collective bargaining and educational reform.⁸⁰ This complex role often generates tensions between adversarial activism and constructive engagement. Teacher unions are positioned as important collaborators in governance structures such as SGBs, thereby contributing to educational quality and professional development.⁸¹

Conversely, teacher unions are viewed as obstacles to effective leadership and stability, particularly when their actions are interpreted as obstructing accountability or promoting factional interests.⁸² Therefore, the literature recognizes the uncertainty and constructed nature of union influence, which serves as both an enabler and a disabler of collaborative leadership.⁸³ Collaboration theory, however, challenges this dual nature of teacher unions by proposing shared ownership of goals and reciprocal accountability measures among the union, SMT, principal, and SGBs.⁸⁴

Regarding the school tensions and role negotiation among stakeholders

Effectiveness in governance within a unionised school setting is frequently characterized by contested roles, tension, and role ambiguity. Consequently, the decentralization of school governance via SGB is central for enhancing democratic accountability.⁸⁵ However, overlaps in roles and ambiguous mandates among stakeholders, including the principal, SMT, SGB, and teacher unions, often result in conflicts, particularly in areas such as professional oversight and effective financial management.⁸⁶

This tension indicates a broader power imbalance and institutional mistrust, exacerbated by policy volatility and a lack of role clarity.⁸⁷ Principals are often positioned in a challenging role, required to balance the expectations of national mandates with localized union activism.⁸⁸ Collaboration theory posits

⁷⁶ Ansell and Gash, "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice"; Oduro and MacBeath, "School Leadership for Learning: Perspectives from Ghana and Scotland."

⁷⁷ Frost and Durrant, "Teacher Leadership and Accountability: A Review of Recent Policy"; McBeath, MacBeath, and Swaffield, "Collaborative Accountability: New Directions in School Leadership"; Townsend, "Reimagining Accountability in Schools: The Role of Collaboration."

⁷⁸ Hargreaves and Fullan, *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh, "An Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance."

⁷⁹ Bascia and Stevenson, "Organising Teaching: Developing the Power of the Profession"; Frost, "Empowering Teachers as Agents of Change: The Role of Teacher Leadership in Teacher Unions."

⁸⁰ Mahlangu and Mhlongo, "The Role of Teacher Unions in Educational Governance in South Africa"; Chikoko and Jorgensen, "Teacher Unions and the Politics of Educational Change in South Africa"; Sithole, "The Influence of Teacher Unions on Education Reform in South Africa."

⁸¹ Gurr, Drysdale, and Mulford, "Building Collaboration in Schools: The Role of Leadership"; Nyoni, "School Leadership and Teacher Unions: Collaboration or Conflict?."

⁸² Mokoena and Daniels, "Teacher Unions and School Governance: Exploring Tensions in Accountability."

⁸³ Mahlangu and Mhlongo, "The Role of Teacher Unions in Educational Governance in South Africa"; Sithole, "The Influence of Teacher Unions on Education Reform in South Africa."

⁸⁴ Ansell and Gash, "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice"; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh, "An Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance."

⁸⁵ Department of Education (DoE), *South African Schools Act (SASA), No. 84 of 1996*.

⁸⁶ Mokoena and Daniels, "Teacher Unions and School Governance: Exploring Tensions in Accountability"; Nyoni, "School Leadership and Teacher Unions: Collaboration or Conflict?."

⁸⁷ Spaul, "Education Quality and Equity in South Africa: An Update on Progress and Challenges."

⁸⁸ Mokoena and Daniels, "Teacher Unions and School Governance: Exploring Tensions in Accountability."

the necessity of a deliberative space for role negotiation, thereby advocating for mechanisms that facilitate conflict resolution, mutual understanding, and reciprocal understanding.⁸⁹ However, entrenched structural and ideological barriers continue to pose significant obstacles to genuine role redefinition.⁹⁰

Regarding the prospects for trust, capacity building, and sustaining collaborative

Despite the existing challenges, the literature underscores sudden pathways for building trust and institutionalizing collaborative accountability. Trust functions as both a relational ideal and an institutional condition, facilitated by shared leadership, inclusive dialogue, and capacity development.⁹¹ Professional learning committees and platforms for joint decision-making, along with facilitative leadership, are significant enablers of sustained collaboration.⁹² These instruments facilitate reciprocity, knowledge co-construction, and equity, particularly in historically marginalized communities where power imbalances are deeply entrenched.⁹³ Fostering collaborative accountability necessitates school redesign, viewing teacher unions not as antagonists but as co-responsible stakeholders within a collective governance model.⁹⁴ The reviewed literature strongly supports the urgent need to transition from a reactive compliance system to a proactive, co-owned accountability framework, grounded in local authenticities and democratic values.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department of Basic Education must urgently develop and implement a policy framework aimed at formalizing collaborative governance at the school level. These frameworks must delineate the roles of principals, SMTs, SGBs, and unions in school decision-making, incorporating measures for collective accountability, co-equal leadership, and regular consultation. It should be schools that establish permanent structures for dialogue involving all key stakeholders. Platforms should prioritize shared problem-solving, conflict resolution, and the promotion of a culture that fosters transparency and respect. The provincial education department should invest in capacity-building workshops and governance charters to clarify the roles and intersections of school leadership and union representatives in governance and accountability. Professional learning committees should be expanded to facilitate collaborative and mutual learning, incorporating union members, school leaders, and teachers.

Professional leadership committees should extend their focus beyond curriculum delivery to include themes of shared governance, particularly in relation to effective school finance processes, policy implementation, and accountability measures. Developmental programs aimed at teaching collaborative accountability, stakeholder engagement, and conflict resolution are also necessary. Principals and SMTs should receive training in both financial compliance and relational governance, acknowledging unions as equal partners in the process of school improvement. Frequent changes in national and provincial education policies contribute to increased tension between compliance and collaboration. Policymakers should collaborate to enhance coherence and continuity in education and policy, particularly regarding governance and accountability, ensuring that collaborative models are not compromised by inconsistent regulatory mandates.

Further empirical studies indicate the necessity of examining how collaborative accountability is practiced and experienced across different provinces and school types. These insights can contribute to a national knowledge base that informs adaptive policy revision and identifies best practices. This study reimagines accountability through collaborative theory lenses, contributing to the growing body of knowledge that challenges hierarchical and compliance-based educational models. Therefore, it is

⁸⁹ Oduro and MacBeath, "School Leadership for Learning: Perspectives from Ghana and Scotland"; McBeath, MacBeath, and Swaffield, "Collaborative Accountability: New Directions in School Leadership."

⁹⁰ Frost, "Empowering Teachers as Agents of Change: The Role of Teacher Leadership in Teacher Unions"; Townsend, "Reimagining Accountability in Schools: The Role of Collaboration."

⁹¹ Ansell and Gash, "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice"; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh, "An Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance."

⁹² Gurr, Drysdale, and Mulford, "Building Collaboration in Schools: The Role of Leadership"; Hargreaves and O'Connor, *Collaborative Professionalism: When Teaching Together Means Learning for All*.

⁹³ McBeath, MacBeath, and Swaffield, "Collaborative Accountability: New Directions in School Leadership"; Oduro and MacBeath, "School Leadership for Learning: Perspectives from Ghana and Scotland."

⁹⁴ Frost and Durrant, "Teacher Leadership and Accountability: A Review of Recent Policy"; M. Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, 5th ed. (Teachers College Press, 2017).

essential to establish a constructive framework in which teacher unions, principals, SGBs, and SMTs are viewed not as competitors for authority but as equal stakeholders in effective, democratic, and contextually responsive school governance. This reimagining is not only necessary but urgent for the South African education system to meet its constitutional commitment to quality, equity, and transformation in every school community.

CONCLUSION

Utilizing collaboration theory, the study examined how collaborative accountability is practiced and experienced across different provinces and school types. The study makes a profound contributions to a national knowledge base that informs adaptive policy reform and best practices, central dialogue, collective decision-making, and inclusive governance. The study concludes that accountability in education is no longer one-dimensional but is context-dependent. Teacher unions emerged as potential stakeholders in collaborative governance, contributing to role clarity, trust, and support within schools. Deeply entrenched power struggles, historical mistrust, and overlapping roles continue to hinder efforts toward authentic partnership and collective responsibility. An important insight from this study is that accountability frameworks necessitate a paradigmatic shift from centrally controlled mechanisms to collaborative infrastructure, which requires central dialogue, collective decision-making, and inclusive governance. In schools where unions exist, such collaborative accountability has the potential to transform school climate, enhance learner outcomes, and professionalize school leadership.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, William C. "Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews." In *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, 492–505. Wiley, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch19>.
- Ansell, Chris, and Alison Gash. "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 18, no. 4 (October 1, 2008): 543–71. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum032>.
- Au, W. *Accountability, High-Stakes Testing, and the Promise of Educational Equity*. Routledge, 2020.
- Bangs, John, and John MacBeath. "Collective Leadership: The Role of Teacher Unions in Encouraging Teachers to Take the Lead in Their Own Learning and in Teacher Policy." In *Teacher Leadership and Professional Development*, 186–98. Routledge, 2016.
- Bascia, Nina, and Howard Stevenson. "Organising Teaching: Developing the Power of the Profession." *Education International*, 2017, 1–74.
- Benninga, J. S., and S. Garcia. "Rethinking Accountability in Education: A Sociocultural Perspective." *Educational Review* 72, no. 1 (2020): 23–40.
- BERA. "Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research ." British Educational Research Association, 2018.
- Birt, Linda, Suzanne Scott, Debbie Cavers, Christine Campbell, and Fiona Walter. "Member Checking: A Tool to Enhance Trustworthiness or Merely a Nod to Validation?" *Qualitative Health Research* 26, no. 13 (2016): 1802–11.
- Braun, H. "Accountability in Education: International Perspectives." *Oxford Review of Education* 45, no. 3 (2019): 292–306.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019): 589–97.
- Chikoko, V., and C. Jorgensen. "Teacher Unions and the Politics of Educational Change in South Africa." *South African Journal of Education* 40(Supplement 2) (2020): S1–9.
- Department of Education (DoE). *South African Schools Act (SASA), No. 84 of 1996*. Pretoria: Government Printers, 1996.
- Emerson, Kirk, Tina Nabatchi, and Stephen Balogh. "An Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 22, no. 1 (2012): 1–29.
- Etikan, Ilker. "Sampling and Sampling Methods." *Biometrics & Biostatistics International Journal* 5, no. 6 (May 4, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.15406/bbij.2017.05.00149>.
- Evans, L., and S. O'Donnell. "Accountability and Professional Autonomy in Schools: Challenges and Opportunities." *Professional Development in Education* 47, no. 4 (2021): 579–95.

- Frost, D. “Empowering Teachers as Agents of Change: The Role of Teacher Leadership in Teacher Unions.” *Educational Review* 72, no. 4 (2020): 462–78.
- Frost, D., and J. Durrant. “Teacher Leadership and Accountability: A Review of Recent Policy.” *School Leadership & Management* 39, no. 5 (2019): 465–81.
- Fullan, M. *The New Meaning of Educational Change*. 5th ed. Teachers College Press, 2017.
- Fullan, Michael. *The New Meaning of Educational Change*. 5th ed. Teachers college press, 2016.
- Govender, L. “Professionalism versus Unionism: Re-Imagining Teacher Agency in South African Schools.” *Perspectives in Education* 39, no. 1 (2021): 104–18.
- Gray, Barbara. *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems*. Jossey Bass, 1999.
- Guest, Greg, Emily Namey, and Mario Chen. “A Simple Method to Assess and Report Thematic Saturation in Qualitative Research.” *PLOS ONE* 15, no. 5 (May 5, 2020): e0232076. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076>.
- Gurr, D., L. Drysdale, and B. Mulford. “Building Collaboration in Schools: The Role of Leadership.” *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 48, no. 3 (2020): 350–67.
- Hargreaves, A., and M. Fullan. *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*. 2nd ed. Teachers College Press, 2020.
- Hargreaves, Andy, and Michael T O’Connor. *Collaborative Professionalism: When Teaching Together Means Learning for All*. Corwin Press, 2018.
- Harris, A., and M. Jones. “Why Professional Collaboration Matters: Educational Lessons from a Pandemic.” *School Leadership & Management* 38, no. 5 (2018): 447–56.
- Harris, A., and J. Spillane. “Distributed Leadership and Accountability: The Interconnection.” *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 17, no. 1 (2018): 1–19.
- Hill, R., and L. Stoll. “Accountability, Trust, and Professional Development.” *Teachers College Record* 121, no. 3 (2019): 1–20.
- Mahlangu, M., and B. Mhlongo. “The Role of Teacher Unions in Educational Governance in South Africa.” *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. 4 (2019): 1–12.
- McBeath, J., A. MacBeath, and S. Swaffield. “Collaborative Accountability: New Directions in School Leadership.” *Journal of Educational Change* 22, no. 2 (2021): 207–26.
- Mncube, V., and V. Mahlangu. “Navigating the Tension between Democratic Governance and Union Influence in South African Schools.” *Africa Education Review* 19, no. 3 (2022): 243–59.
- Mokhele, M., and J. Stewart. “Accountability and School Governance in Disadvantaged Communities.” *Journal of Education Policy* 35, no. 1 (2020): 68–84.
- Mokoena, S., and R. Daniels. “Teacher Unions and School Governance: Exploring Tensions in Accountability.” *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 49, no. 2 (2021): 234–51.
- Ngcobo, T. A., and T. Netshitangani. “Teacher Unionism and Policy Contestation: Exploring SADTU’s Role in Education Reform in South Africa.” *Africa Education Review* 18, no. 2 (2021): 134–50.
- Nowell, Lorelli S, Jill M Norris, Deborah E White, and Nancy J Moules. “Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1609406917733847.
- Nyoni, S. “School Leadership and Teacher Unions: Collaboration or Conflict? .” *International Journal of Educational Development* 88 (2022): 102525.
- Oduro, G. K. T., and J. MacBeath. “School Leadership for Learning: Perspectives from Ghana and Scotland.” *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 49, no. 3 (2021): 430–48.
- Palinkas, Lawrence A., Sarah M. Horwitz, Carla A. Green, Jennifer P. Wisdom, Naihua Duan, and Kimberly Hoagwood. “Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research.” *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42, no. 5 (September 6, 2015): 533–44. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>.
- Poole, W. L. “The Growing Importance of Teacher Unions in Education Policy-Making.” *Policy Futures in Education* 17, no. 7 (2019): 881–95.
- Potokri, O. G. *Qualitative Research Methods: From Data Collection to Data Analysis and Interpretation*. UNISA Press, 2016.
- Sithole, S. “The Influence of Teacher Unions on Education Reform in South Africa.” *Education Policy*

Analysis Archives 29, no. 54 (2021): 1–22.

Spaull, N. “Education Quality and Equity in South Africa: An Update on Progress and Challenges.”

Development Southern Africa 36, no. 5 (2019): 704–19.

Spaull, Nic, and Jonathan D. Jansen. *South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality*. Cham: Springer, 2019.

Spreen, C. A., and S. Vally. “The Limits of Privatisation in Education: Education Reform and the Persistent Tensions of Teacher Union-State Relations in South Africa.” *Journal of Education Policy* 35, no. 6 (2020): 767–82.

Townsend, T. “Reimagining Accountability in Schools: The Role of Collaboration.” *International Journal of Educational Management* 36, no. 1 (2022): 1–16.

Wood, Donna J., and Barbara Gray. “Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Collaboration.” *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 1991): 139–62.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886391272001>.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Dr. Trevor Thembinkosi Zwane (TTZ) is an emerging educational researcher whose studies concentrate on school governance and leadership. He possesses significant experience in public ordinary schools and has played a role in leadership development and the professionalisation of school leadership through various service initiatives. At the moment, Dr TTZ serves on the School Management Team (SMT) at Kholwani Primary School and engages with higher education institutions in research initiatives aimed at improving school leadership practices. He is a member in good standing with the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), thereby broadening his impact within teacher union-academic discourse. His research examines collaboration theory largely, specifically the roles of principals, teacher unions, SMTs, and School Governing Bodies (SGBs) in fostering inclusive and participatory governance in educational institutions. The aim of his work is to empower educational stakeholders and advance sustainable leadership models, particularly in under-resourced educational environments.

Dr Matsepe obtained his PhD in Education at University of Johannesburg. He is a Head of Research for South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) and a Research Associate in the Faculty of Education at University of Johannesburg. He is a founder and Chief Editor for Journal of South African Democratic Teachers Union (JSADTU), for more information please visit <https://jsadtu.com/>. He is a member of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES); South African Education Research Association (SAERA). He has published several peer-reviewed journal articles including a book chapter. He has presented several research papers at reputable international conferences.