



# Navigating the management terrain: Insights from school management teams of Amathole East District, South Africa

Bafundi Zealous Mapisa<sup>1</sup>  & Belinda Rindai Musodza<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges that School Management Teams (SMTs) face in the Amathole East District of South Africa and aims to identify strategies to enhance their effectiveness. The primary objective is to comprehend the constraints that impede SMTs from fulfilling their responsibilities and to propose practical solutions for improving school leadership. Utilising a qualitative research design, data were collected through structured interviews with fifteen participants from three different schools, including principals, deputy principals, and heads of departments, who participated in focus group discussions. Thematic analysis revealed key challenges such as overwhelming workloads, inadequate resources, political and union interference, and limited decision-making autonomy. The findings indicate that SMTs often struggle to balance their administrative and instructional leadership roles, leading to inefficiencies in school management. To navigate these challenges, SMTs employ delegation, collaboration, and professional development strategies. The study concludes that, while SMTs are vital to school leadership, systemic barriers significantly hinder their effectiveness. This research adds to the existing literature by shedding light on the unique challenges SMTs encounter in rural South African schools and providing actionable recommendations for policy and practice. It emphasises the need for targeted leadership training, improved resource allocation, and reduced political influence in school decision-making. Collaboration among educational stakeholders, including government bodies and unions, is essential for establishing a supportive environment for SMTs. This study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by School Management Teams in rural South Africa and suggests strategies for strengthening school leadership, highlighting the need for collaboration among educational stakeholders.

*Keywords: Challenges, Educational Leadership, Rural Schools, School Management Teams, Strategies*

## INTRODUCTION

School Management Teams (SMTs) play a vital role in ensuring the effective functioning of schools by overseeing instructional leadership, resource management, and policy implementation. In the South African education system, SMTs, composed of principals, deputy principals, and heads of departments, are tasked

---

**CORRESPONDENCE** - Belinda Rindai Musodza Email: [bmusodza@wsu.ac.za](mailto:bmusodza@wsu.ac.za)

**PUBLICATION HISTORY** - Received : 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2025 | Accepted: 11<sup>th</sup> November, 2025 | Published: 18<sup>th</sup> February, 2026.

**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE** - Mapisa, Bafundi Zealous, and Belinda Rindai Musodza. "Navigating the Management Terrain: Insights from School Management Teams of Amathole East District, South Africa." *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no.1 (2026): 1 - 12. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2026711>

**COPYRIGHT AND LICENSING** - © 2026 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Journals.

This is an open access article under the CCBY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

with providing strategic direction and fostering a conducive learning environment.<sup>1</sup> However, rural schools, such as those in the Amathole East District, face significant challenges that impede the effectiveness of SMTs. These challenges include excessive workloads, inadequate resources, political and union interference, and limited autonomy in decision-making. While previous studies have examined the role of school leadership in enhancing educational outcomes, there remains a knowledge gap regarding the specific constraints SMTs encounter in rural South Africa and the strategies they employ to navigate these.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, inconsistencies in the literature regarding the impact of external political and union influences on SMT decision-making indicate a need for further investigation.<sup>3</sup>

School Management Teams (SMTs) play a pivotal role in the success of schools. However, many rural schools struggle with leadership effectiveness, which negatively affects overall school performance and student achievement. These challenges are exacerbated by a lack of research that captures the unique, lived experiences of SMT members working in demanding rural contexts. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating the key constraints SMTs encounter in the Amathole East District and examining the strategies they employ to address these challenges. The central research question guides the study. What constraints hinder SMTs from fulfilling their responsibilities, and which strategies can be implemented to enhance their effectiveness? Its objective is to comprehensively analyse these challenges while offering practical recommendations to improve school management in resource-constrained settings. By addressing these issues, the research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on school leadership in rural South Africa. It provides valuable insights to inform policy interventions aimed at strengthening SMT capacity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

School Management Teams (SMTs) are pivotal to the effective functioning and improvement of schools, particularly in rural and under-resourced contexts. Their ability to fulfil leadership mandates directly impacts educational outcomes, teacher morale, and student achievement. However, SMTs in rural areas, such as the Amathole East District of South Africa, face a complex array of challenges that hinder their effectiveness. This section synthesises the main findings of the study, contextualises them within the broader literature, and offers evidence-based recommendations for practice, policy, and future research.

### Challenges Faced by SMTs in Rural Schools

#### *Workload and Role Overload*

There is an overwhelming workload and role overload experienced by SMTs. In the South African context, school leaders are often tasked with both instructional leadership and extensive administrative management.<sup>4</sup> This dual responsibility is especially pronounced in rural schools, where limited staffing means SMT members must juggle roles such as curriculum oversight, teacher evaluation, stakeholder engagement, and routine paperwork.<sup>5</sup> The result is chronic fatigue, diminished job satisfaction, and reduced capacity for strategic leadership. This phenomenon is not unique to South Africa. Research from the UK and Nigeria similarly highlights that SMTs frequently experience stress and burnout due to the breadth of their responsibilities, which can ultimately compromise the effectiveness of school leadership and inhibit

---

<sup>1</sup> Christa Jansen and André du Plessis, "The Role of Deputy Principals: Perspectives of South African Primary School Principals and Their Deputies," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 51, no. 1 (January 7, 2023): 157–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220975764>.

<sup>2</sup> Rajandran Ramsamy Naidoo, "Instructional Leadership Roles of School Management Teams: An Exploratory Study of Five Township Secondary Schools" (University of the Free State, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Pascale Benoliel, "A Team-Based Perspective for School Improvement: The Mediating Role of School Management Teams," *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* 14, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): 442–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2020.1849481>.

<sup>4</sup> Fred C. Lunenburg and Allan C. Ornstein, "Educational Administration Concepts & Practices," *New-York: Thomson Learning Inc* 273 (2008); Tony Bush, *Theories of Educational Management*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Carla Muller, "The Role of School Management Teams in Providing Care and Support to High School Teachers" (Stellenbosch University, 2024).

meaningful school improvement.<sup>6</sup> The growing complexity of educational policies and insufficient support from higher authorities further exacerbate these challenges, making it difficult for SMTs to balance their roles effectively and hindering overall school performance.

### **Resource Constraints**

Resource limitations are a persistent barrier for SMTs in rural schools. The literature consistently identifies inadequate infrastructure, lack of teaching materials, and insufficient financial support as major impediments to effective school management.<sup>7</sup> In the Amathole East District, participants described struggling with limited textbooks, outdated facilities, and a lack of qualified teachers, factors that directly impact teaching quality and student learning outcomes. This issue is mirrored globally. In the UK, funding cuts have disproportionately affected schools in disadvantaged areas, exacerbating existing inequalities.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Nigerian schools also operate under severe financial constraints, placing additional pressure on SMTs to devise alternative solutions, often without sufficient training or support.<sup>9</sup> In the Eastern Cape, slow distribution of funds and resources has been criticised for undermining educational quality and contributing to high dropout rates.<sup>10</sup>

### **Political and Union Interference**

Another significant challenge is the interference of political and union actors in school management. In South Africa, political pressures and union demands have been shown to undermine SMT authority and distort leadership priorities.<sup>11</sup> This interference can create tensions between educational objectives and political agendas, impeding effective decision-making and reform efforts. Similar dynamics are observed in Tanzania and New Zealand, where union negotiations and political directives often conflict with the operational autonomy of SMTs.<sup>12</sup> Such interference can stall reforms, create confusion, and lead to a lack of consensus on school priorities.<sup>13</sup> Despite extensive discussion in the literature, there remains a notable gap in empirical research examining the specific effects of political and union dynamics on SMT decision-making and school outcomes.

<sup>6</sup> Lutendo Ernest Mudau, *School Management Teams' (Smts) Response to Covid-19: A Functional Stupidity Perspective* (University of Johannesburg, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> N. J. Ogunode and A. Musa, "Higher Education in Nigeria: Challenges and the Ways Forward," *Electronic Research Journal of Behavioural Sciences* 3 (2020); Pascale Benoiel and Anit Somech, "A New Perspective for Understanding School Managers' Roles: The Impact of Principals' Boundary Activities on the Effectiveness of School Management Teams," *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 120, no. 3 (March 1, 2018): 1–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811812000301>.

<sup>8</sup> Chris van Wyk and Mohau Marumoloa, "The Role and Functioning of School Management Teams in Policy Formulation and Implementation at School Level," *Journal of Social Sciences* 32, no. 1 (July 9, 2012): 101–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2012.11893056>; Ann Owens, "Unequal Opportunity: School and Neighborhood Segregation in the USA," *Race and Social Problems* 12, no. 1 (March 20, 2020): 29–41, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-019-09274-z>.

<sup>9</sup> Yusuf Suleiman and Araba Hammed, "Perceived Causes of Students' Failure in Mathematics in Kwara State Junior Secondary Schools: Implication for Educational Managers," *International Journal of Educational Studies in Mathematics* 6, no. 1 (2019): 19–33.

<sup>10</sup> Elock Emvula Shikalepo and Selma Ndeyapo Kandjengo, "Challenges Facing Learner Leadership at Schools," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 05, no. 12 (2021): 43–51, <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2021.51204>.

<sup>11</sup> Clionadh Raleigh and Daniel Wigmore-Shepherd, "Elite Coalitions and Power Balance across African Regimes: Introducing the African Cabinet and Political Elite Data Project (ACPED)," *Ethnopolitics* 21, no. 1 (January 1, 2022): 22–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2020.1771840>; Sharifa Mathee, *Exploring the Effect of Military Leadership on the Role of Public Sector Trade Unions: The South African Navy Fleet Command Headquarters Case* (Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Cylestine Kapelela, Moshi Amsi Mislai, and Patrick Renatus Manyengo, "The Politics of School Governance in the Context of Education Decentralisation Policy Reforms in Selected Public Secondary Schools in Tanzania," *Cogent Education* 12, no. 1 (December 31, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2442251>; Huidan Niu, "The Politics of Teacher Professionalism in Teacher Unions: A Case Study of Aotearoa New Zealand" (Massey University, New Zealand, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Trevor Thomas Stewart and Timothy A. Jansky, "Novice Teachers and Embracing Struggle: Dialogue and Reflection in Professional Development," *Teaching and Teacher Education: Leadership and Professional Development* 1 (December 2022): 100002, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tatep.2022.100002>; David S. Cater and Marnie O'Neill, *International Perspectives on Educational Reform and Policy Implementation* (Routledge, 2021).

## Strategies Employed by SMTs

### ***Leadership Development and Professional Training***

To address these challenges, it is of critical importance for leadership development and ongoing professional training to be invoked. Professional development programmes can equip SMTs with essential skills in leadership, decision-making, and resource management.<sup>14</sup> Globally, distributed leadership models, where responsibilities are shared among staff, have been found to improve teacher satisfaction and student outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Mentorship, peer collaboration, and reflective practices are also highlighted as effective strategies for enhancing instructional practices and overall school performance.<sup>16</sup> In South Africa, capacity building and inclusive decision-making processes have been shown to strengthen school governance and align educational objectives with community needs.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Collaboration and Delegation***

Fostering collaboration among school staff and delegating responsibilities is another key strategy for managing workload and empowering team members. Effective school leadership involves building a culture of shared responsibility, which enhances communication, innovation, and school effectiveness.<sup>18</sup> Research from Canada and other contexts demonstrates that collaborative practices improve resource allocation, teacher morale, and student achievement.<sup>19</sup> However, successful delegation requires clear guidelines and support to prevent confusion and ensure accountability. Critics caution that without proper structures, delegation can lead to role ambiguity and inefficiency.

### ***Community Engagement and Resource Mobilisation***

Engaging parents, local leaders, and community organisations is vital for supplementing school resources and fostering a sense of ownership. Community-based resource hubs and partnerships can provide mentorship, tutoring, and extracurricular support, addressing gaps in materials and infrastructure.<sup>20</sup> Such engagement also helps align school goals with local cultural values, enhancing accountability and school effectiveness.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Research Paradigm and Approach**

This study was conducted within an interpretive research paradigm, prioritising the exploration of the lived experiences and perspectives of School Management Teams (SMTs) in rural South African schools. Interpretivism was selected to enable a nuanced understanding of social phenomena through participants'

---

<sup>14</sup> Raj Mestry and Vanitha Govindasamy, "The Perceptions of School Management Teams and Teachers of the Principal's Instructional Leadership Role in Managing Curriculum Changes," *Interchange* 52, no. 4 (December 22, 2021): 545–60, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-021-09425-5>.

<sup>15</sup> Yan Liu, Mehmet Şükrü Bellibaş, and Sedat Gümüş, "The Effect of Instructional Leadership and Distributed Leadership on Teacher Self-Efficacy and Job Satisfaction: Mediating Roles of Supportive School Culture and Teacher Collaboration," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 49, no. 3 (May 16, 2021): 430–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220910438>.

<sup>16</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond et al., "Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development," *Applied Developmental Science* 24, no. 2 (2020): 97–140; Audrey J. Murrell, Stacy Blake-Beard, and David M. Porter, "The Importance of Peer Mentoring, Identity Work and Holding Environments: A Study of African American Leadership Development," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 9 (May 5, 2021): 4920, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18094920>.

<sup>17</sup> Parvathy Naidoo, "Perceptions of Teachers and School Management Teams of the Leadership Roles of Public School Principals," *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. 2 (2019); Linda Darling-Hammond et al., *Developing Effective Principals: What Kind of Learning Matters?* (Learning Policy Institute, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Yin Cheong Cheng, *School Effectiveness and School-Based Management: A Mechanism for Development* (Routledge, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Fatemeh Abbaspour, Rezvan Hosseingholizadeh, and Mehmet Şükrü Bellibaş, "Uncovering the Role of Principals in Enhancing Teacher Professional Learning in a Centralized Education System," *International Journal of Educational Management* 38, no. 3 (April 4, 2024): 873–89, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-12-2023-0654>.

<sup>20</sup> George Shava and Jan Heystek, "Managing Teaching and Learning: Integrating Instructional and Transformational Leadership in South African Schools Context," *International Journal of Educational Management* 35, no. 5 (June 21, 2021): 1048–62, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-11-2020-0533>.

viewpoints.<sup>21</sup> An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted to capture in-depth insights into the challenges SMTs face and the strategies they employ, aligning with the aim of the study to contextualise leadership complexities in resource-constrained environments.<sup>22</sup>

### Research Design and Participants

A case study design was utilised, focusing on three rural schools in the Amathole East District. Case studies are well-suited for educational research as they facilitate the examination of complex issues within authentic contexts.<sup>23</sup> The study sample comprised 15 SMT members: three principals (two female, one male; ages 54–58), three deputy principals (two female, one male; ages 43–53), and nine heads of department (HoDs; both genders; ages 41–58). All participants possessed at least two years of SMT experience, with teaching experience ranging from 16 to 25 years and SMT tenure from 6 to 17 years. Participants were purposefully selected based on their leadership roles and experience, ensuring information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives.<sup>24</sup>

### Data Collection Instruments and Protocols

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Principals and deputy principals participated in individual interviews, while HoDs engaged in FGDs. The semi-structured format allowed for probing and clarification, ensuring depth and breadth of data.<sup>25</sup> All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, as no new themes emerged after 15 participants.<sup>26</sup>

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke’s six-step procedure: familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and interpretation.<sup>27</sup> The process began with a thorough reading and re-reading of interview and focus group transcripts to immerse in the data and note initial impressions. During coding, significant statements and recurring ideas were systematically highlighted and assigned descriptive codes. These codes were then grouped based on similarities, forming the basis for initial theme development. For example, codes like “overwhelming paperwork” and “administrative overload” were clustered under workload and role overload, while “insufficient resources” and “poor infrastructure” informed the resource constraints theme. Themes were reviewed and refined through iterative cross-checking against the dataset to ensure they accurately captured core patterns and were distinct from one another. Each theme was then clearly defined and illustrated with supporting quotations from participants. Finally, themes were interpreted in relation to the study’s objectives and existing literature, ensuring a rigorous, data-driven, and theoretically informed analysis that enhanced the credibility and depth of the findings.

<sup>21</sup> Bunmi Isaiah Omodan, *Research Paradigms and Their Methodological Alignment in Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003484066>.

<sup>22</sup> Sharon M., Ravitch and Nicole Mittenfelner Carl, *Qualitative Research: Bridging the Conceptual, Theoretical, and Methodological* (Sage Publications, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Lesley Eleanor Tomaszewski, Jill Zarestky, and Elsa Gonzalez, “Planning Qualitative Research: Design and Decision Making for New Researchers,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2020): 1609406920967174.

<sup>24</sup> Musarrat Shaheen and Sudeepta Pradhan, “Sampling in Qualitative Research,” in *Qualitative Techniques for Workplace Data Analysis* (IGI Global, 2019), 25–51.

<sup>25</sup> Melissa DeJonckheere and Lisa M Vaughn, “Semistructured Interviewing in Primary Care Research: A Balance of Relationship and Rigour,” *Family Medicine and Community Health* 7, no. 2 (2019): e000057.

<sup>26</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “To Saturate or Not to Saturate? Questioning Data Saturation as a Useful Concept for Thematic Analysis and Sample-Size Rationales,” *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 13, no. 2 (March 4, 2021): 201–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1704846>; Monique Hennink and Bonnie N. Kaiser, “Sample Sizes for Saturation in Qualitative Research: A Systematic Review of Empirical Tests,” *Social Science & Medicine* 292 (January 2022): 114523, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>.

<sup>27</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis,” *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019): 589–97.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional committee. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality through anonymised coding (e.g., P1-A, DEP2-B). Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any stage. Data were securely stored, accessible only to the researcher. Credibility was enhanced through member checking and triangulation of interview and FGD data.<sup>28</sup>

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

### Demographic Information for the Participants

**Table 1: Biographical Information of SMT Participants**

Code	Gender	Age	Highest Qualification	Teaching Experience in Years	SMT Tenure in Years
P1-A	F	56	B.Ed. Honours	20	10
P2-B	M	54	B.A in Education	23	8
P3-C	F	58	B.Sc. in Education	25	17
DEP1-A	F	53	M.E.d	17	11
DEP2-B	M	48	B.E.d	21	9
DEP3-C	F	43	B.A in Education	23	6
FG1-A	M	41	B.Ed	16	7
FG2-B	M	58	B.A. in Education	24	14

The participants comprised five females and three males, aged between 41 and 58 years. All held teaching-related qualifications, ranging from B.Ed to M.Ed, with teaching experience spanning 16 to 25 years. SMT tenure ranged from 6 to 17 years, indicating substantial leadership experience. Female participants were slightly more represented, and the most qualified individual held a Master's in Education. Overall, the data reflect a well-qualified and experienced group of educators, offering credible insights into school leadership practices.

### Objective 1: Constraints Faced by School Management Teams (SMTs) in Fulfilling Their Mandates

The findings revealed that School Management Teams (SMTs) in the rural schools of the Amathole East District face several significant constraints in discharging their mandates. The most prominent challenge reported across all participating schools is an overwhelming workload. SMT members indicated that administrative duties dominate their daily responsibilities, often leaving little time to focus on instructional leadership and curriculum oversight. Both principals and deputy principals described being preoccupied with paperwork and routine administrative tasks, which led to fatigue and limited their capacity to support teachers effectively.

Participants P1-A shared, *"We frequently find ourselves preoccupied with administrative duties that distract us from our primary responsibilities as instructional leaders."*

This sentiment was reiterated by participant DEP1-A, who added, *"Our days are consumed by paperwork, leaving us fatigued and unable to support our teachers effectively."*

Resource shortages were also identified as a major constraint. Participants consistently highlighted the inadequacy of infrastructure, learning materials, and financial support. Many SMT members stated that their schools have a limited supply of textbooks and essential resources, which directly hampers their ability

<sup>28</sup> Satya Subrahmanyam, "Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research in the Aviation Industry," in *Qualitative Research Methods in Air Transport Management* (IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2025), 123–52.

to support both teachers and students. *"Our school has a limited number of textbooks and learning resources, which hampers our ability to support both teachers and students adequately"*(participant P2-B). The lack of professional development opportunities also emerged as another critical concern. SMT members expressed frustration at being expected to lead without sufficient training or access to ongoing leadership development, making it increasingly difficult to make informed decisions in complex situations. Participant FG1-A noted, *"We are expected to lead without proper training, making it increasingly difficult to make informed decisions."*

Additionally, political and union interference was reported as a substantial barrier to effective school management. SMT members noted that external pressures from unions and political figures frequently influence school governance and limit the autonomy of SMTs in making decisions that serve the best interests of the school community. As DEP2-B pointed out, *"Union demands sometimes override the school's needs, making it challenging for us to make decisions that are in the best interest of the students."*

## **Objective 2: Strategies to Mitigate Constraints and Enhance SMT Effectiveness**

The findings also identify several strategies proposed by SMT members to mitigate the constraints they face. Workload redistribution was widely recommended, with participants advocating for the delegation of administrative tasks to non-SMT staff or the hiring of additional administrative personnel. This approach was seen as a way for SMTs to concentrate more on instructional leadership and improving educational quality. As participant P3-C stated, *"We need more administrative staff to manage the paperwork, allowing SMTs to concentrate on leadership and enhancing educational quality."*

Training and professional development were also highlighted as essential strategies for enhancing SMT effectiveness. Participants called for the introduction of specialised leadership training programmes focused on curriculum leadership, conflict resolution, and resource management. Improved resource allocation was also deemed vital, with SMTs advocating for increased financial support and equitable distribution of materials and infrastructure, particularly in rural schools where shortages are most acute.

Finally, reducing political and union interference was considered necessary to enhance SMT autonomy in decision-making. Participants recommended the establishment of clear policies to protect SMTs from external pressures, ensuring that decisions could be made in the best interests of the school rather than being influenced by outside agendas. As participant DEP3-C shared, *"There should be policies to ensure that SMTs can make decisions based on what is best for the school, free from external pressures from politicians and unions."* These findings provide a comprehensive overview of the constraints experienced by SMTs in rural schools and the practical strategies they propose to overcome these challenges.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study align closely with existing literature on the challenges faced by School Management Teams (SMTs), particularly in rural and resource-constrained contexts. The overwhelming workload reported by participants echoes widespread concerns documented in educational leadership research, which emphasises that administrative burdens often detract from instructional leadership roles.<sup>29</sup> This imbalance undermines SMTs' capacity to support teaching and learning effectively, a critical function highlighted in contemporary leadership models such as instructional leadership and distributed leadership frameworks.<sup>30</sup> Resource shortages, including inadequate infrastructure and learning materials, are consistent with findings from studies on rural education globally.<sup>31</sup> Such deficits not only hamper teaching quality but

<sup>29</sup> Tony Bush, "Understanding Instructional Leadership," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* (SAGE Publications Sage UK: London, England, 2015); Raj Mestry and Bennie Grobler, "Collaboration and Communication as Effective Strategies for Parent Involvement in Public Schools," *Educational Research and Reviews* 2, no. 7 (2007): 176.

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth Leithwood, Alma Harris, and David Hopkins, "Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership Revisited," *School Leadership & Management* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 5–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>.

<sup>31</sup> Scientific, and Cultural Organization United Nations Educational, "Reviews of National Policies for Education Education in Thailand An OECD-UNESCO Perspective" (OECD Publishing, 2016); Stanley Taren Ngoben, "Establishing and Maintaining School-Community

also exacerbate inequities between urban and rural schools. The call for improved resource allocation resonates with policy recommendations advocating targeted funding and support to disadvantaged schools.<sup>32</sup>

The lack of professional development opportunities for SMT members is a well-documented barrier to effective school leadership.<sup>33</sup> The participants' emphasis on specialised leadership training aligns with contemporary practice that prioritises continuous professional learning to equip leaders with skills in curriculum management, conflict resolution, and resource stewardship.<sup>34</sup> This is particularly relevant given the complex demands placed on SMTs in dynamic educational environments. Political and union interference as constraints reflect a nuanced challenge in school governance, noted in both South African and international contexts.<sup>35</sup> Such external pressures can undermine SMT autonomy and decision-making, detracting from the school's ability to respond effectively to its unique needs. The recommendation for clear policies to safeguard SMT independence is supported by governance literature advocating for transparent, accountable, and context-sensitive leadership structures.<sup>36</sup>

In summary, the study's findings reinforce the critical need to address workload, resource, training, and governance challenges to empower SMTs. These insights contribute valuable empirical evidence from rural South African schools, enriching the broader discourse on enhancing school leadership effectiveness in under-resourced settings. Implementing the proposed strategies could significantly improve educational outcomes by enabling SMTs to fulfil their mandates more effectively, consistent with global best practices in educational leadership.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Theoretical Recommendations:

- Adopt and adapt instructional leadership and distributed leadership models tailored to rural contexts, emphasising shared responsibilities and collaborative decision-making to reduce SMT workload and enhance instructional focus.
- Incorporate community and traditional leadership theories to better integrate local cultural dynamics into school governance, recognising the unique rural socio-political environment.

### Practical Recommendations

**Workload Redistribution:** Delegate administrative tasks to dedicated non-SMT staff or administrative assistants to free SMT members for instructional leadership and teacher support.

**Professional Development:** Implement continuous, context-specific leadership training and mentoring programs focusing on curriculum management, conflict resolution, resource allocation, and emotional intelligence.

**Resource Mobilisation:** Strengthen partnerships with parents, local leaders, and volunteers to supplement school resources and provide mentorship, tutoring, and extracurricular support, fostering community ownership and tailored educational interventions.

---

Partnerships: A Challenge for School Management Teams," *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 28, no. 4 (July 4, 2025): 903–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2022.2117414>.

<sup>32</sup> Dumisani Wilfred Mncube et al., "Exploring the Problems of Limited School Resources in Rural Schools and Curriculum Management," *UMT Education Review* 6, no. 2 (October 24, 2023): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.32350/UER.62.01>.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Mugambi Mukwairu, "Influence of Teachers' Trade Unions on Management of Public Secondary Schools in Embu County, Kenya" (2022).

<sup>34</sup> Israel Kariyana, "Effects of The Attributes of School Management Teams on The Management of Quality Education: Towards School Effectiveness," *E-Bangi Journal of Social Science and Humanities* 20, no. 2 (May 8, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.17576/ebangi.2023.2002.18>.

<sup>35</sup> Sandhya Sunker, *The Role of School Management Teams in Designing and Implementing Continuous Professional Development Programmes for Secondary School Teachers* (University of Johannesburg (South Africa), 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Ghasem Eslami et al., "How Role Overload Affects Female Teachers' Work-Life Balance Crafting Behaviours: A Coexistence Collective Moderation Model," *International Journal of Management in Education* 18, no. 1 (2024): 46–69, <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJMIE.2024.135185>.

**Policy Advocacy:** Develop clear policies to protect SMT autonomy from political and union interference, enabling decision-making that prioritises student and school needs.

## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that School Management Teams (SMTs) in rural Amathole East District face significant constraints, primarily an overwhelming administrative workload that limits their instructional leadership capacity. Resource shortages, including inadequate infrastructure and learning materials, further hinder their effectiveness. Additionally, the lack of professional development opportunities and interference from political and union actors restricts SMT autonomy and decision-making. Despite these challenges, SMT members demonstrate substantial leadership experience and commitment. To enhance SMT effectiveness, participants recommend redistributing administrative tasks, increasing access to targeted leadership training, improving resource allocation, and establishing policies to safeguard SMT independence. These conclusions are firmly grounded in the participants' experiences and highlight the critical need for systemic support to empower SMTs in fulfilling their mandates and improving educational outcomes in rural schools.

## Recommendations for Future Research

1. Future research should explore the effectiveness of distributed leadership in rural school contexts, focusing on its impact on school functionality and educator morale.
2. A longitudinal study could assess how targeted professional development of SMTs translates into school improvement outcomes over time.
3. Further investigation is needed into the role of political and union dynamics in educational leadership, particularly in underperforming rural schools.
4. Comparative studies between rural and urban SMTs may reveal systemic differences in leadership experiences and inform differentiated support mechanisms.
5. Finally, a mixed-methods study could expand the understanding of how school leadership interacts with community involvement and learner achievement in rural areas.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abbaspour, Fatemeh, Rezvan Hosseingholizadeh, and Mehmet Şükrü Bellibaş. "Uncovering the Role of Principals in Enhancing Teacher Professional Learning in a Centralized Education System." *International Journal of Educational Management* 38, no. 3 (April 4, 2024): 873–89. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-12-2023-0654>.
- Benotiel, Pascale. "A Team-Based Perspective for School Improvement: The Mediating Role of School Management Teams." *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* 14, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): 442–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2020.1849481>.
- Benotiel, Pascale, and Anit Somech. "A New Perspective for Understanding School Managers' Roles: The Impact of Principals' Boundary Activities on the Effectiveness of School Management Teams." *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 120, no. 3 (March 1, 2018): 1–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811812000301>.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019): 589–97.
- . "To Saturate or Not to Saturate? Questioning Data Saturation as a Useful Concept for Thematic Analysis and Sample-Size Rationales." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 13, no. 2 (March 4, 2021): 201–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1704846>.
- Bush, Tony. *Theories of Educational Management*. 3rd ed. London: Sage, 2003.
- . "Understanding Instructional Leadership." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. SAGE Publications Sage UK: London, England, 2015.
- Cater, David S., and Marnie O'Neill. *International Perspectives on Educational Reform and Policy Implementation*. Routledge, 2021.

- Cheng, Yin Cheong. *School Effectiveness and School-Based Management: A Mechanism for Development*. Routledge, 2022.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda, Lisa Flook, Channa Cook-Harvey, Brigid Barron, and David Osher. "Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development." *Applied Developmental Science* 24, no. 2 (2020): 97–140.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda, Marjorie E. Wechsler, Stephanie Levin, and Steve Tozer. *Developing Effective Principals: What Kind of Learning Matters?* Learning Policy Institute, 2022.
- DeJonckheere, Melissa, and Lisa M Vaughn. "Semistructured Interviewing in Primary Care Research: A Balance of Relationship and Rigour." *Family Medicine and Community Health* 7, no. 2 (2019): e000057.
- Eslami, Ghasem, Seyed Mojtaba Hashemian, Alireza Khorakian, and Marzieyh Adibzadeh. "How Role Overload Affects Female Teachers' Work-Life Balance Crafting Behaviours: A Coexistence Collective Moderation Model." *International Journal of Management in Education* 18, no. 1 (2024): 46–69. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJMIE.2024.135185>.
- Hennink, Monique, and Bonnie N. Kaiser. "Sample Sizes for Saturation in Qualitative Research: A Systematic Review of Empirical Tests." *Social Science & Medicine* 292 (January 2022): 114523. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>.
- Jansen, Christa, and André du Plessis. "The Role of Deputy Principals: Perspectives of South African Primary School Principals and Their Deputies." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 51, no. 1 (January 7, 2023): 157–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220975764>.
- Kapelela, Cylestine, Moshi Amsi Mislai, and Patrick Rensus Manyengo. "The Politics of School Governance in the Context of Education Decentralisation Policy Reforms in Selected Public Secondary Schools in Tanzania." *Cogent Education* 12, no. 1 (December 31, 2025). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2442251>.
- Kariyana, Israel. "Effects of The Attributes of School Management Teams on The Management of Quality Education: Towards School Effectiveness." *E-Bangi Journal of Social Science and Humanities* 20, no. 2 (May 8, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.17576/ebangi.2023.2002.18>.
- Leithwood, Kenneth, Alma Harris, and David Hopkins. "Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership Revisited." *School Leadership & Management* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>.
- Liu, Yan, Mehmet Şükrü Bellibaş, and Sedat Gümüş. "The Effect of Instructional Leadership and Distributed Leadership on Teacher Self-Efficacy and Job Satisfaction: Mediating Roles of Supportive School Culture and Teacher Collaboration." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 49, no. 3 (May 16, 2021): 430–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220910438>.
- Lunenburg, Fred C., and Allan C. Ornstein. "Educational Administration Concepts & Practices." *New-York: Thomson Learning Inc.*, 273 (2008).
- Mathee, Sharifa. *Exploring the Effect of Military Leadership on the Role of Public Sector Trade Unions: The South African Navy Fleet Command Headquarters Case*. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2019.
- Mestry, Raj, and Vanitha Govindasamy. "The Perceptions of School Management Teams and Teachers of the Principal's Instructional Leadership Role in Managing Curriculum Changes." *Interchange* 52, no. 4 (December 22, 2021): 545–60. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-021-09425-5>.
- Mestry, Raj, and Bennie Grobler. "Collaboration and Communication as Effective Strategies for Parent Involvement in Public Schools." *Educational Research and Reviews* 2, no. 7 (2007): 176.
- Mncube, Dumisani Wilfred, Oluwatoyin Ayodele Ajani, Thandi Ngema, and Rachel Gugu Mkhasibe. "Exploring the Problems of Limited School Resources in Rural Schools and Curriculum Management." *UMT Education Review* 6, no. 2 (October 24, 2023): 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.32350/UER.62.01>.
- Mudau, Lutendo Ernest. *School Management Teams' (Smts) Response to COVID-19: A Functional*

- Stupidity Perspective*. University of Johannesburg, 2021.
- Mukwairu, Mary Mugambi. "Influence of Teachers' Trade Unions on Management of Public Secondary Schools in Embu County, Kenya," 2022.
- Muller, Carla. "The Role of School Management Teams in Providing Care and Support to High School Teachers." Stellenbosch University, 2024.
- Murrell, Audrey J., Stacy Blake-Beard, and David M. Porter. "The Importance of Peer Mentoring, Identity Work and Holding Environments: A Study of African American Leadership Development." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 9 (May 5, 2021): 4920. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18094920>.
- Naidoo, Parvathy. "Perceptions of Teachers and School Management Teams of the Leadership Roles of Public School Principals." *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. 2 (2019).
- Naidoo, Rajandran Ramsamy. "Instructional Leadership Roles of School Management Teams: An Exploratory Study of Five Township Secondary Schools." University of the Free State, 2021.
- Ngobeni, Stanley Taren. "Establishing and Maintaining School-Community Partnerships: A Challenge for School Management Teams." *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 28, no. 4 (July 4, 2025): 903–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2022.2117414>.
- Niu, Huidan. "The Politics of Teacher Professionalism in Teacher Unions: A Case Study of Aotearoa New Zealand." Massey University, New Zealand, 2023.
- Ogunode, N. J., and A. Musa. "Higher Education in Nigeria: Challenges and the Ways Forward." *Electronic Research Journal of Behavioural Sciences* 3 (2020).
- Omodan, Bunmi Isaiah. *Research Paradigms and Their Methodological Alignment in Social Sciences*. London: Routledge, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003484066>.
- Owens, Ann. "Unequal Opportunity: School and Neighborhood Segregation in the USA." *Race and Social Problems* 12, no. 1 (March 20, 2020): 29–41. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-019-09274-z>.
- Raleigh, Clionadh, and Daniel Wigmore-Shepherd. "Elite Coalitions and Power Balance across African Regimes: Introducing the African Cabinet and Political Elite Data Project (ACPED)." *Ethnopolitics* 21, no. 1 (January 1, 2022): 22–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2020.1771840>.
- Ravitch, Sharon M., and Nicole Mittenfelner Carl. *Qualitative Research: Bridging the Conceptual, Theoretical, and Methodological*. Sage Publications, 2019.
- Shaheen, Musarrat, and Sudeepta Pradhan. "Sampling in Qualitative Research." In *Qualitative Techniques for Workplace Data Analysis*, 25–51. IGI Global, 2019.
- Shava, George, and Jan Heystek. "Managing Teaching and Learning: Integrating Instructional and Transformational Leadership in South African Schools Context." *International Journal of Educational Management* 35, no. 5 (June 21, 2021): 1048–62. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-11-2020-0533>.
- Shikalepo, Elock Emvula, and Selma Ndeyapo Kandjengo. "Challenges Facing Learner Leadership at Schools." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 05, no. 12 (2021): 43–51. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2021.51204>.
- Stewart, Trevor Thomas, and Timothy A. Jansky. "Novice Teachers and Embracing Struggle: Dialogue and Reflection in Professional Development." *Teaching and Teacher Education: Leadership and Professional Development* 1 (December 2022): 100002. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tatelp.2022.100002>.
- Subrahmanyam, Satya. "Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research in the Aviation Industry." In *Qualitative Research Methods in Air Transport Management*, 123–52. IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2025.
- Suleiman, Yusuf, and Araba Hammed. "Perceived Causes of Students' Failure in Mathematics in Kwara State Junior Secondary Schools: Implications for Educational Managers." *International Journal of Educational Studies in Mathematics* 6, no. 1 (2019): 19–33.
- Sunker, Sandhya. *The Role of School Management Teams in Designing and Implementing Continuous Professional Development Programmes for Secondary School Teachers*. University of Johannesburg (South Africa), 2021.

- Tomaszewski, Lesley Eleanor, Jill Zarestky, and Elsa Gonzalez. "Planning Qualitative Research: Design and Decision Making for New Researchers." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2020): 1609406920967174.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. "Reviews of National Policies for Education: Education in Thailand: An OECD-UNESCO Perspective." OECD Publishing, 2016.
- Wyk, Chris van, and Mohau Marumoloo. "The Role and Functioning of School Management Teams in Policy Formulation and Implementation at School Level." *Journal of Social Sciences* 32, no. 1 (July 9, 2012): 101–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2012.11893056>.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The researchers express gratitude to all school management teams (SMTs) that participated in this study, as well as to the University authorities for granting permission to conduct the research without any hindrances.

## **ABOUT AUTHOR(S)**

Bafundi Zealous Mapisa is a Lecturer in the Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) Department at the Faculty of Education, Walter Sisulu University. He has worked as a teacher in different schools, Head of Department and a school principal for the Department of Basic Education in South Africa. His areas of expertise include Educational Leadership, Management, and Policy, particularly within secondary school and higher education contexts. The author actively participates in international research conferences, contributing to the discussions on educational policy and management practices. He is also a member of various key university committees, including the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee, the Curriculum Transformation Committee, and the Research and Higher Degrees Committee, as well as the Admissions Committee, Examinations and Timetable Committee, Teaching and Learning Committee, Health and Safety Committee, WIL-SBE Committee, and the Student Welfare Committee.

Belinda Rindai Musodza is a senior lecturer at a South African university with extensive experience in education, research, and public health. She has worked in both the private and public sectors in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Her research interests are in management and policy, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and postgraduate supervision. She has published in internationally recognised, DHET-accredited journals and has reviewed numerous manuscripts in management and policy. In addition to her academic responsibilities, Dr. Musodza has significant experience in community engagement, particularly in HIV and AIDS programming and women's empowerment. She has held key leadership positions and continues to collaborate on national research projects. Furthermore, she actively participates in faculty committees that focus on quality assurance, research, and postgraduate student support. Dr. Musodza is also a member of several professional associations, including the Postgraduate Forum for Southern Africa (PGFSA), South African Education Research Association (SAERA) and the South African Society for Education (SASE).