



The role of school management teams in enhancing education quality: A case study of four schools in the Chris Hani West Education District, South Africa

Lungelwa Khesa¹  & Owen Madalambana¹ 

¹ Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This study assessed the roles of School Management Teams in improving the quality of education in four selected secondary schools. The Total Quality Management Systems and Transformational Leadership Frameworks were used to ground this study. A qualitative approach and multi-case study design were used to collect data from participants. Four schools were purposively selected, and a principal, deputy principal, and departmental head were purposefully sampled from each of the schools. Data was generated using semi-structured interviews, analyzed using content analysis, and presented in themes. The main findings of this study are that departmental heads are not properly monitoring their departments, and the deputy principals are not properly heading the curriculum of the school. The findings indicated that the period registers, time book, and class registers are not properly monitored, leading to high learner absenteeism. However, some departmental heads still have a problem regarding the concept of working as a team. This study recommends that the Department of Education should conduct training and induction for the senior posts, which are the departmental heads, deputy principal, and principals. School Management Teams must employ departmental heads with expertise in the subjects that they are heading. This study contributes to scholarship by offering empirical insights into the leadership challenges within School Management Teams, particularly in the areas of curriculum management, departmental oversight, and teamwork. It enhances the understanding of how Total Quality Management and Transformational Leadership frameworks can be applied in secondary schools, while also informing policy and leadership development practices through context-specific recommendations.

Keywords: School Management Team, Curriculum Management, Guiding, Monitoring, Learner Performance.

INTRODUCTION

School Management Teams (SMTs) play a pivotal role in shaping the quality of education through their leadership practices, decision-making processes, and stakeholder engagement strategies. In many education systems, particularly in developing contexts, SMTs are responsible for ensuring that teaching and learning are effectively managed and that schools operate efficiently to meet academic and administrative goals. Globally, there is increasing recognition that strong school leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors influencing student achievement. A growing body of literature underscores the significance of instructional leadership as a critical function of SMTs.

CORRESPONDENCE – Owen Madalambana Email: omadalambana@wsu.ac.za

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According to Bush, effective SMTs provide curriculum oversight and monitor classroom instruction to enhance teaching and learning outcomes.¹ This leadership role not only impacts teacher performance but also directly influences learner achievement. Additionally, professional development of educators remains central to improving instructional quality. Steyn emphasizes that ongoing training through workshops, mentoring, and in-service programs equips teachers to better navigate curriculum reforms and classroom challenges.² Another emerging function of SMTs is the use of data-driven decision-making. Harris and Jones note that when SMTs systematically utilize learner performance data and teacher evaluations, they are better positioned to implement evidence-based interventions that address specific school needs.³ Moreover, stakeholder engagement is vital in creating collaborative school environments. Van der Westhuizen et al. argue that active participation of parents and communities fosters a shared vision, increases accountability, and improves educational outcomes. Despite the well-documented importance of SMTs, several studies reveal persistent challenges that undermine their effectiveness.⁴

These include limited leadership training, unclear role expectations, lack of subject-specific expertise, and inadequate resource allocation.⁵ Many SMT members are promoted without proper induction or preparation for the demands of their roles, leading to ineffective school leadership and management practices. While previous research has focused broadly on leadership in schools, there remains a gap in our understanding of how SMTs function on the ground, particularly in terms of curriculum management, departmental oversight, and collaborative leadership at secondary schools. This study aims to explore the roles of School Management Teams in improving the quality of education in four selected secondary schools. Grounded in the Total Quality Management (TQM) Systems and Transformational Leadership frameworks, the study employed a qualitative, multi-case study design to gain in-depth perspectives from principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads. Through semi-structured interviews and content analysis, the study sought to uncover specific leadership practices, challenges, and areas for improvement within SMTs. The remainder of this study is structured as follows:

- Literature Review: Examines existing theories and research on SMT leadership functions, TQM, and transformational leadership.
- Research Methodology: Describes qualitative design, participant selection, data collection, and analysis methods.
- Findings and Discussion: Presents thematic results, highlighting key leadership challenges and gaps within SMT roles.
- Recommendations and Conclusion: Offers actionable suggestions for leadership development and policy reform, along with a summary of the study's contributions to educational leadership scholarship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

School Management Teams (SMTs) play a pivotal role in determining the quality of education within schools. Their functions extend beyond administrative responsibilities to include instructional leadership, professional development, data-informed decision-making, and stakeholder engagement. When effectively executed, these leadership roles directly influence teaching quality and learner achievement. Instructional leadership is one of the most critical functions of SMTs. By engaging in

¹ Tony Bush, "Educational Leadership and Management: Theory, Policy and Practice," *South African Journal of Education* 27, no. 3 (2007): 391–406.

² G M Steyn, "Educators' Perceptions of Continuing Professional Development for Teachers in South Africa: A Qualitative Study," *Africa Education Review* 7, no. 1 (2010): 156–79.

³ Alma Harris and Michelle Jones, "Transforming Education Systems: Comparative and Critical Perspectives on School Leadership," *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 35, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 311–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2015.1056590>.

⁴ Philip C Van der Westhuizen et al., "Organizational Culture and Academic Achievement in Secondary Schools," *Education and Urban Society* 38, no. 1 (2005): 89–109.

⁵ Raj Mestry and Bennie R Grobler, "The Training and Development of Principals to Manage Schools Effectively Using the Competence Approach," *International Studies in Educational Administration* 32, no. 3 (2004).

regular classroom observations, reviewing lesson plans, and offering constructive feedback, SMT members, particularly principals and departmental heads, can ensure that teaching practices align with curriculum standards and educational goals. Bush emphasizes that instructional leadership directly contributes to improved learner outcomes and fosters a school culture centered on academic excellence.⁶

A closely related function is professional development. SMTs that prioritize teacher growth through in-service training, peer mentoring, and professional learning communities help cultivate a culture of continuous improvement. Steyn notes that well-structured professional development programs enhance teacher efficacy, boost morale, and help educators remain responsive to curriculum changes and classroom challenges.⁷ Another emerging responsibility of SMTs is the use of data to drive school improvement. Schools that systematically collect and analyze learner performance data, classroom assessments, and teacher evaluations are better positioned to make informed decisions. Harris and Jones argue that data-driven leadership enables SMTs to identify underperforming areas, implement targeted interventions, and promote a culture of accountability and results-oriented planning.⁸ Stakeholder engagement also forms a key pillar of effective school leadership. Active participation from parents, school governing bodies, and community members contributes to more inclusive governance and promotes shared ownership of the school's vision and objectives.

Van der Westhuizen et al. stressed that such collaboration fosters trust and transparency, which in turn support the successful implementation of school programs.⁹ However, several studies have documented significant challenges that hinder SMT effectiveness. These include limited formal leadership training, unclear role expectations, and a lack of subject-specific expertise, particularly among newly appointed SMT members. Mestry and Grobler highlight that such structural and capacity-related constraints undermine school leadership and compromise the implementation of instructional and managerial duties.¹⁰ To better understand and analyse the roles and effectiveness of SMTs, scholars have drawn upon two main theoretical frameworks, with their emphasis on continuous improvement, systemic monitoring, and stakeholder involvement, which offer a model for managing school quality through structured processes. In parallel, Transformational Leadership theory underscores the importance of vision-building, team empowerment, and inspirational motivation. Leaders who embody these qualities can foster innovation and collective ownership, both of which are essential in school improvement efforts. In conclusion, the literature affirms the critical role of SMTs in educational quality assurance. However, their effectiveness is significantly influenced by their training, resource availability, leadership preparation, and support structures. Strengthening SMTs through targeted leadership development programs, clearer role definitions, and improved stakeholder collaboration is essential for sustainable improvements in educational outcomes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on Total Quality Management (TQM)¹¹ and Transformational Leadership Theory to frame the investigation of QMS implementation in schools. TQM is an organizational philosophy focused on continuous improvement, stakeholder satisfaction, and systemic process control. In education, TQM requires collaborative practices, rigorous data use, and consistent feedback mechanisms.¹² Deming (1986), a foundational figure in TQM, emphasized the importance of leadership commitment, employee involvement, and process-oriented thinking. In schools, this translates into empowering educators, streamlining administrative processes, and fostering a culture of shared responsibility.¹³ Deming demonstrated that when schools in Singapore adopted TQM principles in

⁶ Tony Bush, "Instructional Leadership and Leadership for Learning: Global and South African Perspectives," *Education as Change* 17, no. sup1 (2013): S5–20.

⁷ Steyn, "Educators' Perceptions of Continuing Professional Development for Teachers in South Africa: A Qualitative Study," 2010.

⁸ Harris and Jones, "Transforming Education Systems: Comparative and Critical Perspectives on School Leadership."

⁹ Van der Westhuizen et al., "Organizational Culture and Academic Achievement in Secondary Schools."

¹⁰ Mestry and Grobler, "The Training and Development of Principals to Manage Schools Effectively Using the Competence Approach."

¹¹ W. Edwards Deming, *Out of the Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1986).

¹² Edward Sallis, *Total Quality Management in Education*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge Falmer, 2002); John S. Oakland, *Total Quality Management and Operational Excellence: Text with Cases* (London: Routledge, 2014).

¹³ Deming, *Out of the Crisis*.

alignment with their strategic plans and involved staff in decision-making, significant improvements in school performance and morale were achieved, findings that are relevant to the South African context.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiring and motivating staff to pursue a shared vision while fostering innovation and professional growth.¹⁴ Bass and Avolio identified four key dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.¹⁵ In schools, transformational leaders are critical in driving change and facilitating the adoption of new quality systems. Leithwood and Jantzi argue that transformational leadership significantly contributes to teacher motivation and organizational learning factors essential for sustainable QMS implementation.¹⁶ Bush supports this by stating that leadership is a key determinant in the success of educational reform in South Africa.¹⁷ Transformational leaders can bridge the gap between policy and practice by actively engaging educators and fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, multi-case study design to explore the roles of School Management Teams (SMTs) in improving the quality of education in four selected secondary schools. The interpretivist paradigm informed the study, enabling a focus on understanding the participants' experiences and perspectives within their natural contexts.

Study Sample and Population

The study population comprised SMT members, principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads from four secondary schools. A total of 12 participants (four principals, four deputy principals, and four departmental heads) were purposefully selected based on their roles, experience (three to five years in SMT positions), and availability. Schools were also selected purposively to ensure variation in context while maintaining relevance to the study objectives.

Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured one-on-one interviews and document analysis. Each SMT member participated in an individual interview guided by a set of ten open-ended questions tailored to their specific roles. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim. In addition to interviews, relevant documents were collected and reviewed from each school. These included SMT and staff meeting minutes, annual plans, policies, internal reports, attendance registers, and learner performance records. The use of multiple data sources facilitated triangulation and added depth to the findings.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis followed a content analysis approach. Transcripts and documents were read multiple times to identify recurring patterns and categories. Emerging codes were grouped into themes aligned with the research questions. Cross-case analysis was then conducted to compare findings across the four schools and highlight similarities and differences in SMT practices.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality and

¹⁴ Bernard M. Bass and Bruce J. Avolio., *Improving Organizational Effectiveness through Transformational Leadership* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994).

¹⁵ Bass and Avolio., *Improving Organizational Effectiveness through Transformational Leadership*.

¹⁶ Kenneth Leithwood and Doris Jantzi, "A Review of Transformational School Leadership Research 1996–2005," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 4, no. 3 (2005): 177–99.

¹⁷ Bush, "Educational Leadership and Management: Theory, Policy and Practice."

anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Data were securely stored, and participants were given the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This study aimed to assess the roles played by School Management Teams (SMTs) in improving the quality of education in four selected schools in the Chris Hani West Education District. Data was collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings are presented according to emerging themes:

Theme: SMT members' perception of enhancing quality education.

Sub-theme 1: Role of the school management team in school management.

The school management team knows that their function as SMT includes curriculum management, overseeing learners' and teachers' work, accurately allocating workloads, creating timetables, overseeing exam administration and student discipline, and maintaining the day-to-day operations of schools, which are some of the management roles in the academic performance of learners. Intervention strategies such as mentoring and coaching are provided when one of the roles is failing or needs improvement, and development is provided by the school team. P stands for the participant, followed by the code.

P-A:

The calibre of Teaching and Learning is the responsibility of school management teams. They must be capable of effectively managing their roles if they are to raise the standard of teaching and learning. The school management team must help the teachers teach the learners. This takes place only until the school management teams have received training and orientation to their responsibilities. They oversee school operations daily. To carry out their responsibilities confidently and competently, they should be aware of departmental policies and Acts.

P-B:

To ensure the effective and smooth running of the school. The second key role of the principal in the school management team is to ensure the effectiveness of the school and to monitor the teachers and learners. Furthermore, to manage the school and ensure that learning and teaching take place in a conducive environment.

P-C:

The role of the school management team is to control the school, teachers and the learners and mostly to ensure the functionality of the school.

P-D:

My role as the principal in the school management team is to be the overseer and the supervisor of ensuring that the school is functional and that proper teaching and learning are taking place.

DP-A:

To head and control the curriculum of the school and supervise departmental heads.

DP-B:

To control and supervise the curriculum and departmental heads of the school and assist in managing the school; however, the important key role of SMT is to ensure that the school is well-managed, and be the overseer of curriculum, draft timetable, and allocate subjects.

DP-C:

My role is to manage and supervise curriculum and ensure that the departmental heads are properly executing their roles as they are stated in the PAM document.

DH-B:

The key role of the departmental head is to control and manage the school subjects allocated to my department and curriculum according to the policies developed by the education department. To ensure the school's functionality and monitor learners' and teachers' files.

DH-C:

Evaluate the subject policies and monitor the improvement in subjects within your department.

Sub-theme 2: Support given by the Head of Curriculum to the departmental heads and teachers.

As a matter of ensuring quality teaching, the school management is keeping an eye on students' and teachers' assignments. To control the curriculum and take initiative, visits are paid to classrooms and demonstrations are done to meet the expectations. To promote unity amongst the staff, team building is done quarterly. This is accompanied by the sharing of successes and challenges experienced during the quarter and scanning ahead.

DP-A:

I meet with the heads of the departments. To determine whether the lesson plan has been finished, implemented, and assessed as intended, as well as whether formal assessments, like homework or math classwork, are done as necessary, the department heads and I visit the teachers in the classroom. I also sometimes go without alerting the teacher or the director of the department. This is how I manage the curriculum.

DP-B:

I conduct workshops on demonstrating what is expected from them and how to control the work of others. I usually hold workshops where I discuss assessment alignment, ensuring that assessments are aligned with curriculum objectives and guiding departmental heads on the development and implementation of assessments that effectively evaluate student learning. Secondly, I provide assessment tools and strategies, helping in creating formative and summative assessments, providing guidance on grading policies, and reviewing assessment results to inform future teaching strategies. Lastly, I support with data analysis. As the Head of Curriculum, I need to assist departmental heads in analysing student performance data and using this data to make informed decisions about curriculum adjustments and teaching methods. I hold team-building workshops where I emphasise teamwork for us as a school to obtain a goal.

DP-C:

I always foster and encourage teamwork with the departmental heads within their departments, where one teacher would teach topics that he or she is strong at, and another one would do so as well. That has tremendously assisted our school in improving our performance.

Sub-theme 3: Managing and controlling the work of other school management team members.

Given its connection to student success, curriculum management is one of the key responsibilities of the school administration. The deputy principal leads the department heads in curriculum management, as the authors noted in Theme 2 that the school management team is in charge of curriculum management. Learning the curriculum and the teachers' role in teaching it are the main reasons students attend school. Different viewpoints on curriculum management are held by the SMT members who participate in this study. They all concur, nevertheless, that the goal of curriculum management is to improve learners' academic performance. The Deputy Principals have stressed the importance of teaching according to the Annual Teaching Plan and completing the term work, class visits and holding meetings with the departmental heads as one of the strategies to manage curriculum.

DP-A:

I have a meeting with the Departmental Heads first. Second, they visit the teachers, and I visit the Departmental Heads' classes. During my class visits, I make sure the lesson plan is completed, implemented in the classroom, assessment is carried out as planned, and formal assessments, such as homework or classwork, are completed appropriately”.

DP-B:

Since curriculum is the reason we work as teachers, it is essential. I think everyone has a responsibility to oversee the curriculum, not only the deputy principal. The school management team and teachers are responsible for making sure that both official and informal activities are conducted on respective topics. The department heads receive reports from the teachers, who in turn report to me, who in turn reports to the principal.

Theme 2: Factors influencing the participation of SMT in school management

Sub-theme 1: Difficulties encountered by principals in managing schools.

The management and running of the school is not always effective; there are always factors that cause destruction in the delivery of the curriculum, resulting in the compromised quality of education that is being produced. One of those destructive factors is non-compliance by teachers with the principles and procedures that govern the school, teacher absenteeism and learner absenteeism.

P-A:

Some teachers are obstinate, particularly when it comes to turning in marks, and some teachers don't like the way we manage. You realize that this is their management style, even though some people come across as rebellious. Teacher development is crucial as a result. As managers, we help people grow so they can minimize those difficulties.

P-B:

Some of the challenges that I encounter are that teachers do not honour the arrival time at school. Our school opens at 07:30 am, and teachers are expected to be at school at that time. However, only a few teachers are at school at that time, and many teachers are late. Another challenge I experience pertaining to this is that you will find out that they don't sign the logbook on time, as I delegated one of the teachers to control it. Others do not regularly honour periods; they go 10 minutes late in class and leave 5 minutes earlier. You will find learners outside, others fighting. While others become absent for almost a week without reporting, which sets learners behind in syllabus coverage. Some learners also don't come to school regularly.

Sub-theme 2: Motivation given to the teachers for completing the syllabus on time

Motivation is one of the strategies that positively influences teachers to continue and engage in learner performance programmes that can enhance quality education. Motivating the teacher to teach is pertinent to curriculum implementation. This is because motivation is an influential factor in teaching and learning situations. The success of teaching depends on whether teachers are motivated. Motivation drives teachers to reach their teaching goals. Motivation can be intrinsic and extrinsic. Both types of motivation are essential for boosting extra effort to achieve high performance and inventiveness. Two methods of extrinsic incentive, motivational speaking and career counselling, merit rewards for high-performing teachers and those who are improving, and intrinsic motivation are the strategies that have a favourable impact on learners' academic performance. The other is intervention, which includes extra lessons, grade meetings to talk about improvement goals, and calling parents of learners who are not performing well to ask for statements and other sorts of assistance. The other is intrinsic motivation, which pushes the student to drive their own learning and therefore heightens their aspirations to accomplish more.

From the interviews, only one principal saw the need to reward good results produced by teachers.

Theme 3: Strategies to use to enhance quality education.

Sub-theme 1: Developmental workshops for teachers

One of the strategies that can be employed in producing quality education is firstly equipping teachers with enough knowledge through workshops conducted in schools and departmental workshops.

DP-A:

In our school, we have four departments, namely: languages, science, humanities and commerce. The most active department is the science department that I am in. They hold workshops to help teachers grow, and my departmental head holds workshops to help her staff grow. She also visits classes, gives us advice in meetings, and provides feedback. I remember, for instance, that she led a training on the QMS workshops to support teacher development. Other departments hardly give reports on that.

DP-B:

Other departments hold workshops where they develop each other. As the head of curriculum, I conduct class visits with Departmental heads, where I give advice on how to get better. I believe that is the most development that we can give. However, there is only one department that does

not hold workshops, that is the Language department. Since the departmental head is unfamiliar with isiXhosa content, teachers who are teaching isiXhosa do not get full support.

Sub-theme 2: participation of students in the lesson despite any obstacles to learning.

One of the things that prevents effective learning is learning obstacles. One method that guarantees that students who are struggling are accommodated for group projects is multi-level instruction. Working in groups allows the teacher to see and interact with each student, making it easier for them to teach. Additionally, no student can escape the teacher or the task at hand.

DP-A:

Our institution is not a full-service one. As a result, engaging students in the lesson is challenging, particularly for those who face learning obstacles. Because of its rigidity regarding the content taught, the guidance style, the teaching methodologies, the pace at which the curriculum can be completed, the learning materials, and the ways by which learning is evaluated, the curriculum is one of the largest barriers to inclusive education.

DP-B:

Because our classes are packed, it is challenging to get all the students involved, and teachers find it challenging to spot students who are struggling right away. Because they receive less individualized attention in crowded classrooms, students who have learning obstacles suffer. These classrooms wind up becoming obstacles because students with barriers need specialized attention and help to manage the material being taught.

DH-A:

What I have noticed over time is that these learners are different, and they learn differently because their levels or abilities are not the same. I give learners with barriers work which is of a lower level than others, in other words, I set the task which may be suitable for boy 1, then he may practise this task which is at his level, rather than leaving him behind.

DH-B:

Group learners according to their abilities to cater for them all. They are given different work in those groups; they do not do the same work. We also do the multi-level teaching.

Sub-theme 3: Impact of teacher collaboration on learner performance

DH-A:

Collaboration is one of the best strategies that we have employed in our school. In the past, Economic Management Science was one of the subjects that were mostly failed by the learners, which resulted in them not choosing commerce subjects in the FET phase. We have come up with the strategy of dividing the subject into three parts, where accounting, Economics and Business studies will rotate in tackling the topics that are similar to their subjects. That has been working in improving the academic results of the learners.

DH-B:

Well, collaborative teaching is something that I have not thought about. At the beginning of the year, when I was doing the allocation of subjects, I allowed teachers to choose grades that they are comfortable teaching. Therefore, I believe that you will be comfortable teaching everything in that grade without needing any assistance.

Sub-theme 4: Control of teachers and learner absenteeism

Teacher and learner absenteeism is one major challenge faced by the schools. This not only impacts negatively on the content gap but also interrupts the functionality of the school. Regular updates of the time book and class registers are ways of controlling absenteeism in schools.

P-A:

Learner absenteeism is another challenge that we face in this school. Some of the reasons that the learners give for their absenteeism are beyond our control. As I have stated before, this school is situated in a village area where most of the learners do not stay with their biological parents but with their grandparents. So, you will find out that the learner was absent for a week because

the grandmother was sick. This results in a huge content gap, and eventually, they fail or drop out, thus leading to overall poor academic performance in the school. Well, I usually go and look for the learner if s/he is absent for more than three days. Class teachers continuously update the class attendance registers.

P-B:

Teacher and learner absenteeism is one of the major causes of poor performance. We hardly have 100% attendance per week. The negative impact of the teachers' absenteeism is compromised curriculum days. This not only creates a content gap for the learners, but it also disrupts the daily functionality of the school because they will be unattended to during classes throughout the day, and this impacts academic performance negatively. I normally take them to my office on the day they are present at school and make them sign leave forms, and if this persists, I report to the Circuit manager. Well, for learners, we can't really control it because these learners are not scared since the traditional way of punishing was banned by SACE.

P-C:

I have not yet mastered how to control the learner absenteeism; every day there are learners who are absent from school.

Theme 4: Strategies to use to improve the academic performance of the learners

The use of various teaching techniques, encouraging collaborative learning, creating a conducive environment, creating the School Improvement Plan, holding extra classes, and learner profiling are some tactics to raise the quality of education provided in schools.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine the roles played by School Management Teams (SMTs) in improving the quality of education across four selected secondary schools. The findings revealed both effective leadership practices and significant challenges within the SMT structures. This discussion draws from the five themes that emerged from the data and is contextualized within the frameworks of Total Quality Management (TQM) and Transformational Leadership, both of which emphasize continuous improvement, shared vision, collaboration, and data-informed decision-making.

Theme 1: Instructional Leadership and Curriculum Oversight

Instructional leadership emerged as a critical function of SMTs, with principals and departmental heads taking responsibility for classroom monitoring, lesson plan reviews, and teacher feedback. These practices are consistent with Bush's assertion that instructional leadership directly influences the quality of teaching and learner outcomes.¹⁸ The study found that regular classroom visits were instrumental in identifying teaching gaps and offering real-time professional guidance to educators. However, there was an inconsistency in the implementation of curriculum oversight across the four schools. While some departmental heads actively monitored instruction and assessment practices, others lacked clear strategies or the subject expertise to provide meaningful feedback. This points to a gap between leadership intentions and actual practices. Within the framework of TQM, such inconsistency undermines the principle of standardization and continuous quality improvement in teaching and learning processes. The Transformational Leadership model also emphasizes the need for leaders to inspire and intellectually stimulate their teams, which was not always evident among some SMT members, particularly deputy principals, whose curriculum oversight was reported to be weak.

Theme 2: Professional Development and Capacity Building

Professional development initiatives, such as peer mentoring, in-service workshops, and team-based learning, were commonly facilitated by SMTs. Teachers expressed appreciation for these opportunities, noting improved confidence in curriculum delivery and classroom management. These findings align

¹⁸ Bush, "Instructional Leadership and Leadership for Learning: Global and South African Perspectives."

with Steyn, who argues that sustained professional development is essential for instructional improvement and educator motivation.¹⁹

Nonetheless, the depth and scope of these initiatives varied. In some cases, training sessions were generic and lacked alignment with the specific needs of departments or individual teachers. Furthermore, the absence of formal induction programs for newly appointed SMT members was identified as a weakness. Without proper orientation, many departmental heads lacked clarity on their leadership roles, which hindered their effectiveness. From a TQM perspective, continuous staff development is a core component of quality enhancement. However, for this to be effective, professional development must be needs-based, systematically planned, and monitored for impact. Similarly, transformational leaders are expected to foster an environment of lifelong learning, yet some SMT members struggled to provide adequate mentorship and developmental support, reflecting a gap in leadership preparation and vision alignment.

Theme 3: Data-Driven Decision-Making

The use of data to inform decision-making was evident in all four schools, where SMTs analyzed learner performance records, attendance data, and teacher assessments to identify areas of weakness. This evidence-based approach allowed for targeted interventions, such as additional support for struggling learners and performance monitoring for teachers. This practice supports the arguments by Harris and Jones, who contend that data use enhances accountability and precision in school improvement efforts.²⁰ However, the study also found that data collection tools, such as period registers and time books, were not consistently monitored, leading to high learner absenteeism going unaddressed. This reveals a disconnect between data collection and effective utilization, which undermines the potential benefits of data-informed leadership. Within the TQM framework, this represents a failure in process control and continuous monitoring—two critical elements of quality assurance. Moreover, transformational leadership calls for the strategic use of information to guide and inspire change. In the absence of follow-through and accountability mechanisms, data becomes ineffective in driving improvement.

Theme 4: Stakeholder Engagement and Accountability

SMTs made efforts to involve parents, community members, and school governing bodies in school affairs through regular meetings, parent-teacher communication platforms, and inclusive decision-making structures. This aligns with the findings of Van der Westhuizen et al., who argue that stakeholder participation enhances trust, shared ownership, and overall school performance.²¹ However, the depth of stakeholder engagement varied across schools. In some cases, parental involvement was limited to formal meetings, with minimal follow-up or participation in strategic planning or learner support programs. Furthermore, communication with stakeholders often lacked consistency and clarity, which weakened community trust in school leadership. From a transformational leadership lens, genuine stakeholder engagement involves building strong relationships, articulating a shared vision, and mobilizing collective efforts toward common goals. The observed gaps suggest that SMTs still need to strengthen their relational leadership skills and communication strategies. Similarly, in TQM, stakeholder involvement is considered crucial for quality assurance, yet if poorly executed, it fails to produce a meaningful impact.

Theme 5: Challenges in SMT Functionality

While many SMTs demonstrated commitment to their roles, several systemic and contextual challenges limited their effectiveness. These included:

- Inadequate leadership training for newly appointed SMT members,
- Lack of subject expertise among some departmental heads,
- Resistance to change from some staff members, and

¹⁹ G. M. Steyn, "Educators' Perceptions of Continuing Professional Development for Teachers in South Africa: A Qualitative Study," *Africa Education Review* 7, no. 1 (June 2010): 156–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2010.490009>.

²⁰ Harris and Jones, "Transforming Education Systems: Comparative and Critical Perspectives on School Leadership."

²¹ Van der Westhuizen et al., "Organizational Culture and Academic Achievement in Secondary Schools."

- Resource constraints hampered the implementation of programs. These challenges echo those identified by Mestry and Grobler, who highlight how insufficient preparation and unclear role expectations undermine school leadership capacity.²² The absence of formal induction and ongoing support left some SMT members feeling ill-equipped to lead, resulting in ineffective curriculum management and poor departmental oversight. Both the TQM and Transformational Leadership frameworks emphasize capacity building, shared vision, and systems thinking. The identified challenges highlight a misalignment between these theoretical ideals and the practical realities faced by SMTs in the schools studied. To bridge this gap, there is a need for systematic leadership development, targeted mentoring, and more strategic resource allocation by education authorities.

Synthesis and Implications

Overall, the study confirms that SMTs play a vital role in improving educational quality through instructional leadership, professional development, data use, and stakeholder engagement. However, the effectiveness of SMTs is often compromised by skill gaps, lack of support, and systemic inefficiencies. These findings reinforce the need for:

- Structured leadership training and induction programs for all SMT roles,
- Recruitment of departmental heads with subject-specific expertise,
- Regular and effective monitoring systems for curriculum and attendance data, and
- Stronger strategies for sustainable stakeholder engagement.

The findings also contribute to scholarship by offering a context-specific exploration of SMT functionality in under-resourced schools, providing empirical support for the application of TQM and Transformational Leadership in educational settings. By highlighting both strengths and weaknesses in SMT practices, the study paves the way for more evidence-based interventions and policy reforms aimed at strengthening school leadership and, by extension, educational outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the impact of SMTs on education quality:

- Capacity-Building for SMTs: The Department of Education should develop tailored training programs that go beyond administrative competencies to include instructional leadership, conflict resolution, and data-driven decision-making. These efforts will support SMTs in navigating the multifaceted challenges of school leadership more effectively.
- Promote Reflective and Inclusive Leadership: SMTs should adopt participatory leadership styles that encourage collaboration with teachers and stakeholders. This recommendation is consistent with the interpretive view that understanding and meaning are socially constructed and should involve diverse voices.
- Institutionalize feedback loops through internal audits, peer reviews, and post-implementation reflections to maintain high levels of confirmability and dependability in their improvement strategies.
- Policy Review and Contextual Adaptation: Education policymakers should consider how local contexts shape SMT performance and leadership effectiveness. Flexibility in policy implementation should be encouraged to allow for responsiveness to the unique socio-economic and cultural dynamics of each school.
- Enhance Resource Allocation and Support: Many challenges identified by SMTs were linked to resource limitations. Adequate provision of teaching materials, infrastructure, and staffing support is critical for enabling SMTs to function optimally and maintain education quality.

CONCLUSION

SMTs in the Chris Hani West Education District play a pivotal role in driving educational excellence. Their success depends not only on individual leadership capacity but also on systemic support, reflective

²² Mestry and Grobler, "The Training and Development of Principals to Manage Schools Effectively Using the Competence Approach."

practices, and a commitment to inclusive, credible, and context-sensitive school management. The study's findings reaffirm the need for theory-informed, evidence-based approaches to educational leadership, where both the human and systemic elements are given equal consideration.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Lungelwa khesa is a qualified teacher by profession and a Master of education student at Walter Sisulu University, South Africa. This work mark the first publication on DHET-accredited platforms, reflecting a strong commitment to educational research and professional growth, with practical classroom experience and a passion for advancing teaching and learning. Her research interest is grounded in Educational Leadership and Management, with a focus on improving educational practice and contributing meaningfully to the field of education.

Owen Madalambana is currently serving as a Senior Lecturer at Walter Sisulu University, South Africa. His research interest centres around Educational Leadership and Management . As a emerging scholar, he has successfully graduating postgraduate students for both Honours and Master's programs and currently involved in supervising varying cohort of Honours, Master's and Doctoral students.