



# Optimizing Grade 12 academic achievement: Strategic interventions by School Management Teams

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## ABSTRACT

Grade 12 academic achievement remains a critical concern in educational discourse, particularly within underperforming school contexts where it directly influences access to tertiary education and future economic opportunities. This qualitative study explores the strategic interventions used by School Management Teams (SMTs) to improve Grade 12 academic achievement in resource-constrained in selected secondary schools in the Chris Hani West Education District, South Africa. Anchored in Transformational Leadership Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the research investigated how leadership practices, resource mobilisation, and data-driven decision-making intersect to support academic success. These lenses offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how systemic structures and interpersonal relationships shape academic outcomes. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and document analysis to capture the lived experiences of educators and learners. The findings revealed that SMTs who adopt adaptive, visionary leadership, promote collaborative teaching strategies, and create inclusive, learner-centred environments contribute significantly to improved academic performance. This paper concludes with practical, context-sensitive recommendations for SMTs and policymakers to strengthen leadership capacity, enhance collaboration, and ensure sustainable academic improvement in Grade 12 outcomes. The contribution would inform policymakers about the support and resources necessary for school management teams to implement interventions effectively, potentially influencing educational policy at various levels. The study not only provides theoretical insights but also offers practical recommendations that can be directly applied in schools, thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice in education.

**Keywords:** Educational leadership, Strategic interventions, Grade 12 performance, School management.

## INTRODUCTION

Across diverse educational systems, the academic performance of final-year learners serves as a high-stakes indicator of school effectiveness and future opportunity. In South Africa, the Grade 12 National Senior Certificate examination plays a critical gatekeeping role, yet systemic inequalities continue to undermine learners' achievement, particularly in historically disadvantaged schools. Within this context, School Management Teams (SMTs) have emerged as central actors in leading instructional improvement, navigating resource inadequacy, and optimizing performance using data-driven decision-

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making. Boylan, Hongjuan, Jacques, Birkhead, & Rempe-Gillen agree with Lumadi that effective leadership, curriculum management, and targeted support programs have been identified as key factors in enhancing learner outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Research also highlights other important aspects of schooling, such as discipline management, teacher development, and parental involvement in fostering a conducive learning environment.<sup>2</sup>

This study investigates how School Management Teams strategically respond to these and other challenges through visionary, inclusive and ecologically attuned leadership practices. Serfontein et al. further expound that the integration of social learning theory into school policies fosters a collaborative environment conducive to academic excellence.<sup>3</sup> The effectiveness of SMT-led interventions depends on their ability to adapt strategies to contextual needs, ensuring sustainable improvements in Grade 12 academic performance.<sup>4</sup> Guided by two complementary theoretical lenses,<sup>5</sup> Transformational Leadership Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the research aims to illuminate the multi-layered, relational, and adaptive strategies SMTs employ to optimize Grade 12 achievement.<sup>6</sup> Although transformational leadership emphasises leaders' moral and motivational capacities to inspire collective efficacy, the ecological model foregrounds the nested systems that influence learner development, including the home, school, and broader community.

Additionally, Michael and Mhando, contend that SMTs play a pivotal role in resource allocation and policy implementation to address disparities in educational attainment.<sup>7</sup> By employing evidence-based strategies, schools can significantly improve Grade 12 academic achievement, ensuring equitable access to quality education.<sup>8</sup> Across different settings, SMTs that use distributed, collaborative leadership and actively involve teachers, learners, parents, and community partners build stronger shared responsibility, healthier school climates, and more effective community support.<sup>9</sup> By setting shared goals and using participatory structures and reciprocal partnerships, they align school improvement with community needs, helping schools better support all learners. Studies indicate that lower-quintile schools often struggle with resource constraints, necessitating innovative leadership approaches to bridge performance gaps.<sup>10</sup>

Lumadi opines that SMTs further play an imperative role in implementing data-driven solutions to improve Grade 12 academic attainment.<sup>11</sup> This involves carefully collecting, evaluating, and interpreting learner performance data from multiple assessments, such as continuous evaluations and mock exams. By identifying specific learning gaps and areas of curriculum weakness, SMTs can create and implement targeted interventions such as remedial classes, individualized assistance programs, or changes to teaching practices. According to Gianola, Montali, and Winkler, efficient data use allows SMTs to move beyond general techniques, resulting in a more precise and responsive educational environment.<sup>12</sup> This proactive monitoring and evaluation cycle ensures that interventions are evidence-based and constantly improved to maximize effectiveness. The ability of School Management Teams to provide a supportive and inspiring atmosphere for educators has a substantial influence on their efficacy in increasing Grade 12 academic attainment. SMTs assist beyond formal professional development by offering ongoing mentorship, acknowledging teacher efforts, and properly managing

<sup>1</sup> Mark Boylan et al., "Secondary Maths Practice Review," 2024; Rudzani Israel Lumadi, "Optimising School Management Strategies: Empowering School Management Teams through Revision of the Learners' Code of Conduct for Effective Discipline Management," *South African Journal of Education* 44, no. si1 (2024): S1–13.

<sup>2</sup> C Serfontein, "Cost Efficiency versus Disruption: Are Traditional Universities Doomed?," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 39, no. 1 (2025): 315–37.

<sup>3</sup> Serfontein, "Cost Efficiency versus Disruption: Are Traditional Universities Doomed?"

<sup>4</sup> E. Michael and S. Mhando, "The Influence of School Management Team on Student's Academic Performance in Tanzania," *East African Journal of Education Studies* 7, no. 4 (2024): 399–410.

<sup>5</sup> Ishra Batool, Sofia Jabeen, and Samaira Zulifqar Ali, "Journal of Social Sciences Advancement," n.d.

<sup>6</sup> Matuor Dot Alier, "The Role of School Leadership in Promoting and Supporting Cultural Diversity and Inclusion in the Classroom: A Grounded Theory Approach," 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Michael and Mhando, "The Influence of School Management Team on Student's Academic Performance in Tanzania."

<sup>8</sup> Lumadi, "Optimising School Management Strategies: Empowering School Management Teams through Revision of the Learners' Code of Conduct for Effective Discipline Management."

<sup>9</sup> Michael and Mhando, "The Influence of School Management Team on Student's Academic Performance in Tanzania."

<sup>10</sup> Boylan et al., "Secondary Maths Practice Review."

<sup>11</sup> Lumadi, "Optimising School Management Strategies: Empowering School Management Teams through Revision of the Learners' Code of Conduct for Effective Discipline Management."

workloads to avoid burnout. According to Kilag et al. when teachers feel respected and supported by their supervisors, their morale, commitment, and instructional effectiveness rise dramatically, which directly benefits Grade 12 students.<sup>13</sup> SMTs also facilitate collaborative planning sessions and peer learning opportunities, ensuring that teachers have the most effective ways to prepare students for high-stakes examinations, hence improving overall academic achievement.

School Management Teams' strategic interventions also include establishing effective learner support psychosocial systems that serve Grade 12 students' academic and emotional needs. Recognizing that the overall academic well-being of students, SMTs frequently implement programs such as peer tutoring, academic counselling, and psychosocial support services. Smith found that addressing concerns such as stress, anxiety, and absenteeism through structured support mechanisms can greatly improve student engagement and retention, ultimately leading to better matriculation results.<sup>14</sup> SMTs guarantee that these support systems are easily accessible and responsive, fostering a nurturing environment in which Grade 12 students feel encouraged to overcome obstacles and reach their academic potential. Recent research has highlighted the importance of leadership in promoting student success, with effective SMTs using strategic interventions to improve learning outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Leadership techniques that prioritize collaboration and flexible strategies have been associated with higher student achievement.<sup>16</sup> However, there are still gaps in our understanding of how these frameworks might be applied in a variety of educational situations.

Empirical research highlights the influence of School Management Teams' interventions on student achievement. Studies show that data-driven decision-making, mentorship programs, and structured teacher support significantly improve academic outcomes.<sup>17</sup> Despite these findings, disparities in implementation persist, particularly in under-resourced schools.<sup>18</sup> The effectiveness of SMT-led strategies varies based on institutional culture and stakeholder engagement, necessitating further exploration of contextual factors influencing success. Existing research indicates limitations in understanding the nuanced impacts of SMT therapies. Many studies emphasize quantitative indicators, leaving out qualitative insights into leadership dynamics and stakeholder participation.<sup>9</sup> Addressing these gaps requires interdisciplinary approaches that combine leadership theories with practical implementations.

Recent talks have advocated for policy-driven frameworks that connect theoretical models to real-world implementation. Strengthening SMT training programs and encouraging transdisciplinary research that can yield actionable insights to increase Grade 12 academic attainment.<sup>10</sup> Future research should consider adaptive leadership models that can accommodate various educational environments while guaranteeing fair access to effective management solutions. Against this background, the study crafted a research objective to identify and analyze effective strategic interventions implemented by School Management Teams aimed at enhancing the academic performance of Grade 12 learners.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

SMTs play a central role in improving academic performance through the strategic execution of instructional and operational interventions. Moyo et al. argue that the deliberate construction of instructional leadership frameworks, encompassing data-informed lesson planning and systematic teacher mentorship, contributes significantly to the improvement of Grade 12 outcomes, particularly

<sup>12</sup> Alessandro Gianola, Marco Montali, and Sarah Winkler, "Smt Techniques for Data-Aware Process Mining," *KI-Künstliche Intelligenz* 39, no. 3 (2025): 221–37.

<sup>13</sup> Gianola, Montali, and Winkler, "Smt Techniques for Data-Aware Process Mining."

<sup>14</sup> Gianola, Montali, and Winkler, "Smt Techniques for Data-Aware Process Mining."

<sup>15</sup> Osias Kit T Kilag et al., "Quality Performance of Teachers: Work Environment, Work Attitude, and Principal Supervision: Qualitative Investigation," *Science and Education* 4, no. 7 (2023): 415–29.

<sup>16</sup> Jared Smith, *Attending School: A Qualitative Study Exploring Principals' Strategies for Enhancing Attendance* (Trident University International, 2024).

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Attending School: A Qualitative Study Exploring Principals' Strategies for Enhancing Attendance*.

<sup>18</sup> Michael and Mhando, "The Influence of School Management Team on Student's Academic Performance in Tanzania."

<sup>19</sup> Michael and Mhando, "The Influence of School Management Team on Student's Academic Performance in Tanzania."

within underperforming educational contexts.<sup>11</sup> Their findings underscore the critical role of SMTs in leveraging empirical data to inform pedagogical decisions, enabling the customization of remedial strategies to address learners' specific academic deficits. In parallel, Adam-Taylor, Acemah, and Knobel demonstrate that the institutionalization of performance-tracking systems under the leadership of SMTs correlates positively with improved matriculation pass rates.<sup>12</sup> Collectively, these studies affirm that effective instructional leadership requires a dual focus on robust academic monitoring and sustained teacher professional development.

Moreover, the internal dynamics of SMTs, specifically their communicative practices and decision-making structures, have emerged as key determinants of school-level academic efficacy. Across different settings, SMTs that institutionalize inclusive leadership and use distributed, collaborative, and actively involve teachers, learners, parents, and community partners build stronger shared responsibility, healthier school climates, and more effective community support.<sup>13</sup> Their study, which focused on township schools in South Africa, found that these collaborative practices not only enhanced learner discipline and teacher motivation but also contributed to improved academic performance at the Grade 12 level. Similarly, Nadeem highlights the efficacy of formalized feedback mechanisms, such as structured learner progress reviews and routine parental engagement forums, in fostering a culture of shared educational responsibility.<sup>14</sup> These mechanisms, they contend, reinforce mutual accountability and positively influence academic trajectories.

In addition to interpersonal and managerial strategies, the integration of technology into school governance and instructional support has gained prominence as a catalyst for academic improvement. Khumalo and Ndlovu, provide empirical evidence that SMT-led digital interventions, such as real-time performance tracking systems and online tutorial platforms, significantly improve learner engagement and final examination outcomes.<sup>15</sup> These technologies facilitate the timely identification of at-risk learners and enable rapid pedagogical adjustments, thus improving instructional responsiveness. However, the study also acknowledges disparities in implementation capacity between well-resourced and under-resourced schools, emphasizing the need for policy interventions that promote equitable access to digital infrastructure. Therefore, strategic adoption of technology, when embedded within a coherent instructional leadership framework, can amplify the effectiveness of SMT-led academic support systems.

Finally, the development of SMT capacity through targeted leadership training and continuous professional development is essential to maintain improvements in academic performance. Blose and Mbatha assert that ongoing, context-responsive leadership development equips SMT members with the skills necessary to navigate curriculum reforms and manage instructional time effectively.<sup>16</sup> Their mixed-methods research links well-trained SMTs with improved curriculum coverage and enhanced time-on-task, both of which are critical predictors of Grade 12 success. Additionally, Barrows, for mentorship and structured peer collaboration among SMT members as mechanisms for cultivating leadership efficacy and embedding sustainable academic improvements.<sup>17</sup> These findings collectively underscore the imperative to embed capacity-building initiatives within the broader architecture of school leadership reform.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Moyo et al., "Adapting Smallholder Irrigation Systems to Extreme Events: A Case of the Transforming Irrigation in Southern Africa (TISA) Project in Zimbabwe," *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 41, no. 2 (2025): 274–97.

<sup>12</sup> Jacqueline Adam-Taylor, Christian Acemah, and Courteney G Knobel, "Ubuntu and Sankofa: On Pathways to Strengthen Future Africa as a Pan-African Platform for Scientific Collaboration" (2024).

<sup>13</sup> Nyiko Sibuyi et al., "Exploring the Strategies Used by the School Management Teams (SMTs) in Addressing Poor Academic Performance Post-Pandemic in Rural High Schools of Mopani West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, September 5, 2024, 1668–83, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.20245113>.

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad Nadeem, "Distributed Leadership in Educational Contexts: A Catalyst for School Improvement," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 9 (2024): 100835.

<sup>15</sup> T Khumalo and T Ndlovu, "Recycled Plastic in South African Sculpture: Analyzing the Role of Waste Materials in Contemporary Art," *Studies in Art and Architecture* 4, no. 1 (2025): 39–47.

<sup>16</sup> Sibonelo Blose and Ayanda Mbatha, "Wrestling with Complexities of Rural School Contexts: Learning from Deputy Principals' Leadership Experiences," *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 20, no. 3 (2025): 616–33.

<sup>17</sup> Cassandra Grant Barrows, "Exploring Instructional Leadership Impact on Principals' Effectiveness and Students' Achievement at the Primary Level within a Region in Jamaica's Education System," 2025.

Academic achievement and school management are often analyzed through theoretical frameworks such as Transformational Leadership Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Recent studies emphasize the role of leadership in fostering student success, with effective SMTs implementing strategic interventions to enhance learning outcomes.<sup>18</sup> Leadership approaches that prioritize collaboration and adaptive strategies have been linked to improved student performance.<sup>19</sup> However, there are still gaps in understanding how these frameworks translate into practical applications within diverse educational settings. Academic accomplishment and school management are frequently examined using theoretical frameworks such as Transformational Leadership Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Recent literature continues to emphasize the significance of leadership in shaping educational outcomes. Transformational Leadership Theory fosters a culture of continuous improvement, where school leaders inspire teachers to adopt innovative pedagogical approaches. Research suggests that transformational leadership enhances teacher motivation and engagement, leading to improved student performance. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights the interconnectedness of various environmental factors, demonstrating how family involvement and community support contribute to student success. Schools that integrate these frameworks effectively create dynamic learning environments that address both academic and socio-emotional needs. However, practical implementation remains a challenge, particularly in under-resourced schools. Studies indicate that systemic barriers, such as inadequate funding and policy constraints, hinder the application of leadership models. Addressing these disparities requires adaptive strategies that consider contextual realities. Future research should explore how leadership frameworks can be tailored to diverse educational settings, ensuring equitable access to quality education for all students.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article is underpinned by two theoretical frameworks, namely Transformational and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, to triangulate the findings. Mafe contends that transformational leadership is characterized by leaders who inspire, intellectually stimulate, and support individuals to exceed expectations, fostering innovation and change in educational settings.<sup>20</sup> Also, empirical reviews from 2023–2024 confirm its positive effects on school culture, teacher motivation, and institutional performance. Whilst Guy-Evans, maintains that Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory posits that human development is shaped by interactions within five nested systems: the microsystem (e.g., home, school), mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), exosystem (external environments that indirectly affect the individual), macrosystem (cultural and societal norms), and chronosystem (the dimension of time and life transitions).<sup>21</sup> The two theoretical frameworks are briefly presented and applied to the article.

Transformational Leadership Theory offers a compelling lens for understanding how SMTs can strategically enhance Grade 12 academic achievement. Recent systematic reviews highlight that transformational leadership, characterized by idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, consistently yields improvements in teacher innovation, motivation, and efficacy, which in turn support student learning outcomes. For instance, a study in Yemeni schools from 2022 to 2024 found that a positive school culture mediates the effect of transformational leadership on teaching performance, underscoring its indirect impact on learner achievement. These findings suggest that SMTs that embrace transformational practices can foster professional growth and a supportive school environment, critical levers for boosting Grade 12 learner success.

<sup>18</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>19</sup> Muhammad Abdullah et al., "Measuring Changes in Travel Behavior Pattern Due to COVID-19 in a Developing Country: A Case Study of Pakistan," *Transport Policy* 108 (2021): 21–33.

<sup>20</sup> Ponting Mafe S, "Transformational Leadership: Exploring Secondary School Leaders' Perceptions on Best Practices," *International Journal of Formal Education* 2, no. 10 (2023): 176–88.

<sup>21</sup> Olivia Guy-Evans, "Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory," *Simply Psychology*, 2020, 10518–46.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory complements this view by situating SMT-led interventions within the multifaceted environments shaping learners. This framework, which includes the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, emphasizes that academic success emerges from interactions across nested layers of influence. Xiao et al. present that in an empirical study on Chinese adolescents, this lens was successfully applied to unpack how family, school, and community contexts jointly influence academic outcomes.<sup>22</sup> By recognizing these interconnected systems, SMTs can design strategic interventions that align internal school practices with external supports (like parental engagement, community partnerships, and policy environments), to create a cohesive ecosystem that underpins Grade 12 achievement. Grade 12 academic achievement plays a pivotal role in shaping students' prospects, influencing higher education access, career opportunities, and socio-economic mobility. As educational institutions strive to enhance learner outcomes, SMTs emerge as key drivers of strategic interventions, fostering environments conducive to academic excellence. However, despite various initiatives, many schools continue to face persistent challenges in optimizing Grade 12 performance, necessitating a deeper exploration of SMT-led strategies. This study investigates how SMTs implement qualitative interventions to support learners, guided by Transformational Leadership Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. The research aims to examine the effectiveness of leadership approaches, stakeholder engagement, and institutional policies in improving student achievement. Existing literature highlights the critical role of collaborative leadership, data-informed decision-making, and student-centred support mechanisms, yet gaps remain in understanding their practical application within diverse educational contexts. By addressing these gaps, the study seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations to refine management interventions to enhance Grade 12 academic success.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Paradigm

This paper used an interpretive paradigm deep-seated in a qualitative research technique to investigate the numerous practices utilised by SMTs to effect improvement in Grade 12 academic achievement. This research paradigm also stresses understanding individuals' subjective meanings and experiences in their specific social situations.<sup>23</sup> The research sought to reveal the "how" and "why" of successful treatments by emphasising in-depth comprehension and comprehensive description. This method allowed a more nuanced study of the intricacies inherent in school management strategies and their perceived influence on student achievement.

### Research Design

The authors used a case study design to thoroughly investigate the practices used by SMTs to address poor academic performance in Grade 12.<sup>24</sup> This approach is particularly appropriate for comprehending complicated social events in real-world settings. The findings of interpretive case studies can provide actionable information for school management teams. Understanding what works in a specific context helps tailor interventions to meet the unique needs of schools. Lastly, this research design is used to contribute to the development of theoretical frameworks that explain how strategic interventions lead to improved academic outcomes, offering valuable contributions to educational research.

### Research Approach

A qualitative approach was well-suited and used to investigate how SMTs strategically intervene to improve Grade 12 academic attainment because it allows for a rich, contextualised understanding of

<sup>22</sup> Meng Xiao et al., "After-School Behaviors, Self-Management, and Parental Involvement as Predictors of Academic Achievement in Adolescents," *Behavioral Sciences* 15, no. 2 (2025): 172.

<sup>23</sup> Ramji Acharya, "Examining Interpretivism in Social Science Research: Exploring Subjectivity, Context, and Meaning in Social Inquiry," *Education Science & Technology*, 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Nyiko Sibuyi et al., "Exploring the Strategies Used by the School Management Teams (SMTs) in Addressing Poor Academic Performance Post-Pandemic in Rural High Schools of Mopani West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa," *E-Journal of Humanities Arts and Social Sciences* 5, no. 11 (2024): 1668–83.

lived experiences.<sup>25</sup> Ghaleb argues that qualitative methodologies are vital in educational research for investigating how human elements such as leadership styles and team collaboration affect learner performance in high-stakes academic environments.<sup>26</sup>

### Sample and Sampling Technique

The population for this paper incorporated all senior secondary schools in the Chris Hani Education District in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. A population is the total number of persons participating in a single activity or event that adheres to a particular standard and for which the researchers have no plans to generalise their findings.<sup>27</sup> A sample refers to a selected group of individuals from a larger population used to conduct a study, aiming to generalise findings to the entire population.<sup>28</sup> Sampling is crucial in research, as it enhances efficiency and feasibility while maintaining the validity of the study's outcomes.<sup>29</sup> The sample for this paper was five secondary schools. From each secondary school, three SMT members were chosen to constitute a total of fifteen members of the sample. Purposive sampling was used to choose SMTs who could provide useful insights into SMTs' strategic interventions.<sup>30</sup> This sampling technique selects individuals based on their distinctive responsibilities, experiences, and contributions to academic achievement campaigns, resulting in rich and meaningful data collection.<sup>31</sup> Key informants, such as experienced teachers and SMT leaders, were sought to gain a thorough understanding of the interventions' success and problems.<sup>32</sup>

### Data Collection

Data will be collected primarily through qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Individual participants were interviewed in a semi-structured format to learn about their experiences, attitudes, and viewpoints on SMT strategic interventions. Document analysis to study school regulations, SMT meeting minutes, and other pertinent papers to provide more context and insights. All participants received informed permission to confirm their voluntary participation and understanding of the study's purpose and methods. To ensure accuracy, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure participant confidentiality, data would be securely stored and anonymised. Data gathering methods were carefully managed to minimise interruption to the school environment while maintaining the integrity of the research findings.

### Data Analysis

Wells and Giacco show that thematic analysis is a popular method for detecting, interpreting, and reporting patterns in qualitative data.<sup>33</sup> This technique entails systematically classifying the data to find recurring themes and patterns relevant to the research issue. This technique enables a thorough and nuanced analysis of the numerous variables driving Grade 12 academic attainment. Several tactics were used to improve the reliability of the data analysis, including member verification, triangulation, and peer debriefing. Member verification involves sharing preliminary findings with participants to ensure that they accurately represent their experiences and viewpoints.<sup>34</sup> The researchers kept their voices and

<sup>25</sup> Sibuyi et al., "Exploring the Strategies Used by the School Management Teams (SMTs) in Addressing Poor Academic Performance Post-Pandemic in Rural High Schools of Mopani West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa," 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Belal Dahiam Saif Ghaleb, "Effect of Exam-Focused and Teacher-Centered Education Systems on Students' Cognitive and Psychological Competencies," *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Approach Research and Science* 2, no. 2 (2024): 611–31.

<sup>27</sup> Mathew Kimanzi, "The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Fostering Innovation and Sustainable Entrepreneurship: A Case of a University in South Africa," 2020.

<sup>28</sup> M. Saunders, P. Lewis, and A. Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*, 9th ed. (Pearson Education, 2024).

<sup>29</sup> John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage publications, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Pascale Benoliel 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>31</sup> Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*.

<sup>32</sup> Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*.

<sup>33</sup> Imogen Wells and Domenico Giacco, "Theoretical Frameworks Used to Inform Qualitative Mental Health Research: A Focus on Positivism, Interpretivism and Critical Realism," *BJPsych Advances* 31, no. 5 (2025): 299–307.

<sup>34</sup> Stephanie Lindstrom, "Factors That Influence the Use of Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogies for Elementary School Leaders," 2024.

their sense of uniqueness throughout the data analysis process and completely depended on what the participants disclosed. Patterns were identified and classified, units and categories were created, and patterns were recognised. Transcripts of the recorded themes, sub-themes, and replies were analysed thematically. Ethics were considered; for example, permission was requested, and participation for the participants was voluntary.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following themes emerged during the data analysis and are consequently discussed:

- **Leadership practices**
- **Inadequate resources**

### *Leadership Practices*

The study revealed that SMTs who adopted a transformational leadership style, marked by vision-setting, ethical modelling, and staff empowerment, were more effective in driving Grade 12 academic improvement. These findings align with recent literature that emphasizes the four pillars of transformational leadership: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. Leaders who practised these behaviours cultivated a culture of trust and innovation, which translated into improved teacher morale and learner engagement. Whilst Bronfenbrenner's ecological model further contextualizes these leadership practices. By influencing the microsystem (teacher-learner relationships) and mesosystem (school-family partnerships), SMTs created a cohesive support network around learners. As noted by Guy-Evans, development is shaped by dynamic interactions between systems, and effective leadership can catalyze positive proximal processes. Participants described how collaborative leadership within SMTs fostered a culture of academic excellence.<sup>35</sup> One principal shared,

*We realised that when teachers and administrators work together, students feel more supported. Our mentorship program has transformed how learners engage with their studies (Interviewee 1A).*

Educators echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that data-driven decision-making allowed them to tailor interventions to students' needs. A senior teacher noted,

*Analysing performance trends helped us identify struggling learners early, ensuring timely support (Interviewee 1B).*

These insights highlight the pivotal role of strategic leadership in optimizing Grade 12 academic achievement.

The study also revealed that stakeholder engagement significantly influenced student performance. Parents and community members actively participated in school initiatives, reinforcing a shared commitment to educational success. One parent explained,

*When the school involved us in academic planning, we felt empowered to support our children better (Interviewee 1C).*

Additionally, teachers expressed appreciation for structured mentorship programs, with one teacher stating,

*Having a mentor helped me stay motivated and focused on my career (Interviewee 1D).*

These narratives accentuate the importance of holistic interventions that integrate leadership, collaboration, and community involvement to enhance academic outcomes.

### **Inadequate Resources**

Despite facing acute shortages, such as overcrowded classrooms and limited textbooks, many SMTs exhibited remarkable adaptive leadership practices. Participants highlighted that

*Principals often turn constraints into opportunities (Interviewee 1 and 4).*

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<sup>35</sup> Olivia Guy-Evans, "Feminist Theory in Sociology: Definition, Types & Principles," *Simply Sociol*, 2023.

Illustrating how they secure donations and initiate peer tutoring programs to enhance learning experiences. This sentiment was echoed by Interviewees 3 and 5, who noted,

*The creativity shown in networking with neighbouring schools to share Resources is inspiring (Interviewees 3 and 5).*

Participants described how these actions reflect a transformational trait of reframing adversity into opportunity. Interviewee 3 remarked,

*We have created a culture of resilience among both staff and learners (Interviewee 2).*

This was an emphasis on the positive influence of these initiatives. However, as Interviewee 4 pointed out,

*Limitations of resources are not just a school issue; they reflect broader systemic inequalities (Interviewee 4).*

Furthermore, emphasized the importance of recognizing these interconnected realities, Interviewee 5 had this to say,

*SMTs that partner with NGOs and community organisations are more effective in addressing basic learner needs (Interviewee 5).*

This perspective highlights the proactive approaches that SMTs are taking to navigate the complexities of resource inadequacy. This structure integrates the views of the participants while emphasizing their insights on resource challenges and adaptive leadership.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To improve Grade 12 academic attainment, School Management Teams should undertake focused leadership training programs that teach school leaders adaptive management practices. Professional learning communities can help teachers collaborate more effectively, fostering a culture of shared accountability for student success. Furthermore, SMTs should stress parental and community involvement, since studies show that active stakeholder engagement improves student motivation and performance. Schools should also implement data-driven monitoring tools to assess students' development and identify areas that require help. Policy frameworks should encourage established mentorship programs, which ensure that students receive personalized academic help.

In addition to these strategies, schools should prioritize the integration of technology into the classroom. Providing teachers with training in educational technology can enhance their instructional methods and engage students more effectively. Furthermore, the implementation of blended learning models can accommodate different learning styles and paces, ensuring that all students receive the support they need. Regular workshops and seminars that focus on innovative teaching techniques and the use of digital resources will empower SMTs and educators to create dynamic learning environments. Lastly, establishing partnerships with local businesses and organizations can provide students with real-world experiences and internships, further motivating them to excel academically and prepare for a future career.

## **Directions for Future Studies**

Future research should look into the long-term effects of School Management Team-led interventions on student performance across a variety of educational environments. Comparative studies on urban and rural school management practices can reveal contextual differences in leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, studying the function of technology integration in SMT decision-making processes may yield novel ways to academic optimization. Longitudinal research evaluating the sustainability of mentorship programs and stakeholder involvement methods would help to advance evidence-based policymaking. Expanding research on transdisciplinary leadership frameworks can improve the adaptability of SMT techniques to changing educational environments.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategic interventions employed by SMTs to enhance Grade 12 academic achievement in resource-constrained selected secondary schools in the Chris Hani

West Education District, South Africa. This study highlights the interconnected nature of leadership, resource management, and data-driven decision-making in optimising Grade 12 academic achievement. School Management Teams who operate at the intersection of ethical leadership, ecological responsiveness, and inclusive data practices are best positioned to drive meaningful academic change. The findings accentuate the need for leadership development programs that integrate systems thinking and adaptive strategies to navigate resource constraints. Finally, effective leadership and strategic resource management are crucial to improve academic outcomes in resource-constrained environments. By prioritising ethical leadership and adaptive strategies, School Management Teams can foster meaningful change and improve Grade 12 achievement in their schools.

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