



The influence of leadership style on the effective functioning of the school system in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Effective school leadership remains essential for the successful functioning of educational institutions, particularly within the complex and evolving landscape of South African education. This study examines the influence of leadership style on the operational effectiveness of schools in South Africa, highlighting the effects of different leadership approaches on teacher motivation, learners' experiences, academic performance, and the overall school environment. Guided by Situational Leadership Theory, the study focuses on how school leaders adapt their leadership styles according to the needs, readiness, and skills of teachers and learners, and how this adaptability enhances school effectiveness. A qualitative research methodology was used using a desktop data collection strategy to examine the existing academic literature, governmental policy documents, and empirical studies regarding the effectiveness of leadership in South African schools. Data were thematically analysed to identify recurring patterns and relationships between leadership adaptability and school effectiveness. The analysis demonstrates that adaptive, supportive and contextually responsive leadership styles foster collaborative school cultures, improve teacher effectiveness, and create conducive learning environments. Inflexible or deficient leadership strategies often result in insufficient motivation, inadequate training, and suboptimal learning outcomes. The study suggests that to improve the efficacy of schools, leadership development initiatives should prioritise distributed leadership, ongoing professional development, and context-driven decision-making. Overall, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the enhancement of schools and the cultivation of leadership skills within South Africa's educational framework.

Keywords: Leadership Style, Effective Leadership, South African School System, Situational Leadership Theory

INTRODUCTION

A leader is an individual who guarantees that their team has the necessary support and resources to accomplish their objectives. According to Ogunode, Ojochnemi and Ayoko, the primary function of a leader is to mentor, direct, and motivate people.¹ They inspire teams during difficult periods and assist other people in their career advancements. A leader oversees individuals to ensure teams remain coordinated and pursue common objectives. They cultivate a cooperative atmosphere and exemplify

¹ Niyi Jacob Ogunode, Ukpoju Bartholomew Ojochnemi, and Victor Olugbenga Ayoko, "Leadership Styles and School Effectiveness," *Excellencia: International Multi-Disciplinary Journal of Education* 1, no. 4 (2023): 102–14.

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effective leadership.² Therefore, a leader is characterised as an individual who executes managerial functions within an organisation, including decision-making and plan implementation.

School leaders face many concerns and problems. The primary duty of school leaders is to inspire their teachers to improve the academic performance of learners.³ A suitable leadership quality is essential for teachers to be effective in their instructional roles and therefore enhance learner performance.⁴ The deficiency of administrative skills amplifies the significance of a teacher's leadership abilities in the educational process. Naz & Rashid assert that the primary difficulty for leaders is to leverage leadership in a way that reflects the contextual influence of principals and educators in education.⁵ The approach adopted by a certain educator should depend on cultural context, subject matter, and physical environment, among other variables.

Literature indicates that diverse leadership styles have proven effective for different leaders in distinct contexts, resulting in the conclusion that there is no singular optimal leadership style.⁶ School leadership styles are essential for the general functioning of a school, as they are the primary determinants of learner accomplishment. Leadership has emerged as a central focus in global education policy initiatives, significantly impacting school outcomes by enhancing the drive of educators and competence. The principal's leadership style determines the school's success or failure. Consequently, the paper aims to explore the influence of leadership styles on the effective functioning of the school. Effective school leadership is crucial to foster a healthy school culture, improve teacher motivation, and improve learner accomplishment. International and African research indicate that leadership styles, including transformational and instructional leadership, enhance school performance, whereas authoritarian or passive methods may impede advancement.

In the South African setting, schools encounter issues, including inconsistent leadership practices, low staff morale, and ongoing learner underperformance. Although research on school leadership in South Africa is available, there is a paucity of emphasis on the impact of distinct leadership styles on the daily operations and efficacy of schools. This study aims to examine the effects of leadership styles employed by school leaders on effective school operations, encompassing management processes, staff collaboration, and learners' results. It further seeks

- To explore the influence of leadership style on the effective functioning of the school.
- To understand how the leadership style motivates teachers, learners, and the school climate.
- To examine the ways in which leadership styles affect learner experience and academic outcomes in schools

Research Questions

- How does the leadership style influence the effectiveness of the school?
- How does the leadership style motivate teachers, learners, and the school climate?
- What are the ways in which the style of leadership affects the experience of learners and academic outcomes in school?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership Style and Its Influence on the Effectiveness of the School System

The effectiveness of a school is generally assessed by its ability to enhance learner learning and achieve academic objectives, as demonstrated by improved assessment outcomes and overall institutional performance.⁷ According to Edmonds, effective school systems produce superior learners' achievement

² Ogunode, Ojochemi, and Ayoko, "Leadership Styles and School Effectiveness."

³ Wei Lijun and Hsin Chun Te, "The Role of Primary School Principals and Administrators in Promoting Student Achievement, Teacher Effectiveness, and a Positive School Culture," *Journal of Roi Kaensarn Academi* 9, no. 8 (2024): 727–39.

⁴ Ersika Puspitadani, Frans Yudea, and Friskila Loo, "Educational Leadership and Learning Quality: The Influence of the Princi-Pal's Leadership Style on Teacher Performance," *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Dan Humaniora* 11, no. 3 (2022): 206–20.

⁵ Farah Naz and Surryia Rashid, "Effective Instructional Leadership Can Enhance Teachers' Motivation and Improve Students' Learning Outcomes," *Sjesr* 4, no. 1 (2021): 477–85.

⁶ T. S. Nanjundeswaraswamy et al., "Leadership Theories and Styles—A Systematic Literature Review and the Narrative Synthesis," *Human Resources Management and Services* 6, no. 3 (August 20, 2024): 3477, <https://doi.org/10.18282/hrms.v6i3.3477>.

⁷ Abatihun Alehegn Sewagegn, "Learning Objective and Assessment Linkage: Its Contribution to Meaningful Student Learning," *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 8, no. 11 (2020): 5044–52.

compared to similar institutions; nevertheless, Aulia, Buehanuddin & Arifin emphasised the internal and external organisational factors that affect variations in learner performance.⁸ Leadership is essential in this process, as school leaders influence staff conduct, teaching methods, and organisational culture, all of which impact learners' learning.⁹

Situational Leadership Theory asserts that leadership effectiveness depends on principals' capacity to modify their leadership style, directive, supportive, participatory, or delegative according to staff readiness, contextual factors, and institutional requirements.¹⁰ In educational institutions that necessitate instructional enhancement, a more prescriptive and instructional leadership approach may be essential for establishing clear expectations and oversight.¹¹ Conversely, in more stable environments, participative or distributed leadership strategies can improve teacher commitment, collective efficacy, and shared accountability for learner success.¹² Studies demonstrate that administrators who provide targeted feedback, support teacher professional development, and align practices with academic goals contribute to improved school outcomes.¹³ Situational competence, defined as the ability to discern when and how to apply a specific leadership style, is crucial. Successful schools emerge not from reliance on a single approach, but from leaders who adjust to contextual demands and teacher abilities, ensuring ongoing improvement in teaching and learning.

How Does Leadership Style Motivate Teachers, Learners and the School Climate?

The administration of a school significantly influences teacher motivation, learner engagement, and the general atmosphere of the institution. Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) asserts that effective leaders use directive, coaching, supporting, or delegative approaches based on the readiness, skill, and dedication of their team members.¹⁴ This flexible approach emphasises that no leadership style is intrinsically superior. A leader's effectiveness is contingent upon the context and the requirements of the educators, influencing the school's culture and the learners' outcomes.

Directive leadership works well for new teachers or those who lack confidence. By providing clear instructions, coordinated advice, and tight supervision, school leaders improve teacher skills.¹⁵ According to Hersey & Blanchard, this encourages teachers to succeed.¹⁶ Motivated teachers under great leadership may set clear standards and help learners. This generates a stable and structured learning environment that supports school health.

Leadership that builds relationships and gives direction is coaching. Leaders educate teachers and provide feedback, support, and professional development. For skilled but insecure teachers, this method works wonderfully. According to Dami et al., coaching leadership boosts teacher self-efficacy, engagement, and job happiness, which motivates learners by encouraging creative teaching.¹⁷ Working together and seeking coaching aid creates relationships amongst colleagues, creating a collaborative and friendly school environment.

⁸ Ronald Edmonds, "Characteristics of Effective Schools," in *The School Achievement of Minority Children* (Routledge, 2020), 93–104; Egi Dina Aulia, Burhanuddin Burhanuddin, and Imron Arifin, "Analysis of Internal and External Factors Influencing Teacher Performance," *Academia Open* 10, no. 1 (2025): 10–21070.

⁹ Ramazan Atasoy, "The Relationship Between School Principals' Leadership Styles, School Culture and Organizational Change.," *International Journal of Progressive Education* 16, no. 5 (2020): 256–74.

¹⁰ Sutarjo Sutarjo, Muhammad Kristiawan, and Rambat Nur Sasongko, "The Principal's Leadership Style and the Teacher Performance," *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 11, no. 02 (2022).

¹¹ Ping He, Fangyun Guo, and Genevive Anulika Abazie, "School Principals' Instructional Leadership as a Predictor of Teacher's Professional Development," *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education* 9, no. 1 (2024): 63.

¹² Muhammad Nadeem, "Distributed Leadership in Educational Contexts: A Catalyst for School Improvement," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 9 (2024): 100835.

¹³ Sarah Jean L Gading, "Instructional Leadership Practices of the School Heads to Improve Teachers' Performance," *United International Journal for Research & Technology* 5, no. 6 (2024): 89–119.

¹⁴ P. Hersey and K. H. Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Leading Human Resources*, 10th ed. (Pearson, 2017).

¹⁵ Warman Warman et al., "Leadership Style and Principal Supervision in Improving Teacher Performance at State High Schools in Kutai Kartanegara Regency, East Kalimantan Province, Indonesia," *EduLine: Journal of Education and Learning Innovation* 2, no. 1 (2022): 17–24.

¹⁶ Hersey and Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Leading Human Resources*.

¹⁷ Zummy Anselmus Dami et al., "Principal Self-Efficacy for Instructional Leadership in the Perspective of Principal Strengthening Training: Work Engagement, Job Satisfaction and Motivation to Leave," *Cogent Education* 9, no. 1 (2022): 2064407.

The emphasis on individuality, collaboration, and acknowledgement improves the authority of educators. Ideal for proficient educators seeking direction or motivation to make a commitment. Autonomy and recognition of teacher contributions enhance intrinsic motivation, professional innovation, and ownership of school reform initiatives.¹⁸ Enthusiastic educators provide a positive and nurturing educational environment. This cultivates trust, a common goal, and constructive connections within the educational environment.

Proficient, assured, and committed educators assign leadership responsibilities. Leaders empower teachers to make decisions, solve problems, and assume accountability for their roles. This autonomy motivates educators and cultivates innovative concepts while instilling responsibility and accountability in learners. Delegating leadership fosters trust and collaborative governance, establishing a collegial, resilient, and development-oriented educational environment.¹⁹

SLT says that the way a leader leads and how ready a teacher is can affect motivation and the school climate. Leaders who know how to meet teachers' needs increase teachers' motivation, learners' engagement, and learners' success. Leaders who are aware of their surroundings generate trust, teamwork, and empowerment to make the school a place where people can learn and progress as professionals. This shows that good leadership is flexible and depends on the situation.

Ways in which Leadership Styles Affect Learner Experience and Academic Outcomes in Schools

The administration of a school influences learners' emotional well-being and academic performance. SLT posits that effective leadership requires adaptation to the skills and commitment levels of teachers.²⁰ The performance, motivation, and engagement of teachers significantly influence the quality of instruction and the experiences and success of learners. Consequently, adaptation is of significant importance.

Schools with novice or uncertain teachers require directive leadership, characterised by providing clear instructions, the establishment of tasks, and continuous oversight. Directive leaders facilitate teachers' comprehension of expectations, instructional strategies, and curriculum standards, thereby reducing uncertainty and promoting effective classroom practices. In environments marked by strong leadership, well-organised curricula, consistent teaching, and clear expectations, a sense of safety and predictability is cultivated, thereby improving academic performance.²¹

Coaching leaders offer structured feedback and encouragement to educators through relational dynamics. This technique supports proficient educators who require additional practice or motivation. Coaching leadership improves teacher confidence and performance, hence increasing learner engagement, involvement, and accomplishment.²² Coaching improves learner motivation, clarifies learning objectives, and increases enjoyment in studying. This indicates that leadership style may influence academic achievement.

Supportive leadership prioritises collaboration, recognition, and empowerment, making it appropriate for proficient educators who thrive under encouragement rather than stringent supervision. Supportive leaders foster teacher autonomy, innovation, and creativity in instruction, hence enhancing learners' classroom experiences.²³ Studies indicate that empowered and trusted educators are more inclined to employ learner-centred approaches, promote critical thinking, and customise instruction to meet learner needs, thus improving learner engagement and academic performance.

Delegating leadership entails allowing highly competent and driven educators to determine their instructional methods. This strategy promotes accountability and innovation, urging educators to deliver

¹⁸ Hongzhuo Lin and Mazni Mohammad, "Collaborative Leadership and Teacher Autonomy: Drivers of School Improvement in Zhengzhou's Vocational High Schools," *Uniglobal Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2025): 38–47.

¹⁹ Yevgen I Sokol, Joseph Mukuni, and Olena Mykolayivna Lapuzina, "Educational Leadership Connecting the World," 2024.

²⁰ Jingyan Liang, *Situational Leadership and the Influence on Employee Work Engagement in China's K-12 Public Schools* (Northwest University, 2022).

²¹ Gading, "Instructional Leadership Practices of the School Heads to Improve Teachers' Performance."

²² Tamara Harris Gilliam, "The Principal's Coach: A Phenomenological Exploration of Psychological Safety and Coaching Dynamics in Educational Leadership" (Virginia State University, 2024).

²³ Mairian Riddell and Idris Rahman Zulfikar, "The Role of Innovative Leadership in Transforming Student Learning Effectiveness: A Review of Best Practices and Future Directions," *Development: Studies in Educational Management and Leadership* 3, no. 1 (2024): 35–50.

more personalised, engaging, and challenging educational experiences to learners. Assigning individuals responsibility enhances problem-solving, fosters self-directed learning, and elevates academic achievement by providing more engaging and diverse study environments.²⁴

SLT emphasises the necessity of aligning the leadership style with the teacher's preparedness to improve learner performance. Effective leadership aligned with teachers' competencies and motivation significantly influences learner engagement, satisfaction, and achievement. Situationally adaptive leadership enhances learner performance in academic settings by aid, encouragement, and recognition.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework is crucial for guiding the design and execution of a research project, as it allows researchers to concentrate on key elements and ensures methodological accuracy.²⁵ It provides a systematic framework for analysing results, directing the choice of participants, variables, and research methods.²⁶

This paper is guided by situational leadership theory developed by Hersely & Blanchard.²⁷ The theory asserts that effective leaders adapt their leadership style to accommodate the motivation, expectations, and competency of their adherents, as well as the demands of specific situations. By understanding the diverse capacities and circumstances of educators and learners, school leaders can adjust their leadership approach to fit each context by implementing situational leadership principles.

This approach delineates four leadership styles: directing, coaching/mentoring, supporting, and delegating. Each type is suitable for varying degrees of follower preparedness and task complexity. The framework promotes leaders to make decisions that are deliberate. It compels them to engage in critical thinking regarding the timing and manner of using each type to optimally assist staff and enhance overall school operations. This study uses the notion as a framework to analyse the effects of adaptive leadership methods on school operations, teacher motivation, teamwork, and learner experiences.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

This study is based on the interpretivist paradigm, which examines how people or groups understand social processes. The interpretivist perspective posits that reality is socially constructed and shaped by cultural, historical, and contextual factors.²⁸ Pervin and Mokhtar assert that the interpretive paradigm seeks to understand human experiences and perspectives to clarify social processes and activities.²⁹ The interpretivist paradigm in educational research provides a significant framework for examining the understanding and application of leadership styles in educational institutions. This framework allows the researcher to examine the influence of different leadership styles on the functioning of educational institutions through the analysis of contemporary literature and documented research. The research analysis secondary data, including academic articles, policy documents, and previous studies, to clarify the impact of leadership practices on educational attainment. Thus, the interpretivist paradigm was considered appropriate for this study as it enables a thorough understanding of the influence of various leadership styles on the efficient functioning of schools.

Research Design

This study used qualitative documentary analysis to examine the influence of leadership styles on the effectiveness of South African schools and to draw relevant findings from the documented viewpoints in the literature.

²⁴ Ahumuza Seth and Moses Ntirandekura, "Delegation of Responsibilities and Teachers' Performance in Selected Secondary Schools in Kabale Municipality," *International Journal of Academic Pedagogical Research* 6, no. 6 (2022): 31–48.

²⁵ Adrian Holliday, *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446287958>.

²⁶ James H McMillan and Sally Schumacher, *Research in Education: Evidence-Based Inquiry* (pearson, 2010).

²⁷ Hersey and Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Leading Human Resources*.

²⁸ Ramji Acharya, "Examining Interpretivism in Social Science Research: Exploring Subjectivity, Context, and Meaning in Social Inquiry," *Education Science & Technology*, 2025.

²⁹ Nasrin Pervin and Mahani Mokhtar, "The Interpretivist Research Paradigm: A Subjective Notion of a Social Context," *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development* 11, no. 2 (2022): 419–28.

Sampling Procedure

This study used convenience sampling. As Emerson noted, such samples are suitable if participants acknowledge their validity, the limitations are explicitly stated, and they are included in further statistical analysis.³⁰ Consequently, academic literature and research materials were sourced from various scholarly platforms.

Data Collection Method

Document analysis was used to collect data relevant to the study's questions, ensuring consistency and dependability. The researcher obtained qualitative data from a variety of sources, including books, published articles, and journals. The goal of using this data collection strategy was to examine a variety of texts related to the research issue. To collect relevant qualitative data, the researcher conducted a systematic analysis of books, scholarly articles, policy documents, and academic journals. This strategy produced considerable and reliable data that contributed to the understanding the influence of various leadership styles on the operational success of South African schools.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis and divided into separate categories. The researcher used thematic analysis to examine trends in the literature to gain insights into the impact of various leadership styles on schools in South Africa.

Ethical Considerations

This study exclusively used secondary data and did not involve direct interaction with human subjects; however, ethical standards were upheld throughout the research procedure. The researcher ensured that the intellectual contributions of all authors were appropriately acknowledged through citation and reference. Since no primary data were collected, methods such as informed consent, withdrawal rights, and anonymity protocols were irrelevant; however, confidentiality and responsible data utilisation were maintained in compliance with existing research ethics standards.³¹ Ethical rigour was maintained by accurately reporting data, avoiding plagiarism, and upholding academic honesty throughout the project.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the objectives, this section discusses the findings of the paper.

A qualitative desktop review technique was used to analyse published academic literature, governmental policy documents, and empirical research on leadership in South African educational institutions. The findings demonstrate that adaptable, supportive, and context-responsive leadership improves school operations, teacher motivation, and learner academic achievement, whereas rigid and authoritarian leadership styles hinder efforts for school improvement.

Theme 1: The Influence of Leadership Style on the Effective Functioning of the School

The study indicates that the approach significantly influences the effectiveness of the school.

Adaptive Approach to Leadership

Schools whose principals adapt leadership to fit the demands of their personnel and the environment have better communication, stronger organisational structures, and greater control of instruction. These leaders consider the skills of the teachers, the needs of the learners, and the resources available, and they adjust the assistance and guidance as needed.³²

Working together helps build relationships and achieve goals. The Teacher Resilience Initiative and leaders work together to make school partnerships work. Being a leader in student affairs helps

³⁰ Robert Wall Emerson, "Convenience Sampling Revisited: Embracing Its Limitations Through Thoughtful Study Design.," *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness* 115, no. 1 (2021): 76–78.

³¹ Sheetal Temara, "Ethics for Responsible Data Research: Integrating Cybersecurity Perspectives in a Digital Era," in *IRB, Human Research Protections, and Data Ethics for Researchers* (IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2025), 103–44.

³² Bernard Brown and Cheryl Jones, "Adaptive Leadership of Schools in Australia during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Lessons for Future Crises," *School Leadership & Management* 45, no. 2 (March 15, 2025): 153–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2025.2473890>.

individuals become resilient and take care of themselves. Teachers help leaders in develop better plans on how to reach more students. The leader formulates a clear plan for how to work together and gives people jobs to help these partnerships grow.³³

Capacity to Assess Teacher Requirements and Adjust Assistance Accordingly

According to Rosel et al. and Tiwow, Arsana & Dolonseda, the majority of schools led by flexible principals are likely to be effectively and those led by inflexible results to inefficiency.³⁴

Authoritarian Leadership Hinders Organisational Effectiveness

Autocratic leadership style fosters fear, limiting followers' motivation to actively participate in the learning institution's activities. While this leadership can provide a clear structure and discipline, it often has a negative influence on school outcomes. Parlar, Türkoğlu & Cansoy reveal that authoritarians can hinder subordinates' innovation, engagement, and motivation by limiting possibilities for learners' involvement and resulting in a lack of anatomy in learning.³⁵

Contextual Competency is Essential

In South Africa, effective leaders must address social and economic challenges, disparities in resources, and the varied needs of learners. Leaders who understand situational issues are more effective in implementing responsive strategies.³⁶

The notion that the environment profoundly influences the leader-follower dynamic was prevalent during the situational era. Rather than highlighting the characteristics of leaders, the situational phase underscores leadership within specific contexts. This indicates that leaders must evaluate their operational context and select the most appropriate strategy for the circumstances. The contingency leadership model emphasises the significance of context in effective leadership, asserting that there is no universal set of leadership practices as the optimal approach is contingent upon the circumstances.³⁷ Fiedler posits that a leader should be situated in contexts that correspond with their established style. The efficacy of a leader is contingent on the alignment of his or her style with the circumstances at hand.

The findings closely align with Situational Leadership Theory, which posits that leaders must adapt their behaviour based on the readiness of their followers.³⁸ Adaptive leadership is crucial in South Africa's diverse educational contexts. Leaders who oscillate between directing, coaching, assisting, and delegating ensure operational efficiency, enhance teacher accountability, and foster responsive management practices. Educational institutions are increasingly emphasising collaborative leadership as an essential strategy for managing the evolving learning environment for sustained performance. This supports the view that school effectiveness improves when principals delegate authority and foster teacher leadership.³⁹ Autocratic leadership suppresses innovation and undermines teacher empowerment. Leaders who rely solely on their authority struggle to motivate their subordinates to exert effort and adapt to change, resulting in inefficient educational systems and diminished morale. Situational Leadership Theory posits that leadership must guide and direct subordinates to attain

³³ Hamit Özen and Pınar Yavuz, "A Theoretical Analysis for Resilience: Developing a Complex Adaptive Leadership Model in Schools," *Anadolu Eğitim Liderliği ve Öğretim Dergisi* 12, no. 1 (2024): 49–72.

³⁴ Mahal Rosel et al., "Adaptive Leadership in Education: A Qualitative Exploration of Leadership Styles in Resource-Constrained Schools In The Philippines," *The Threshold* 17, no. 1 (2025); Gilly Marlya Tiwow, I Kadek Satria Arsana, and Herman Philips Dolonseda, "Designing a Transglobal Leadership Model to Optimize Holistic Learning within the Independent Learning Framework," *Tadbir: Jurnal Studi Manajemen Pendidikan* 9, no. 1 (2025): 257–78; Muhammad Rafiq-uz-Zaman, Sumera Bano, and Youstra Naveed, "Comparative Analysis of Authoritative and Democratic Leadership Styles and Their Impact on School Management Effectiveness," *Ijss* 4, no. 2 (2025): 105–17.

³⁵ Hanifi Parlar, Muhammet Emin Türkoğlu, and Ramazan Cansoy, "Exploring How Authoritarian Leadership Affects Commitment: The Mediating Roles of Trust in the School Principal and Silence," *International Journal of Educational Management* 36, no. 1 (2022): 110–29.

³⁶ Rose Matshelane Masela, "The Role of Educational Leadership and Management Research Methods in Addressing Socio-Economic and Security Challenges in South Africa," in *Research Methods for Educational Leadership and Management* (IGI Global, 2025), 329–54, <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-9425-0.ch014>.

³⁷ Sihame Benmira and Moyosolu Agboola, "Evolution of Leadership Theory," *BMJ Leader*, 2021, leader-2020.

³⁸ Gilbert A. Ang'ana and Walter J. Ongeti., "Collaborative Leadership and Performance: Towards Development of a New Theoretical Model," *Journal of Business* 11, no. 6 (2023): 297–308.

³⁹ Ang'ana and Walter J. Ongeti., "Collaborative Leadership and Performance: Towards Development of a New Theoretical Model."

specified objectives. Schools in South Africa that exhibit context-adaptive leadership demonstrate superior decision-making and overall performance.⁴⁰

For a school to operate effectively, leaders must possess the ability to adapt their perspectives rather than adhere rigidly to a certain approach. Educational institutions perform more effectively when leaders oscillate between authoritative, coaching, supportive, and delegative approaches, depending on the abilities of their team and the demands of the situation.

Theme 2: How the Leadership Style Motivates Teachers, Learners and the School Climate

The research demonstrated that a leader's leadership style significantly influences teacher motivation, learner morale, and the overall school environment. Supportive and participatory leadership styles result in the following:

Enhanced Teacher Morale and Loyalty

Supportive leaders who commend teachers' achievements, provide emotional assistance, and engage staff in significant discussions enhance job satisfaction, foster trust in leadership, and promote long-term commitment to the organisation.

A Constructive School Culture and Emotional Security

By fostering respect, transparent communication, and psychological safety, these leaders establish a school environment in which staff and learners feel esteemed, acknowledged, and motivated to excel. This reduces stress and conflict while improving well-being.

Professional collaboration and dedication to institutional objectives

Participatory leadership promotes collaboration, collective accountability, and distributed responsibility. Educators believe that they can influence the vision and efforts to improve it. This fosters a culture of learning among colleagues, establishes shared objectives, and cultivates a sustained commitment to the institution's success.

Research indicates that educators flourish in settings where leaders empower them, acknowledge their accomplishments, and offer substantial professional support.⁴¹ On the contrary, teachers experience increased stress, burnout, absenteeism, and work dissatisfaction when their supervisors are authoritarian or lack support.⁴²

Situational Leadership Theory underscores the need for leaders to adjust their levels of support and direction according to the competence, confidence, and readiness of teachers for certain duties.⁴³ Supportive leadership approaches in educational institutions, such as empathy, coaching, mentorship, and acknowledgement of teachers' contributions, can enhance learner motivation and emotional well-being. These perspectives recognise teachers not merely as implementers of policy but as professionals with emotional requirements and developmental trajectories.

Effective school leadership encompasses both relational and instructional elements. Although monitoring academics and curriculum remains essential, fostering strong relationships between leaders and teachers is the most critical element in enhancing schools. According to Wang'ombe, leaders who intentionally foster trust, facilitate respectful communication among teachers, and acknowledge their

⁴⁰ Ahmad Matinul Haq and Erny Roesminingsih, "Situational Leadership Skills of Foundation Heads in Human Resource Development for Early Childhood Education," *Munaddhomah: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 5, no. 1 (November 9, 2023): 26–40, <https://doi.org/10.31538/munaddhomah.v5i1.545>.

⁴¹ Katy Granville-Chapman, Matthew T Lee, and James Ritchie-Dunham, "The Development of a New Model of Educational Leadership: Leadership for Teacher Flourishing," *Humanistic Management Journal* 9, no. 2 (2024): 247–67; Tony Wang'ombe, "The Role of Educational Leadership in Fostering a Positive School Culture and Enhancing Teacher Retention," *European Journal of Education* 1, no. 1 (2023): 31–43.

⁴² Farshad Ghasemi, "The Effects of Dysfunctional Workplace Behavior on Teacher Emotional Exhaustion: A Moderated Mediation Model of Perceived Social Support and Anxiety," *Psychological Reports* 127, no. 5 (October 16, 2024): 2526–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00332941221146699>.

⁴³ Badriah Khaleel, Shahida Kausar, and Sumiya Riaz, "Investigating Leadership Dynamics: A Comparative Analysis of Situational Leadership Theory and Contemporary Leadership Practices in a Public School," *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2024): 638–49.

dedication contribute to a school environment where educators feel valued and motivated.⁴⁴ Such leaders facilitate professional learning communities, motivate educators to collaborate in problem-solving, and encourage teachers to assume leadership roles, thereby enhancing the group's strength and commitment.⁴⁵ Ultimately, effective and adaptable leadership improves teacher engagement, fosters a positive school culture, and lays the groundwork for sustained advancements in teaching and learning.

Theme 3: Ways in Which Leadership Styles Affect Learner Experience and Academic Outcomes in Schools

The evidence establishes a definitive connection between leadership approaches and learner experience and performance. Schools governed by leaders who emphasise instructional enhancement, educator development, and accountability indicate the following:

Enhanced Pedagogical Methods

Effective school leadership is frequently associated with improved teaching competencies. He et al., assert that good instructional leadership fosters teachers' professional development by establishing conducive conditions for learning, reflection, and cooperation.⁴⁶ Effective leaders provide teachers with continuous mentorship, coaching, and professional development, enhancing their pedagogical skills and self-assurance.⁴⁷ Research demonstrates that educators are more likely to adopt innovative, learner-centred teaching methodologies when they get continuous support and clear pedagogical direction from school administration.⁴⁸ This improves curriculum delivery as educators feel empowered to experiment, customise their lessons for diverse learners, and implement research-based practices.⁴⁹ Leaders who prioritise teacher development foster an enduring culture of continuous learning. This results in improved pedagogical methods that are closely aligned with learner requirements and curriculum expectations.

Increased Learner Discipline and Involvement

Establishing explicit objectives, providing teachers with ongoing support, and fostering a conducive school environment enhance learners' responsibility, motivation, and engagement in academic and extracurricular pursuits. Studies demonstrate that setting clear objectives, providing continuous support to educators, and cultivating a positive school environment are leadership strategies that enhance students' sense of responsibility, motivation, and engagement in academic and extracurricular pursuits.⁵⁰

Elevated Trends in Academic Performance

School leaders foster a culture of academic achievement by prioritising instructional leadership, data-informed decision-making, and professional accountability. This results in measurable enhancements in learner performance and overall school accomplishment patterns. Distributed leadership and robust instructional oversight are associated with enhanced learner outcomes.⁵¹ Nonetheless, research indicates

⁴⁴ Wang'ombe, "The Role of Educational Leadership in Fostering a Positive School Culture and Enhancing Teacher Retention."

⁴⁵ Christie W Johnson and Robert H Voelkel, "Developing Increased Leader Capacity to Support Effective Professional Learning Community Teams," *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 24, no. 3 (2021): 313–32.

⁴⁶ Ping He, Fangyun Guo, and Genevive Anulika Abazie, "School Principals' Instructional Leadership as a Predictor of Teacher's Professional Development," *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education* 9, no. 1 (June 13, 2024): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-024-00290-0>.

⁴⁷ Athanasios Tsarkos, "Coaching and Educational Leadership Development: Harnessing Coaching for Leadership Excellence," in *Navigating the Coaching and Leadership Landscape: Strategies and Insights for Success* (IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2024), 166–88.

⁴⁸ Pui Yee Chan, Phaik Kin Cheah, and Yuen Onn Choong, "Digital Era Learner-Centered Leadership and Teachers' Efficacy: The Mediating Role of Teachers' Professional Learning," *Journal of Professional Capital and Community* 10, no. 4 (2025): 393–411.

⁴⁹ Qinyun Lin et al., "Factors Affecting Students' Learning from a Design-based Implementation Research Project in Diverse Education Systems," *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 59, no. 5 (May 21, 2022): 808–40, <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.21745>.

⁵⁰ Stella Nkechi Ezeaku and Anthonia Chinyere Okoye, "Best Strategies for Ensuring a Good Organizational Climate in Secondary Schools in Anambra State," *Unizik Journal of Educational Laws and Leadership Studies* 1, no. 1 (2025).

⁵¹ Ferdinand Johan Hartogh, *Departmental Heads as Leaders in Improving School Performance Through Professional Development* (University of Johannesburg (South Africa), 2024); Chuma Zuma, "Exploring the Role of School Principals as Instructional Leaders Improving Learner Academic Performance in Johannesburg South District Primary Schools" (University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa., 2024).

that socio-economic problems and resource disparities influence the impact of leadership on learner performance.⁵²

DISCUSSION

Situational leadership asserts that adaptable leadership improves learning by providing appropriate support based on instructional needs.⁵³ When educators lack sufficient pedagogical knowledge, directive or coaching methodologies might improve their teaching efficacy. In classrooms with proficient teachers, strategies that promote collaboration and distribute tasks enhance learners' creativity and engagement in learning.⁵⁴ Learners perform better not solely due to the presence of a leader, but also because the leader employs an appropriate leadership style that directly facilitates teaching and learning.

Insights that encompass

Four significant observations emerged from all the objectives:

Insight	Implication
Adaptive leadership is essential, not merely optional.	Executives should assess individual preparedness and the prevailing environment.
Relational competence is the key factor in individuals' success.	Empathy and emotional intelligence are essential.
Distributed leadership improves capacity.	Teacher leadership enhances educational conditions.
Instructional leadership serves as the primary lever.	Leadership influences results only when it is associated with education.

The findings indicate that a leader's behavior significantly influences school efficacy, teacher motivation, and learner performance in South Africa. Situational Leadership Theory posits that adaptable, flexible, collaborative, and instructional leaders create environments conducive to the success of both educators and learners. Institutions led by rigid or authoritarian figures face issues with learner disengagement, lack of productivity, and poor academic performance. To improve the quality of education in South Africa, leadership development programs must emphasise adaptive leadership, coaching competencies, contextual problem-solving, and instructional leadership skills.

Discussion Summary

The study findings indicate that leaders in South African institutions must navigate complex social, economic and cultural challenges; therefore, they must be adaptable, responsive and cognisant of their environment. Adaptive leaders have been shown to improve school structures, facilitate communication, and advance the execution of curriculum and pedagogical strategies by adjusting their ways to address the requirements of teachers, students, and the broader school community.

The research demonstrates that collaborative and distributed leadership models promote shared accountability, collective problem-solving, and improved internal leadership capacity, thereby enabling more cohesive and effective educational institutions. Supportive leadership actions, such as recognising teacher achievements, fostering psychological safety, and promoting professional discussion, were identified as characteristics that enhance staff morale and nurture a culture of mutual respect and

⁵² Jan Heystek and Raymond Emekako, "Leadership and Motivation for Improved Academic Performance in Schools in Low Socio-Economic Contexts," *International Journal of Educational Management* 34, no. 9 (2020): 1403–15.

⁵³ Matinul Haq and Roesminingsih, "Situational Leadership Skills of Foundation Heads in Human Resource Development for Early Childhood Education."

⁵⁴ Lu-Ho Hsia and Gwo-Jen Hwang, "Enhancing Students' Choreography and Reflection in University Dance Courses: A Mobile Technology-assisted Peer Assessment Approach," *British Journal of Educational Technology* 52, no. 1 (January 29, 2021): 266–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12986>.

collaboration. Moreover, leadership styles that prioritise instructional assistance were associated with improved teaching practices, heightened student engagement, and more effective curriculum implementation. The research definitively demonstrates that a leader's methodology profoundly affects student learning, especially in terms of motivation, discipline, engagement, and dedication to academic endeavours. This underscores the importance of leadership in educational institutions and various learning settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Advocate for adaptive leadership training: Principals should undergo professional development that improves their flexibility, situational awareness, and decision-making skills to meet the varied demands of educational institutions.
- Foster collective and collaborative leadership: Educational institutions ought to establish frameworks that facilitate educators' involvement in decision-making, lesson planning, and problem-solving to enhance their competencies and ensure accountability among all stakeholders.
- Address contextual challenges: Leadership development programs must instruct school leaders on managing socio-economic disparities, resource deficiencies, and community issues.
- Prioritise instructional leadership: Leaders must concentrate on enhancing teaching quality through focused mentoring, coaching, classroom support, and professional development.
- Improve supportive and relational leadership: To raise morale and reduce burnout, school leaders should work on building trust, acknowledging teachers' accomplishments, making communication simpler, and giving emotional support.
- Promote constructive educational environments: Schools must ensure that their environments are safe, respectful, and supportive, empowering students to feel motivated, responsible, and involved in both academic and extracurricular activities.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of various leadership styles on key aspects of school functioning in South Africa, including organisational performance, teacher motivation, school atmosphere, and student experience. The management of a school is essential to its efficacy in South Africa. Adaptive and context-responsive leadership improves organisational performance, promotes teamwork, and energises instructors, hence maintaining student engagement and academic achievement. Situational Leadership Theory allows school leaders to adapt their activities based on the needs and preparedness of teachers. This improves schools as workplaces by cultivating a sense of worth and dedication among educators. Supportive, participatory, and instructional leadership improves the educational environment, professional relationships, and mental health. In contrast, authoritarian and rigid leadership styles complicate school operations by stifling innovation, restricting teachers' autonomy, and diminishing morale. These strategies damage relationships, hinder collaboration, and diminish student motivation. Educational institutions require leaders who are relational, collaborative, adaptive, and proficient in pedagogy, rather than those who are authoritarian and adhere rigidly to regulations. Given the many demands and challenges in South African schools, leadership training should prioritise adaptability, emotional intelligence, collaborative decision-making, and exemplary instructional support. Institutions led by responsive leaders are more likely to effect significant improvements in teacher well-being, school climate, and student achievement.

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