

The leadership styles and practices of school principals and heads of departments and their impact on learners' pass rates in selected Namibian secondary schools

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the leadership styles and practices predominantly employed by the school principals and their implications for learners' pass rates in secondary schools. The study adopted interpretivist paradigms because of its focus on understanding social reality from the standpoint of those experiencing it (principals and HODs). A qualitative research design was employed, with semi-structured interviews conducted across six schools. The study was guided by transformational, distributed, instructional, and situational theory. The target population was 24, which includes principals and HODs. A total sample of 12 participants, including principals and HODs, were purposefully selected. Data was thematically analyzed using Yin's analysis framework. The study found that instructional, transformational, distributive, and adaptive leadership improved shared accountability, collaboration, motivation, and students' pass rate, while autocratic practices were generally avoided. Leadership practices such as monitoring classroom instruction, enforcing discipline policies, monitoring teachers' work, and consistent engagement in instructional leadership were widely implemented. Although transformational, instructional and distributed leadership dominate, situational flexibility and learner participation remain underdeveloped. Principals who integrate instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership and who change leadership depending on the situation reported improved accountability, motivation, and improved learner pass rates. The study recommends school leaders institutionalize a hybrid, context-responsive leadership style that integrates distributed, instructional, and transformational practices; formalize distributed leadership structures; strengthen mentorship and capacity-building systems; and embed structured consultation processes that enhance teacher empowerment and shared accountability as well as improve learners' outcomes.

Key words: Heads of Departments, Leadership Styles, Principals, Leadership Practices, Namibia

I. INTRODUCTION

School leadership is commonly seen to be a principal school-based factor affecting student achievement (Hallinger, 2011; Liethwood & Jantzi, 2006). Studies show that strong leadership influences the climate of a school, the quality of instruction, and commitment from teachers which are in turn directly related to student achievement outcomes (Bush, 2011; Fullan, 2014). Principals and Heads of Departments [HODs] should coordinate planning, organizing, leading and controlling functions in close collaboration with teachers, learners, parents and wider community (Gougas & Malinova, 2021). Leadership in the Namibian context functions within frameworks such as the Education Act of 2020, which provides school governance systems (school hierarchy and management, school boards of schools and a stakeholder engagement platform). With the enactment of the Basic Education Act of 2020, the responsibility for leadership has moved from being principal-centred to a distributed model that places responsibility with middle management and central management (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture [MOEC], 2020; MOEAC, 2023). But leadership performance relies not only on structural compliance with the Act, but also on the way in which principals and HODs enact leadership styles to fit with contextual realities, and the Act does not prescribe any one leadership style, so practices among the schools are varied.

While there have been cases of good orientation among many principals and long-term leadership terms among some, both their leadership styles and their effectiveness affect school climate, teacher motivation and learner achievement significantly; as a result (Hangula et al., 2019; Katewa, 2016). Recent literature indicates that there is no adequate approach to leadership for dealing with the complexities of secondary schooling, on the contrary effective leadership arises from adaptive-context responsive practices (Bush, 2011; Spillane, 2006). The empirical study in Namibia has shown that principals implement various leadership styles such as laissez-faire, instructional, transformational leadership and self-leadership to influence the performance in schools (Katewa & Heystek, 2019; Silume, 2014; So-Oabeb & Du Plessis, 2023). Leadership has been much questioned in the context of national examination results, with poor progression from Grade 11 to Grade 12, especially at the National Senior Secondary

Certificate Ordinary (NSSCO) level (MOEAC, 2022; MOEAC, 2023). Despite the adoption of the new curriculum, national stats from 2021 to 2022 indicate weak progress in the qualification rates, and a high number of learners have dropped out of the basic education at Grade 11 (Education Management Information Systems, [EMIS] 2021, 2022, and 2023). The push for better instructional leadership and accountability in schools was further exacerbated by concerns concerning poor performance (MOEAC, 2023). Considering the ongoing performance difficulties seen with the new curriculum framework, the current study aimed to investigate leadership styles and practices utilized by Principals and their impact on the learner's pass rates.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the existence of school management frameworks and distributed leadership structures, learner pass rates remain inconsistent across schools. Although leadership responsibilities are shared under the Basic Education Act 3 of 2020, overall accountability remains centered on Principals and HODs, whose effectiveness is closely linked to national examinations results. The National Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary (NSSCO) results have been consistently below ministerial expectations, with many learners failing to progress to Grade 12 and exit the basic education system (MOEAC, 2024). Several researchers indicate that principals' leadership styles significantly influence learner achievement, yet many school leaders lack a clearly defined leadership model to guide effective instructional practices (Katewa & Heystek, 2019; Silume, 2014). Literature further highlighted gaps in supervisory skills, leadership preparations and structural support for principals (Mbangula & Sazita, 2019). This study sought to examine the leadership styles and practices of Principals and HODs and their implications on students' pass rates in secondary schools.

1.2 Research Objective

To explore the leadership styles and practices predominantly employed by school Principals and Heads of Departments (HODs) in secondary schools.

1.3 Research Question

What leadership styles and practices are employed by school Principals and HODs in secondary schools?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

Four theories of school leadership informed this study to make sense of the impact school leadership has on student results. The school has a complex system that aims for the one goal of curriculum attainment. Each theory has unique characteristics but collectively contributes to the in-depth understanding of leadership practices of principals and HODs in the schools because they provide complementary lenses to understand how school leadership influences teaching and learning and students' outcomes. For this study, the four theories provided a multi-dimensional framework that helped to understand and easily analyse leadership practices of principals and HODs and how these practices relate to students' pass rates, by allowing in-depth exploration of individual leadership actions and the collective practice of both leaders in the school.

2.1.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory (MacGregor, 1978;) focuses on motivators to outshine and inspire their followers, to lead with innovation, trust, and dedication through vision, intellectual stimulation, an idealized influence and individualized consideration. In this study, this theory contributed the insights of the transformational leadership styles of the principal and HODs by guiding on the meanings of practices of school leaders towards improving students' pass rates. The transformational theory guide on how a leader can transform teachers and learners through transformational style to actively move towards desired targets.

2.1.2 Instructional Leadership Theory

Instructional leadership theory (Bush, 2013; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) center on the extent to which principals support teaching and learning, including curriculum monitoring, teacher support, and resource provision, to promote student achievement. This theory plays a major role in school leadership as it provides insights into the processes of teaching and learning monitoring and supervision. In this study, it provides knowledge to better understand the instructional leadership practices and perceptions of school principals and HODs.

2.1.3 Distributed Leadership Theory

Distributed leadership theory (Harris, 2005; Spillane, 2006) emphasizes the importance of cooperative decision-making and solving problems together among principals, HODs, teachers and other stakeholders, fostering

collaboration, autonomy, and capacity development to enhance learning results. The leadership function of the Namibian schools involves key players at each leadership hierarchical level from the principal to parents. Therefore, distributed theory was equally relevant to this study to understand leadership roles of principals and HODs as top actors of distributed leadership and how their practices relate pass rates.

2.1.4 Situational Leadership Theory

Finally, Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969) advocates the necessity for leaders to shape their style based on the followers' competence and commitment in order that leadership be able to be flexibly adapted to the context. These theories were combined to give a holistic view of the impact of leadership styles, practices and adaptations on school effectiveness and student pass rates. This theory informed the study that leadership styles of principals and HODs are not fixed or single but can vary depending on the situation. For this reason, the theory helped the researcher to understand why certain leadership are practically possible in one school and not in another making it valuable for cross case analysis in this study.

2.2 Empirical Review

Different leadership styles and models of schools that impact teaching, learning and school performance are outlined in this section. According to Cole and Kelly (2004), leadership style is described as the leader's strategic style of orienting and motivating individuals within team to achieve organizational goals and is a vital factor for academic as well as the co-curricular outcomes.

2.2.1 Leadership Styles and Practices in School Leadership

Shapaka (2026) found that school leaders should give much focus on distributive, instructional and transformational leadership with continuous training on how to apply the leadership styles to optimize leadership success and enhance students' academic performance. Shapaka (2025) established that school leaders need to enhance student outcome through learning how to apply instructional strategies to support teacher performance. While Awodiji and Oluwalola (2025) emphasize that principals should be empowered with distributed leadership to attain sustainable school goals, practices need continuous use of combination of leadership styles to enhance student achievement. Instructional leadership places emphasis on the direct involvement of principals and Heads of Departments (HODs) in teaching and learning, by setting clear vision, monitoring of the learners' achievement, organizing curriculum and supporting teachers in enhancing learning outcomes (Brolund, 2016; Carraway & Young, 2015; McEwan, 2003). However, limited time, inadequate training and lack of confidence in classroom practice supervision impede its successful implementation (Salo et al., 2014).

Transformational leadership emphasizes the needs of teachers and learners to be driven to the highest levels of commitment and performance by having vision, inspiration, and motivation for the individual and individual support (Brass & Burkhardt, 1993; MacGregor, 1978). Distributed leadership fosters collective learning and work responsibilities among school leaders and staff as principals cannot operate all departments and collaborative leadership works for school efficiency (Botha, 2017; Harris, 2004; Spillane et al., 2001). Situational leadership focuses on flexibility, asking principals and HODs to develop a type of leadership based on the extent to which teachers are competent and committed to respond according to the varied contexts in which their school operates (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Northouse, 2018). Meanwhile, in many cases autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire styles provide opposing models of leadership: While autocratic leadership permits decisive action, it tends to diminish morale (Lewin et al., 1939; Bush, 2003); Democratic leadership encourages participation, trust and better performance, and slows decision-making (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2009), Laissez-faire leadership provides experienced staff with a strong role but risks leading to weak guidance and poor performance for schools that struggle (Bush, 2003; Glickman et al., 2018).

2.2.2 Leadership Styles and Practices on Students' Pass Rates in African Context.

The literature reveals that there is no comprehensive model of effective leadership in every setting, hence, a blend and contextuality are necessary for successful school leadership to improve teaching and learning. Leadership is conceived as a management function that enables followers to pull together to achieve school goals. Leadership relies more on the principals in the role and approach of their managers and strategists (Cole & Kelly, 2004). Researchers found that a combination of balanced leadership style that combines participatory with transactional (inclusive) elements can help achieve inclusivity and efficiency (Mastul et al., 2024). Although transactional leadership is mainly practiced and positively related to enhanced student achievement (especially versus transformational and laissez-faire styles) (Heidmets & Liik, 2014; Pashiardis, 2013; Edi & Beshiri, 2022), research has shown that many principals are unsure as to what leadership style to adopt.

The study conducted by Akomodi (2025), found that principals who measure students' performance and have access to assessment data that leads them to change their leadership styles in the teaching and learning process have

improved students' pass rate. Similarly, Park and Datnow (2009) also reveal that leaders distributed decision-making authority to empower different staff members to utilize their expertise in order to give relevance to data for adjustment of curriculum delivery to achieve higher pass rates. Some Researchers identify transformative and instructional leadership as effective in creating innovative environments conducive to academic progress (Heissenberger & Heilbronner, 2017; Ikram et al., 2020), where directive type leadership has been associated with increased teacher performance that led to high learner outcome. In contrast, participative leadership is not an adequate predictor of school's success, even though in-service leadership models are still widely practiced.

In the Namibian context, Section 50(1) of part 4 of the Basic Education Act 3 (2020), describes governance of schools by school boards who develop the vision and mission of the school while day to day routines remains in the leadership of the school principal and Heads of Departments. In Namibian literature, it is reported that principals do not infrequently integrate instructional with distributed, self-leadership and transformational approaches, albeit unconsciously (Katewa & Heystek, 2019; Penehupifo, 2021). Research highlights the significance of the instructional practices as well as the professional development, resource improvement, innovation, and team building in improving learner performance and promotes formal leadership development focused on leaders in helping to establish the quality of education in Namibia (Chaka, 2018; Kaukewahulo, 2022; Shikongo, 2021).

Instructional and transformational leadership styles are also associated with higher pass rates, mainly by focusing on supervision, teacher support and learner motivation (Silume, 2014). Moreover, Kaukewahulo and Nkengbeza (2023) found that leadership practices such as academic supervision and monitoring, assessment, decision-making and discipline are faced with challenges such as lack of resources and failure to meet the set targets which are overcome by motivation and continuous professional developmental activities. Day et al. (2016) explain that leadership affects student achievement indirectly by impacting school culture, teaching quality, and organization context, especially through transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership approaches. However, Yaqoob et al. (2023) identified effective school leaders as those who combine skills, knowledge, and relational capacity to manage educational systems through distributed leadership across the organizational level. It is well documented that existing studies are largely descriptive, in nature and concentrate on the identification of leadership styles (i.e., the identification of leadership types) rather than integrating leadership styles within a structured empirical framework aligned with the Basic Education Act 3 of 2020. There are also scarce, empirically derived studies examining how principals use examination data to make instructional decisions, how leadership changes manifest in the classroom, and how leadership training programs impact learners. The gaps underscore the necessity of further exploring and validating a leadership model-based system that can be integrated to improve NSSCO progression and academic success in Namibian secondary school.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Method

The study used a qualitative methodology because the primary purpose was to gain an in-depth understanding of school leadership styles and practices of Principals and HODs and their implication on learners' pass rates.

3.2 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative method with a case study design. The case study involved two cases of analysis: principals and HODs, to allow an in-depth investigation of school leadership styles and practices of leadership in schools (Yin, 2018). This design was considered appropriate for this study to develop an in-depth, contextualized understanding of leadership practices as they are enacted within real school settings through the experiences and perceptions of principals as overall leaders and HODs as experts in instructional leadership in areas of their subject expertise, rather than to test hypotheses or establish statistical relationships (Merriam, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the case was bounded by the selected secondary schools, while the cases included principals and Heads of Departments (HODs), where leadership styles and practices related to teaching and learning were examined.

3.3 Study Area

The study was conducted in Namibia. The participated schools are located in the Walvis Bay and Swakopmund towns of Erongo region and Divudu of Okavango east region.

3.4 Population

The target population was 24 school leaders that includes Principals and HODs from 6 public secondary schools offering Grade 8 to 12.

3.5 Sample Procedure and Sample Size

The sample from the population was purposefully sampled based on seniority and expertise in leadership positions at the school, along with three years or more of experience as school principals, while their senior HODs were

included as part of the study. Therefore, only Principals who had served as top leaders for three or more years and senior HODs who deputized the principal were selected, making a total sample size of 12 participants. Participants' demographic information is as in table 1 below.

Table 1
Participants Details

Participant	Gender	Years of experience	Qualification
School A Principal	Male	7 years	B. Science Mathematics and Science
School A HOD	Female	13 years	Master's in educational leadership and policy
School B Principal	Female	10 years	Master's in educational leadership
School B HOD	Female	8 years	Master's in education
School C Principal	Male	9 years	B. Ed Honours Education
School C HOD	Male	8 years	B. ED Honours Education in Sciences
School D Principal	Male	15 years	B. Tech Educational leadership
School D HOD	Female	10 years	Master's in education
School E Principal	Male	5 years	B. Ed Honours History and Geography
School E HOD	Female	6 years	M. A. Education
School F Principal	Male	7 years	Master's degree in mathematics
School F HOD	Female	4 years	B. ED Honours Leadership and Policy

3.5 Data Collection

Data were collected by Joyce Masiye between June and August through semi-structured interviews and document review on one-to-one interviews for a period of 40 minutes per participant. The total number of interview questions was 26, and participants' responses led to reviewed documents that included departmental meeting minutes, continuous professional development reports, result analysis reports, and school policies for confirmation and clarity of participants' answers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with school principals and Heads of Departments at their convenient times. The interview guide was filled out by the researcher during each session. Extra field notes for response clarifications from interviews and document review were written down in a notebook throughout the interview process without omissions.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed thematically using cross-case analysis as recommended by Yin (2003). Firstly, data from both Principals and HODs was organized, transcribed, coded and initial themes were identified. Data patterns from both Principals and HODs were compared to identify connections across all schools. Findings from all participants and clarification notes from document reviews were compared and combined to form overall findings that answer the research question.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The researcher made a request for data collection from senior secondary schools to the regional director on the 24th of March 2025. Data was collected after receipt of permission letter dated 1 April 2025 with reference to 13/2/9/1. The researcher gave informed consent to participants. Participants' participation was voluntarily and their identities were kept anonymous and confidential; views and opinions were respected and interpreted without bias. Credibility was achieved through clarity on said statements. Same instrument was used across all schools.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

Theme 1: Variation of Leadership Styles and Shared Decision-Making

The findings reveal that school principals do not rely on a single leadership style but enact a contextually adaptive and integrative leadership repertoire. Majority of principals and HODs' leadership practices are characterized by the interweaving of transformational, instructional, distributed, and consultative leadership were more perceived by school B, C, D who highlighted the use of consultation from teachers and learners' representatives for shared decision making. One HOD explained:

*"For every decision making we make, it involves schoolteachers' input before finalizing a decision."
(HOD, School B, interview, 25 June 2025)*

Similarly, some schools exercise participatory or democratic leadership before taking decisions on matters related to teaching and learning. Another principal emphasized that teachers' ideas on how to support the curriculum are

incorporated in decision making for curriculum attainment issues and further mentioned that there is a forum for views for teachers every Thursdays. And School C Head of Department (*interview, 4 July 2025*) said that:

Teachers vote for items that need to be added to all votes of the school budget before it is finalized. Teachers' ideas on how to support curriculum are incorporated in decision-making for curriculum attainment issues.

Additionally, School C Principal further indicated that he introduced what he called 'principal education period' to engage with learners where learners air out concerns and suggestions about their education matters. Similarly, the principal of School F (*interview, 15 August 2025*) mentioned that:

Some management issues need input from the teachers. The management discusses issues related to the school operation but is not finalized, management sells the ideas to teachers who discuss the issue on the ground and vote, and majority vote is what is considered for final take.

On the other hand, selective issues of discussion with teachers were pinpointed by School A principal mentioning that: "The leadership of the school informs teachers on issues of management such as logistics or furniture to get the teachers' input before final decision is taken while other issues, teachers are just told for their information purposes only" (*Principal, School A, interview 20 June 2025*)

Additionally, school A prefers the use of 'one man voice' demonstrating a top-down leadership that is more autocratic or directive leadership style with little democratic leadership elements. School A, principal, (*interview, 20 June 2025*) elaborated that:

I don't like democracy. If everything is democratic, curls will be invited. I use one man voice in my leadership. Sometimes when situation is critical, I use a combination of both democratic and autocratic leadership.

Theme 2: Innovative school leadership structure

Another leadership style like distributive came apparent with some schools such as School D and F, who demonstrated leadership with more structured levels which the principal ensures that such structures are all active and functional. Both two schools have added what they call grade guardians (school D) or grade advisors (School F) between the HOD and Teacher leadership level. This addition is quite new in the school structure and is not applied or known by other schools. School C and D are more on systematic structures and distributed leadership while school E and F demonstrate strong moral and practical leadership through transparency and leading by example.

The principal from School D, (*interview and document review 15 July 2025*) mentioned that:

The school has strong structures where everyone has responsibility. I follow a layered leadership hierarchy in the school that includes HODs, grade guardian, class register teacher and learner representatives.

When the principal for school D, (*interview and document review, 15 July 2025*) was asked to clarify the type of work done by grade guardian, she explained that:

Learners do not meet the school leadership immediately upon misconduct, they are first sent to the grade guardian by teachers who sits and talks with the referred learner, upon understanding the learner problem, then he or she advises the learner or send a learner to school counselor for counselling or if found necessary send the learner to school HOD or Principal.

Moreover, similar structure was mentioned by the HOD from School F (*interview and document review, 15 August 2025*) that:

Our school has grade advisors who are part of the leadership structure. They advise learners on disciplinary matters. When a learner contravenes a school rule, such learner first must be attended by the grade advisor before receiving top leadership.

Transformation and distributive leadership style are more applied by School D, E and F which highlighted shared leadership responsibility among staff members and emphasized capacity building and staff empowerment. Both schools have strongly emphasized the practice of workload distribution and practice every morning staff meetings for progress review of daily activities to address areas that concern teachers before the beginning of the day routine. While school F demonstrates Situational leadership style mixed with democratic leadership by showing flexibility by adjusting leadership depending on the situation that arises or depending on the challenge on the ground. All schools have structured school leadership levels involving Head of Departments (HODs), subject, register teachers, class prefects and committees such as school boards that involve school parents in school leadership (school A, B, C, E and F). School D has a hierarchy that involves grade guardians between HODs and class register teachers. Although leadership support structures are well established, school F is unique in that some structure compositions are different from that of all schools. School F principal (*interview and document review, 15 August 2025*) said:

This school is unique; the school board comprises of no school parents but regional directors and regional school counsellors across the country. We communicate with directorates not with parents. We are not financed like other schools; our budget is sent directly to the Ministry of Finance and funds are directly

deposited in school and learners' accounts. Everything and everyone here is cared for by the government, including transport of all learners to and from their destinations at the end and beginning of the term.

Theme 3: Motivation and inspiration

The second theme that came apparent in the interview data was motivation and inspiration as part of the leadership strategies that were exercised by all schools at local and regional level through collaboration, recognition, praise and role modelling during regular meetings, rewards and team building but differ in leadership practices. Peer motivation and interpersonal growth is emphasized by school A and B, while majority of schools stated that teachers and learners are motivated and inspired informally by praise, thank you gestures and encouragement from experienced teachers and invited speakers. Formally, annual prize giving ceremonies are done to recognize top achievers by certification at school, circuit, regional and national level. School D and F further highlighted that they lead by example and motivate teachers to willingly achieve their goals.

School F Principal (*interview and document review, 15 August 2025*) said:

I put everything into practice that I want the teachers to do. I am currently teaching a science subject of the highest grade, and I also give extra classes and teach during weekends. Basically, I love to lead by example.

The HOD for school F, added that teachers and learners are highly inspired and motivated to the extent that teachers continue extra classes during afternoon and weekends and learners request extra classes in some subjects. Moreover, School B leaders combine positive reinforcement with supportive supervision for guiding struggling teachers by creating a balanced motivation strategy, fostering growth where achievement and improvement are equally valued. School C responded in addition to that:

"I am open to teachers' needs and give support for teachers to feel ownership of school goals and motivate the culture of professional trust and respect that enhance motivation" (School C, Principal, interview, 4 July 2025)

During the interviews, a different motivation strategy was also highlighted from School A that:

"I use a strength-based collaborative motivation model in which the low achieving teachers are paired and strengthened by top achievers in areas of weaknesses" (Principal, School A, interview, 20 June 2025).

In addition, the HOD (school A), added that by emphasizing teachers' individual strength, it encourages peer learning and mentorship where capable teachers help colleagues to improve their weak areas. The principal for School A further elaborated that even though prize giving is done at regional and national level, he relies on informal motivation and does not prefer awarding top performing teachers and learners due to lack of fairness.

School B Principal, (*interview and document review, 25 June 2025*) said that:

Teachers are motivated informally by regular motivation, praising every good thing a teacher or a learner does, supporting performance through provision of guidance to teachers and learners where performance is weak. I encourage teachers to engage in collaborations with experienced teachers or experts from the directorate advisory office. Although the school formally organizes the prize giving ceremony at school level, teachers and learners also participate in annual prize giving at regional and national level.

In addition, School E HOD (*interview and document review, 15 August 2025*) also indicated that:

We have an award system to motivate teachers, learners and parents. During the award ceremony at school level, we appreciate top achievers by awarding certificates based on their academic achievement and behavior. Most of our annual top achievers are also recognized at regional and national level.

Theme 4: Communication and shared vision

All schools align vision with targets, policies and curriculum implementation. In response to the question of how principals communicate school vision, all principals communicate the school vision through staff and parent meetings as well during general assemblies with the learners. School A and E responded that schools have direct communication through meetings and face to face with learners, parents and use media such as radio announcements when communicating to the school community.

School E, Principal (*interview and document review, 12 August 2025*) stated that:

The class teachers gather cell-phone numbers for parents per grade and create WhatsApp groups for each class group in the school where communications are done through the register teachers from the principal's office to learners and parents.

The HOD for school E (*interview and document review, 12 August 2025*) further explained that when there is a call for parent meeting, the school leadership uses various communication channels making sure that invitation reaches every parent and guardian of the learners. She further elaborated that:

The school has learners from diverse economic backgrounds. Not every parent has a smart phone to follow communication on WhatsApp, that is why we normally use letters also and verbally tell the learners to invite their parents and guardians to the meeting.



Similarly, School B, C, D and F mentioned that they use performance-based communication that integrates the use of goal setting which is communicated via digital platforms such as email, WhatsApp groups of parents and teachers, and communication of a vision is repeatedly communicated during learner assemblies and award ceremonies. School B and D additionally, utilized formal mechanisms such as face-to-face and parents meeting as important platforms to communicate the vision of the school. School C, D and F emphasize alignment of vision with curriculum design with focus on subject specialization which allows vision communication to strongly align with teachers' roles.

Table 2
Cross-case analysis across the six schools (School A, B, C, D, E, F)

Theme / School	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F
Theme 1: Variation of Leadership Styles and Shared Decision-Making	- Top-down/autocratic leadership; "one man voice"	- Consultative, participatory leadership	- Consultative and democratic leadership	- Transformational, distributive, consultative	- Distributed leadership with strong moral and practical leadership	- Situational and democratic leadership
	- Selective teacher input only on certain management issues	- Teachers and learners' reps involved in decision-making	- Teachers vote on school budget items	- Shared leadership	- Transparency and leading by example emphasized	- Management sells ideas to teachers for voting
	- Limited democratic elements	- Emphasis on shared decision-making and consultation	- 'Principal education period' engages learners directly	- Strong leadership hierarchy with multiple leadership layers		- Unique governance (no parents on boards, direct gov't funding)
	- Prefers directive leadership		- Incorporates teachers' ideas on curriculum support			
Theme 2: Innovative School Leadership Structure	- Traditional leadership structure (HODs, subject teachers, prefects)	- Traditional structure with HODs, committees, learner reps	- Systematic and distributed leadership	- Layered hierarchical structures with added "grade guardians"	- Distributed leadership with strong focus on transparency	- Similar to School D with "grade advisors"
			- Structured leadership levels as above	- Grade guardians act as intermediaries before escalating learner issues	- Traditional leadership hierarchy + active parental involvement	- Unique board structure (regional directors & counsellors instead of parents)
						- Direct funding from Ministry of Finance
Theme 3: Motivation and Inspiration	- Strength-based collaborative motivation	- Combination of informal praise, support and formal prize giving at multiple levels	- Supportive culture fostering ownership and professional trust	- Leading by example and distributed leadership foster motivation	- Formal award system recognizing academic and behavioural achievements-Recognition at school, regional, and national levels	- Leading by example (principal teaches and gives extra classes)
	- Peer mentoring (high achievers support low achievers) Informal motivation	- Emphasis on collaboration and supportive supervision for	- Formal and informal motivation including recognition	- Morning meetings for workload review and encouragement		- Teachers and learners motivated to do extra work



	preferred over formal awards (due to fairness concerns)	underperformers				
						- Strong role modelling emphasized
Theme 4: Communication and Shared Vision	- Face-to-face communication	Multi-channel communication including WhatsApp, email, face-to-face meetings	- Similar to School B with digital platforms and assemblies	- Similar to School B and C	- Multi-channel communication: WhatsApp groups, letters, verbal messages	- Similar to Schools B, C, D- Repeated communication through digital and formal platforms
	- Parent and learner meetings	- Repeated communication during assemblies and school events	- Emphasis on alignment with curriculum	- Face-to-face and parental meeting	- Consider socio-economic diversity of learners' families	- Strong alignment of vision with subject specialization
	- Use of radio announcements			- Strong alignment of vision and curriculum		

Cross-Case interpretation

School B, C, D and E generally show adaptive, distributed, consultative, and transformational leadership styles with stakeholder engagement. Whereas school A prefers more autocratic leadership with limited democratic style. Moreover, Schools D and F are unique in adding intermediate level of leadership role in the school leadership structure (Grade guardian/ Grade advisor). School F has a specialized governance structure operating directly under government bodies rather than parental involvement. All schools use multiple strategies. However, School A relies mostly on peer mentoring and informal motivation, while others combine formal recognition ceremonies with informal praise and leading by example. Schools communicate using a variety of strategies, School B, C, D, E and F actively use digital platforms such as WhatsApp and emails alongside meetings. While school A uses more traditional face to face and radio communication

4.2 Discussion

Findings of this study are discussed under the four themes below.

4.2.1 Variation of Leadership Styles and Shared Decision-Making

Using Yin’s (2018) framework, findings indicate that school principals adopt contextually adaptive and integrative leadership styles rather than a single fixed style. Schools B, C, D, E and F combined consultative, distributed, instructional, and transformational approaches, engaging teachers in decision-making and curriculum support, consistent with distributed leadership principles (Harris, 2013; Spillane, 2006). This supports Harianto et al. (2025) who found that instructional leadership practices which is influenced by data driven decisions is important for improving teaching quality and student outcomes.

Structured forums, voting mechanisms, and teacher meetings promoted shared responsibility and professional trust, aligning with transformational leadership theory emphasizing empowerment and collective commitment (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). In contrast, School A had a predominantly autocratic character along with limited consultation, like authoritarian leadership styles that seek to impose control and efficiency (Bush, 2011). Although such approaches promote quick decision-making, they can limit both teacher empowerment and collective responsibility (Day et al., 2016).

4.2.2 School Leadership Innovation

Creative structures of leadership at school D and F, e.g. grade guardians/ advisors, exemplify formal distributed leadership that can increase the level of learner support, discipline management and strategic instruction (Harris, 2013; Spillane, 2006), and Ikram et al. (2020) who emphasize that transformational and instructional leadership creates innovative environment conducive for improved performance. Transformational and moral leadership methods

(transparency, role modelling, capacity building and distribution of the workload) support professional trust and collective efficacy (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). However, situational leadership was exercised unequally and formal learner involvement in decision-making was minimal, suggesting some degree of democratic leadership and the opportunity to embrace learner voice to include the whole school governance (Harris & Jones, 2017; Fielding, 2011). The cross-case synthesis confirmed that effective leadership is both hybrid and context-responsive, including consultation, shared responsibility, and structured support systems.

4.2.3 Motivation and Inspiration

An important leadership strategy (and I agree motivation was found to be the key) was motivation to which schools implemented by the Principal(s) and HOD(s), through recognition, collaboration, praise, awards and team formation as well as role modelling which relates with the transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). As with the value of social support and peer interventions of non-formal means (verbal encouragement combined with award ceremonies), informal support and peer praise provided by teachers in schools played a central role in promoting the maintenance of intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation (Day et al., 2016). Peer mentorship and team arrangements were important to develop and ensure professional development and shared responsibility, especially in school A, B and F.

Principals' demonstrable effort at direct instruction, including teaching extra classes (eg, F and E), was indicative of idealised influence, positively contributing to the motivation of teachers and students (Hallinger, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008). Yet there were gaps in the modelling of instructional roles and formal mentoring that led to gaps in the depth of inspirational leadership. However, relational leadership, ethical behaviour, professional trust and maintaining professionalism are still key features to sustaining motivation and commitment and trustworthiness (Bryk et al., 2010). The results underscore the importance of such embedded institutionalised mentorship to enhance capacity development and influence as a leader.

4.2.4 Communication and Shared Vision

Principals consistently aligned vision with curriculum, targets, and policies, communicating through staff meetings, parents' meetings, assemblies, and digital platforms (Bush, 2011; Hallinger, 2011; Yin, 2003). Multi-channel communication, adapted to socio-economic realities (face-to-face, letters, WhatsApp), reflected context-sensitive leadership (Day et al., 2016). Performance-oriented communication integrated goal setting, curriculum alignment, and instructional leadership. Linking vision to teachers' roles and professional accountability (Hallinger, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008). Distributed communication structures, such as teacher-mediated parent engagement, extended leadership influence, reinforced relational trust, and enhanced parental involvement, supporting improved learner outcomes (Bryk et al., 2010; Harris, 2013; Spillane, 2006). Although digital platforms were not consistently effective, adaptive face-to face and paper-based methods ensured inclusivity. The study revealed that communication practices integrated instructional, distributed, and context-responsive leadership, embedding vision, clarity of purpose, and alignment between leadership strategy and practice

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study revealed that instructional, transformational, distributive and adaptive leadership styles are predominantly employed by secondary school principals thereby creating conditions conducive to sustained improvements in learners' pass rates. The innovation of adding grade guardians/advisors by some schools is critical for reducing failure rates through learner moral support, counselling, and improving overall learners' academic performance. Prioritizing strong leadership practices such as monitoring classroom instruction, enforcing discipline policies, monitoring teachers' work, regular data-informed decisions, and consistent engagement in instructional leadership reinforce a culture of academic seriousness that positively influences increased learners' performance.

Structured mentorship and professional development systems to strengthen teacher capacity enhance sustainable improvements in learners' pass rates. Promotion of clear communication of academic vision and performance targets is essential for improving learner attendance, discipline, and examination performance. Although transformational, instructional and distributed leadership dominate, situational flexibility and learner participation remain underdeveloped. Principals who integrate instructional, transformation, distributed and who change leadership depending on the situation reported improved accountability, motivation, and improved pass rate.

5.2 Recommendation

The study recommends that schools institutionalize hybrid, content-responsive leadership that integrates distributed, instructional, and transformational practices while reducing over-reliance on autocratic approaches. Schools should formalize distributed leadership structures, strengthen mentorship and capacity building systems, and embed structured consultation processes that enhance teacher empowerment and shared accountability. Additionally, integrating learner voice into governance and sustaining inclusive, multi-channel communication will strengthen professional trust, collective efficacy, and ultimately improve learner performance.

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