



Investigating Leadership Styles in Township Public Primary Schools: A Case of Two Principals in Gauteng Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Most research studies on school leadership rely much on pre-established leadership theoretical frameworks. There was a need for a research study that investigates leadership as it evolved naturally within a particular setting of every school. The purpose of this study was to investigate how principals lead daily. Two principals from township public primary schools in Gauteng were observed and interviewed. It was found that principals do not rely on a single leadership style but rather adopt multiple styles that evolve according to their context and beliefs. These findings confirm that leadership in Gauteng township primary public schools is multi-dimensional, context-driven, and deeply influenced by each principal's philosophy about human potential and professional responsibility. Both cases highlight that effective leadership is not rigid but adaptive, blending elements of theory with the lived realities of schools. However, because of its limitation to only two principals, the study cannot be generalized to other public schools, and there is a need for a much wider and deeper research study on principals' leadership style occurring naturally.

Keywords: Leadership Styles, Township Schools, Primary schools, Principals

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context

Many scholars have emphasized how important school leadership is in fostering an environment that supports successful teaching and learning. According to Leithwood et al. (2006), school leadership ranks second only to classroom instruction in influencing learners' achievement. Principals are central figures in directing the strategic vision of a school, managing its resources, and setting the tone for collaboration and accountability among teachers (Bush, 2007).

The need for effective leadership is even more pronounced in township public schools. These schools often face several challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Within such settings, school principals are expected to not only manage daily operations but at the same time they must also motivate staff, involve parents and address socioeconomic issues that affect learning (Naicker, 2011). The ability of a principal to lead with clarity and purpose is often a determining factor in whether a school overcomes its difficulties or continues to struggle.

Even though leadership is important in public schools, there is still limited knowledge about the most common leadership style employed by principals in township primary schools. Despite the existence of several leadership theories, such as instructional, transformational and transactional styles, little research has been done on how these styles are implemented in township primary public schools (Grant, 2006). This knowledge gap makes it difficult to understand how leadership affects school outcome and prevents the development of tailored leadership training for principals working in complex, real-world school environments.

1.2. Background

There has been considerable research on school leadership, particularly focusing on how leadership styles



affect school performance, teacher motivation, and learner outcomes. For example, Bush and Glover (2003) investigated the effects of instructional and transformational leadership on teaching and learning in township schools. Their research demonstrated how transformational leadership can effectively increase teacher dedication and enhance school culture. Similarly, Msila (2010) examined the role of distributed leadership in previously underprivileged schools and made the case that shared leadership improves employee morale and boosts school efficacy. An additional illustration was provided by Moloi, Gravett, and Petersen (2009), who investigated the instructional leadership of school principals and discovered that effective instructional leadership enhances the quality of instruction and learning in the classroom.

Although these studies offer insightful information about the connection between leadership style and school achievement, they frequently rely too much on pre-established theoretical frameworks. When studying leadership, most researchers start with an established model, such as transformational, transactional, or instructional leadership, and then use these frameworks to analyse the actions of principals. While this helps in comparing findings across contexts, it also runs the risk of oversimplifying the complexity and uniqueness of leadership as it occurs in real-life school settings (Bush & Glover, 2014). To put it in another way, these studies frequently impose a framework on leadership practices that might not accurately represent principals' real-world experiences, particularly in the dynamic, resource-constrained circumstances of many township primary public schools in Gauteng.

A different strategy was required, one that did not start with predetermined leadership styles but instead aimed to comprehend leadership as it evolved naturally within the setting of every school. This involved researching how principals lead daily, and how they handle the unique difficulties of their environments. An approach like this enabled context-specific insights to emerge and uncovered situational or hybrid leadership practices that did not neatly fit into pre-existing theoretical categories (Leithwood et al., 2020).

1.3. Problem

Currently, there are no studies that describe the leadership style of school principals as it naturally develops in their daily work in Gauteng public primary schools without being forced into a predetermined category. What is missing is an approach that pays attention to principals, observe their actions, and evaluates their leadership styles as they are, in the raw, authentic form as shaped by institutional realities, community needs, experience, and context. This kind of approach is essential for creating a solid understanding of leadership that is relevant and sensitive to the specific challenges faced by public school principals.

1.4. Purpose

The purpose of this research study was therefore to investigate the leadership styles of two Gauteng township public primary school principals without using any pre-existing leadership types. It aimed to understand how these principals perceived their positions, handled difficulties, engaged with staff and learners, and what leadership styles naturally arose from their work. By doing so, the study provided a more natural and contextualized view of school leadership, which could guide training, policy, and support systems for principals in similar environments.

1.5. Aim

The aim of the study was to investigate and understand the leadership styles of two public school principals as they occurred naturally in their day-to-day activities, free from the limitations of established leadership frameworks or models. In contrast to previous research, which frequently employed well-known leadership theories like transformational, instructional, or transactional leadership as lenses, this study recorded and analysed leadership as it was experienced, lived, and expressed in the real environments of public schools (Bush & Glover, 2014). The research approached the investigation with an open mind, allowing the leadership style of each principal to emerge naturally through their actions, interactions, and reflections.

By concentrating on principals in two different public schools, the study sought to understand how these leaders handled the day-to-day challenges of school leadership, navigated their roles, made decisions, and



interacted with their staff and learners. The aim was not to fit leadership styles into a theoretical framework, but to allow them to develop inductively from the principals' own stories, observed practices, and contextual realities. This provided a more comprehensive and realistic view of school leadership, capturing the fluid, situation-specific, and frequently mixed character of leadership practice in public education (Spillane et al., 2004).

The study also aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge on educational leadership by providing an alternative method that is not limited to theory-driven assumptions but was guided by actual leadership behaviours, values, and relationships as observed in practice. Additionally, the knowledge gathered from this study could contribute to the establishment of leadership training programs, legislative efforts, and support networks that are better suited to the difficulties and practical realities encountered by public school principals (Harris, 2004).

1.6. Questions

The study attempted to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the main leadership styles used by the two principals in the [deleted for anonymity] schools?
- 2) How do the two principals implement their leadership style in the daily management of the [deleted for anonymity] school?
- 3) Why do the two principals lead the way they do in their respective schools?

Before conducting the study, an attempt was made to find answers to these questions from literature.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

Different leadership theories and models have been created and implemented in educational settings over the years. Transformational, transactional, and instructional leadership are some of the most well-known leadership styles that have been covered in the literature. These styles provide different perspectives on how principals lead schools and influence teaching and learning. Both theoretical and empirical literature on these leadership styles were reviewed.

2.2. Theoretical Literature

2.2.1 Transformational leadership

James MacGregor Burns originally proposed the idea of transformational leadership in 1978 when he made a comparison between transactional and transformational leadership styles. According to Burns (1978), transforming leadership is a process whereby leaders and followers support one another in reaching a higher moral and motivational level. Burns believed that great leaders significantly change the lives of individuals and organizations. They achieve this by establishing ambitious objectives and expressing an inspiring vision.

Bernard Bass (1985) later developed it by identifying specific behaviours and elements of transformational leadership. Bass aimed to clarify the psychological effects of transformational leaders on followers' motivation and achievement. He was also the first to refer to this type of leadership style as transformational rather than transforming in his 1985 book, *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations* (Bass, 1985).

The goal of transformational leadership is to inspire, motivate, and intellectually challenge followers to put the success of the organization or a common vision ahead of their own interests. Visionary thinking, role modelling, intellectual stimulation, and personalized attention are its defining characteristics (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational principals are frequently regarded as inspirational and visionary leaders in educational settings who encourage a culture of dedication, creativity, and cooperation among staff members and teachers.



According to Leithwood and Jantzi (2000), this leadership approach seeks to change the organization and its members to improve morale, motivation, and performance.

In the transformational leadership style, leaders gain the respect and trust of their followers by setting an example and acting as role models. These leaders inspire passion and dedication by articulating a compelling vision. They inspire followers to be innovative, creative, and critical thinkers. Lastly, they also pay attention to each followers' needs for growth and provide coaching or mentoring (Bass, 1985).

2.2.2. Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is a leadership style where the principal (or school leader) prioritises improving teaching and learning within the school. Instructional leaders are deeply involved in curriculum development, teacher support, learner achievement, classroom practices, and the academic progress of the school. According to Smith & Andrews (1989), instructional leadership refers to the activities a principal performs or assigns to others to foster improvements in learners' learning. Unlike more administrative positions, instructional leaders spend a large amount of time in classrooms, mentoring teachers, evaluating lesson plans, and using data to improve learners' achievement.

The concept of instructional leadership became prominent in the 1980s, mainly through the work of Ronald Edmonds and later scholars like Hallinger and Murphy (1985). Ronald Edmonds (1979) was one of the first proponents of effective school research, which focused on the principal's role in improving learners' outcomes. In 1985, Hallinger and Murphy created a three-dimensional model of instructional leadership that encompasses establishing the school's mission, overseeing the curriculum, and cultivating a supportive learning environment (Hallinger, 2005). Instructional leaders also observe classrooms, give feedback, support professional development, and prioritize student learning outcomes.

2.2.3. Transactional Leadership

According to Burns (1978), transactional leadership is based on the exchange relationship between leaders and followers. This leadership style strongly emphasizes defined roles, organised tasks, and the use of rewards and punishments to control performance or accomplish specific objectives. While non-compliance may result in disciplinary action, the leader makes expectations clear and rewards adherence to them. In its most basic form, transactional leadership is a social exchange in which both the leader and the follower both benefit (Bass, 1985).

James MacGregor Burns initially proposed the idea of transactional leadership in 1978, setting it apart from transformational leadership. The concept was later expanded by Bass (1985), who clarified that transactional leaders maintain the status quo by establishing clear expectations and rewarding compliance. Transactional leaders may prioritise maintaining discipline, enforcing regulations, and making sure teachers fulfil performance requirements in educational contexts. This approach works well for schools that need structure and discipline. When it comes to schools, this means that a principal expects teachers to do specific tasks (such as teaching the curriculum, attending meetings, and submitting reports on time) in exchange for job security, performance bonuses, or promotions.

2.3. Empirical Literature

Empirical studies play a crucial role in understanding how different leadership styles impact the functioning of public schools. The study by Branden Arendse (2022) identified the problem as low learner academic performance despite educational reforms in [deleted for anonymity] to address historical inequalities. The poor results are partly attributed to principals' leadership practices. However, there was a lack of empirical evidence on how specific leadership styles influence academic outcomes in the [deleted for anonymity] context. This study responds to that gap by investigating the leadership styles of principals in relation to learner performance. The study found that principals do not follow one fixed leadership style but employ a combination of styles based on context and needs. Transformational leadership was most common, especially



in building relationships and vision. Instructional leadership was used to manage teaching and learning. Some elements of transactional and participative styles were present to ensure order and collaboration.

The study by Vivian Edrin (2022) identified the problem as the lack of knowledge and documentation about how leadership styles contribute to the functionality of primary schools that perform well even though they are in the socio economically disadvantaged communities. The study found that all four schools used multiple leadership styles: democratic/participative, transformational, transactional, autocratic, and laissez-faire. Functional leadership was found in three out of four schools; effective leaders did not rely on one fixed style but adapted their approach based on the situation, team, and challenges; and school leaders defined functional leadership as leadership that improves.

The third study by Shava G.N and Heystek (2021) identified the problem as under exploration of leadership roles of principals particularly how they integrate various leadership styles to promote teaching and learning in [deleted for anonymity] school contexts. It aimed to investigate how instructional and transformational leadership models, when integrated, can support sustainability. The study found that principals did not distinguish sharply between instructional and transformational leadership but applied both concurrently to improve teaching and learning.

Even though empirical studies reviewed consistently found principals do not follow one leadership style but uses a variety depending on the situation at that time, there was no study found from literature that found the same thing in [deleted for anonymity] public primary schools. This is the gap that the study reported here attempted to close.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

This study was conducted within the contextual qualitative approach and not embedded in any one leadership theoretical framework, even though it did take cognisance of established leadership theories such as transformational, instructional, and transactional leadership theories, which have been widely used to analyse and classify school leadership practices. An attempt was made not to be influenced by these theories in a way that limited or predetermined the interpretation of the principals' leadership behaviours (Bush, 2007). Rather than imposing any fixed theoretical lens on the data, the study explored and documented how leadership styles manifested as they were practised and experienced in the everyday realities of two Gauteng township public primary schools' principals.

In this way, this study provided a place for context-specific interpretations of leadership that were not limited to theoretical constructions but rather informed by the reality of public-school life. The leadership styles identified were compared to the established theories only after being thoroughly described in their original observed form.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Paradigm

The research employed an interpretivist paradigm, a research paradigm that describes a worldview or a set of beliefs and ideas about how knowledge is constructed and understood. The interpretivist paradigm is based on the idea that people individually interpret their experiences, and that reality is socially constructed (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm was selected because it enabled the researcher to capture the two principals' real experiences as they naturally occur in their workplaces. Personal values, beliefs, and relationships shape leadership styles, which are complex and context dependent. Through this paradigm, the researchers could comprehend leadership as a dynamic practice influenced by the school culture, community, and daily interactions rather than as a fixed model. The study's interpretivist lens sought to offer profound, significant insights into how each principal viewed, practiced, and considered their leadership style in the context of public education (Creswell & Poth, 2018).



3.2. Research Methodology

This study employed a multiple case study research methodology. According to Yin (2018), a case study is an empirical investigation that looks at a current phenomenon in its actual setting, particularly when it is difficult to distinguish between the two. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) describe a case study as an approach in which a researcher examines a real-life, bounded system (a case) across time through detailed, in-depth data gathering including a range of information sources, such as observations, interviews, and documents.

The case study approach was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive and in-depth investigation of leadership styles of principals in the real-world setting of public schools. Principals' leadership styles are impacted by a variety of complex, context-specific factors, including staff dynamics, school culture, learners need, and community involvement. Each principal constituted a case, representing a bounded system in their respective public school, which allowed the researcher to examine leadership styles in a real-life context. By focusing on two principals who were part of the study, the study explored the complexities of leadership practices in depth, including how factors such as school culture, staff dynamics, learners' needs, and community involvement influenced their decision-making and leadership behaviours. For each case, a thick description was produced.

3.3. Research Methods

The primary research methods were semi-structured interviews and participatory observations (see Appendix A and B). By using these qualitative methods, the researchers obtained detailed first-hand accounts of participants' experiences and behaviours in their natural settings, which made them appropriate for investigating leadership styles (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, using a variety of techniques allowed for data corroboration, which increased the findings' trustworthiness.

3.4. Research Participants

The study involved two principals drawn from two public primary schools. The selection of these participants was purposive, based on their direct involvement in or experience with school leadership practices.

The decision to focus on two principals also enabled an intensive examination of each case while retaining a comparative dimension. The two cases were not intended to provide a statistically representative account of leadership styles across Gauteng township public primary schools. Instead, the study sought to generate context specific insights into the leadership practices of the selected principals. The analytical value of the comparison therefore rests on the depth of the evidence collected the transparency of the case-selection process and the systematic examination of similarities and differences between the two cases.

The study's contribution lies in illuminating leadership styles within two Gauteng township public primary-school contexts and in identifying questions, patterns or interpretations that may inform further research on school leadership. The findings should consequently be interpreted in relation to the selected cases and the evidence generated, rather than generalised to all primary school principals in Gauteng. The use of two cases is thus justified by the study's exploratory and interpretive purpose, subject to the adequacy of the data collected and the coherence between the research question, case selection and analytical approach.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data was analysed inductively searching for answers to the research questions. Each of the research questions was responded to from the data of interviews and observations. The research data consisted of verbatim transcripts from semi-structured interviews with participants and detailed field notes from observations. By combining these two qualitative data sources, the researchers gained a deep, multi-dimensional understanding of how school leaders lead their schools daily.

The data were analysed thematically following the phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006): becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming



themes, and writing up. Initial coding was guided by categories such as transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and instructional leadership styles. Researchers remained open to new codes that could emerge from the data. Democratic, laissez-faire, coaching, servant, visionary, pacesetter, and situational leadership styles emerged from the data analysis. Themes were then organized according to the three research questions. Verbatim quotes were used so that the voices of principals generated the findings, while observation notes were used to validate or contextually expand the interview narratives.

3.6. Measures of Truthfulness

The study adopted the truthfulness criteria of Guba and Lincoln (1989, 2018) of confirmability, transferability, credibility, and dependability. For credibility, which is the confidence in the "truth" of the findings, reflects how well interpretations align with participants' experiences. Confidence in the 'truth' of the findings was enhanced through prolonged engagement at each school, persistent observation of daily routines, and corroboration of interviews and observations data. Member checking was conducted by returning unedited transcripts and summaries of key interview points to the participants for verification, ensuring that the interpretations accurately reflected their actual experiences and opinions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For transferability, which is the degree to which findings can be applied to other contexts, the researchers depended on thick descriptive data enabling readers' judgment. To enable readers to judge how the findings might apply to other settings, the researchers provided a detailed 'thick description' of the school contexts, participant demographics, and administrative or instructional procedures (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposive sampling ensured that the selected schools were typical of successful, resilient public schools in similar socioeconomic environments.

For dependability, which is the consistency of the research process, ensuring findings would be repeatable by another researcher in the same context, the researchers maintained a detailed audit trail documenting every methodological decision from design to analysis, engaged in peer debriefing with each other, and kept a step-by-step reflexive journal (Shenton, 2004). Unedited transcripts were kept available for academic audit.

And for confirmability, which refers to neutrality of findings, ensuring they emerge from the data rather than researcher biases or preferences, the researchers used a journal to track personal assumptions, engaged in a raw-data-to-interpretation audit, and utilized cross-source triangulation to verify that emergent themes arose strictly from the principals' data rather than researchers' bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Introduction

In the semi-structured interview, principals were asked, *"can you describe your leadership style and how it reflects in your daily practices?"* This question aimed to explore how principals perceive their own leadership style and how it influences their daily decision-making and interactions. The principals identified specific leadership styles they believed they were using, however during the observations, it was noticed that both principals actually employed a combination of multiple leadership styles in leading their schools.

4.2. Principal A

In school A, in the answering the question, the principal said:

"I would say, I am using the democratic way of leading, whereby the subordinates are free to approach me if ever there is something that they need or if they have a concern. I also listen to their ideas; I am not that kind of a leader who says I am the one who is in charge and my word is final. So, we work as a group with the subordinates for the good of the institution."

Even though principal in school A identified his leadership style as solely democratic, observations indicated that he employs a variety of leadership styles within the school context. These leadership styles included



democratic (participative) leadership, transactional leadership, laissez-faire leadership, and coaching leadership styles.

4.2.1. Democratic (participative) leadership style

This is a type of a leadership style whereby the leader actively involves team members in decision-making. This leader encourages discussion, collaboration, open communication, inclusion and values the inputs, opinions and ideas of others before making final decisions (Northouse, 2022). He was observed during staff meetings and noted that he actively incorporates teachers' suggestions into the decision-making process. His decisions are not final without consultation, as he values the input of other staff members before reaching a conclusion. He explained:

I make decisions with the teachers, mostly the deputy principal, HODs [Head of Department], and senior staff, asking them if they agree or disagree with whatever is discussed, and from there we implement what has been agreed upon.

Prior to presenting ideas to the broader teaching staff, he first discusses them with the deputy principal, heads of departments, and senior teachers to ensure their perspectives are considered.

4.2.2. Transactional leadership style

This is a leadership style based on a system of rewards and punishments to manage and motivate followers, as discussed above. When principal in school A was asked “*what strategies do you use to motivate both staff and the learners?*” His response was:

To motivate learners, we do offer awards to the top performing learners academically, and also to those who are excelling in sports, even to those who are well behaved. We do have a day whereby we issue certificates to those learners for the rest of the learners to copy the behaviour of doing well. We do this so that the rest of the learners can also work hard since they now know that when they work hard and behave there is a reward.

For teachers, we have awards for teachers in terms of monetary awards, whereby those teachers who are going an extra mile, at the end of year, we give them extra money, just to thank them for their hard work and commitment. Only those who are excelling get that certain amount of money in an envelope. We do this so that the rest of the teachers who did not get the money will be motivated to also pull up their socks and go an extra mile too

Based on the principal's words, he demonstrated characteristics of a transactional leader by using rewards to motivate both learners and teachers. He provides certificates and recognition for students who perform well academically, excel in sports, or display good behaviour, and offers monetary awards to teachers who go the extra mile. These incentives are contingent on performance and effort, aiming to encourage others to emulate such behaviour. His approach focuses on maintaining standards and motivating compliance through tangible rewards, which is a key feature of transactional leadership.

4.2.3. Laissez-faire leadership style

This is a type of a leadership style whereby the leader takes a hands-off approach, giving team members freedom to make decisions and manage their work independently. This is a hands-off, high-trust style in which the leader delegates authority and decision-making to capable team members, provides resources and broad goals, trust in team and intervenes minimally (Sharma & Singh, 2013). It was observed that the principal gives teachers a lot of autonomy to manage their classes and projects independently, reflecting a laissez-faire leadership style when it comes to teaching and learning. He believes that teachers perform best without constant supervision. For example, teachers are allowed to organise classroom activities, plan lessons, and manage group projects on their own. However, he acknowledged that this approach can sometimes present challenges, as some teachers may become complacent or neglect certain responsibilities. For example,



“teachers tend to not do their duties and just sit back or pretend they have forgotten their duties, such as monitoring learners during break time” he, said. While he occasionally needs to remind them, most of the time he allows teachers to take responsibility, trusting that they understand their roles and will carry out their tasks effectively.

4.2.4. Coaching leadership style

This is a leadership style where the leader focuses on developing the skills, confidence, and performance of individuals or teams. The leader acts like a mentor or coach, guiding, supporting, and providing constructive feedback so that people can reach their full potential both personally and professionally. The leader focuses on the personal and professional growth of team members, guiding and mentoring them for long-term success rather than just achieving immediate results (Goleman, 2000).

The principal demonstrated characteristics of a coaching leadership style, which focuses on developing the skills, confidence, and performance of individuals. During observation, it was noted that he supports both teachers and learners by providing guidance, stepping in to teach classes when a teacher has an emergency, and offering mental and professional support. He explained:

I also offer mental support if a particular teacher is facing personal or professional challenges, I try to come up with solutions to help them cope, because stress can affect their performance. If the teacher is stressed it also affects the results as the person might not perform their duties diligently.

4.3. Principal B

Principal in school B was also asked “can you describe your leadership style and how it reflects in your daily practices?”

He replied:

I would describe my leadership style as a transformational leadership because I believe in inspiring others so that they can be motivated and at the same time be able to carry the vision of the school. I believe that if you inspire people and empower them, they are in a position to even foster change in an environment. Instead of telling them what to do, inspire them by transforming them so they believe in what they have to do.

Even though principal in school B identified his leadership style as solely transformational, observations indicated that he employs a variety of leadership styles within the school context. These leadership styles included transformational, democratic, servant, visionary, transactional, pacesetting, and situational styles.

4.3.1. Transformational leadership style

The principal demonstrated transformational leadership by inspiring, motivating, and empowering both teachers and learners to achieve their full potential and take ownership of school initiatives. During meetings, it was observed that he actively engages teachers by asking about their progress with the syllabus, the challenges they are encountering, and how they plan to address these challenges. Each teacher is given the opportunity to speak and propose solutions, fostering a sense of responsibility, collaboration, and innovative problem-solving.

He also introduces new teaching strategies aimed at improving learner outcomes and encourages staff to implement these strategies confidently, which promotes professional growth and ownership of change. In addition, the principal motivates the use of technology throughout the school. For example, facilitating communication with parents via emails and providing training to teachers to enhance learner engagement and achievement. His approach reflects transformational leadership, as he inspires staff, promotes continuous improvement, and empowers teachers to embrace change, while also attending to their personal and professional development.



4.3.2. Democratic (participative) leadership style

The principal's leadership style can also be described as democratic because he actively involves teachers, the school management team (SMT), and even learners in decision-making processes. Instead of making unilateral decisions, he values collaboration, consultation, and open communication, which are key features of democratic leadership. For example, when asked how he makes important decisions, he explained that most of his choices are based on consultations with the SMT and teachers, particularly when the matter involves teaching and learning. This demonstrates that he does not view leadership as a one-man role but rather as a shared responsibility, where different stakeholders contribute ideas and solutions. Even in his absence, he trusts the heads of departments to ensure that learning continues effectively, which highlights his trust in delegating responsibilities and recognizing the input of others. By doing this, he empowers his team members to take ownership of the school's progress, reinforcing the democratic value of inclusion and participation.

In addition, his approach during meetings provides clear evidence of a participative leadership style. For instance, when staff raised concerns about a misbehaving Grade 12 learner, the principal did not impose his own solution but allowed an open discussion where everyone could share their perspectives. He then addressed the issue collectively by involving the learner directly, showing that he values transparency and the voices of both staff and students in solving problems. Moreover, he records the names of learners mentioned during meetings and follows up with them, which reflects his commitment to listening to others' input and acting on it. This demonstrates that his decisions are shaped by the collective contributions of the school community rather than his personal authority. Such practices clearly align with democratic leadership, where the leader promotes collaboration, shared responsibility, and decision-making through consultation to improve both teaching and learning outcomes.

When he was asked “*how do you make important decisions at your school?*” he said:

Most of the decisions that I make at school are also dependent on consultations, I do not have to make decisions on my own however I may impose some things here and there, but I make most of the decisions through consultations. For example, if it is a decision that has to do with teaching and learning I will have to consult the school management team and teachers as well, just depending on the problem.

“I don't work alone, there is a school management team and most of the time the heads of departments are people that are teachers as well, so in my absence I know I have HODs who can ensure that classroom learning is taking place, remember again it is about distributing roles” he said.

4.3.3. Servant leadership style

In a servant leadership style, the leader prioritizes the needs of the team and organization over his or her own, focusing on serving others and helping them grow. Servant leaders prioritize the growth, well-being, and success of those they lead (Greenleaf, 1970). This principal also demonstrated servant leadership because of how he consistently places the needs of teachers and learners at the centre of his practice. Servant leadership is about prioritizing the growth, well-being, and success of others, and this is clearly shown in how he counsels and supports teachers who are struggling personally or professionally. He takes time to listen to their concerns, provides advice, and even arranges further assistance where needed, ensuring that no teacher feels unsupported. He also recognizes that for staff to be effective in their work, their emotional state must be considered. This aligns with his belief in pastoral leadership, where emotional and social well-being are valued as much as academic progress. In this way, he creates a school environment that is not only supportive but also conducive to long-term growth for both staff and learners.

Furthermore, the principal's approach extends beyond the school's internal environment, showing a broader servant leadership perspective. He intentionally engages with parents and the community as partners in the school's mission, rather than imposing decisions on them. His belief that his biggest responsibility is to ensure good relationships among teachers, learners, and parents reflects his commitment to building trust and collaboration. For example, he sees himself as the face of the school who must bridge gaps between



stakeholders, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected. By creating opportunities for staff development, arranging extra support for learners, and fostering open communication with parents, he demonstrates humility, empathy, and service all of which are the hallmarks of servant leadership.

I believe that for people to work in an environment that is satisfactory, they also need to be fine emotionally. I listen to people, listen to their problems, I do not want people to take advantage of that but I want people to be free in such a way that they understand that problems are part of life and they need to be solved because if in a school set up, if we do not allow people to share how they feel, you are going to have a team that is not supportive because they are not okay emotionally, not that they do not want to work but just because you never listen to them when they have problems. So, I implement a situation where they have to be given space to vent out and if they need further help, it is my responsibility to ensure that they get that particular help.

4.3.4. Visionary leadership style

Visionary leadership is a leadership style in which the leader articulates a clear and compelling vision for the future and inspires others to work toward achieving it. This type of leader focuses on creating and communicating an inspiring picture of what the organization or team can achieve in the long term, motivating and guiding others to align their efforts with that vision. Visionary leaders are typically forward-thinking, strategic, and highly motivational, using their vision to drive innovation, commitment, and long-term success (Jeffrey, 2025). Unlike transformational leaders, who focus on changing followers' attitudes, values, and behaviours to achieve organizational transformation, visionary leaders primarily emphasize setting a strategic direction and inspiring alignment with the envisioned future. While both styles motivate and influence others, transformational leadership seeks deep, personal and organizational change, whereas visionary leadership centres on clarity of purpose and direction toward a long-term goal.

The principal in school B demonstrated visionary leadership by implementing a system to improve communication between the school and parents through emails. He created a clear plan where newsletters, reports, and other important information are sent electronically, ensuring that parents are consistently informed about learners' progress and school activities. At first, this strategy faced challenges because some teachers were unfamiliar with technology and struggled to use computers and laptops. Rather than abandoning the plan, the principal arranged for Information and Communication Technology (ICT) specialists to train teachers, ensuring they had the skills needed to carry out the new system effectively. This showed his forward-thinking approach, as he not only envisioned a long-term goal for the school but also anticipated obstacles and developed practical solutions to overcome them.

By providing support and resources, the principal also motivates and empowers his staff to embrace change. Teachers who were initially hesitant or unsure gained confidence through the training sessions, which allowed them to contribute actively to the success of the communication system. This reflects the core traits of visionary leadership, including strategic thinking, persistence, and the ability to inspire others to work toward a shared long-term vision, ultimately, if successful, improving the overall functioning and reputation of the school.

4.3.5. Transactional leadership style

The principal in school B also used this type of leadership styles because when he was asked “*what strategies do you use to motivate both staff and the learners?*” His response was:

For learners we normally motivate them by having termly awards (certificates), we award them based on their averages, the top 5 just to give them some bit of motivation so they can keep up the good work.”

“We also have awards at the end of the year where we give the top learners, certificates, trophies and bursaries, we buy them even a blazer that is different from others as top achievers. These blazers are received by top 3 per phase.



The principal demonstrated elements of transactional leadership through his use of structured rewards to motivate both staff and learners. Transactional leadership is based on a system of clear expectations, incentives, and consequences, where followers are motivated to perform by tangible rewards or recognition. In line with this approach, the principal organizes termly awards for learners based on their academic averages, recognizing the top five performers to encourage continued effort and achievement. At the end of the year, he further reinforces this system by presenting top learners with certificates, trophies, bursaries, and distinctive blazers for the highest achievers in each phase. These strategies provide clear incentives for learners to meet established performance standards, reflecting the “you do this, and you will get that” principle central to transactional leadership. By linking achievement directly to rewards, the principal motivates learners to perform consistently while maintaining a structured and results-oriented school environment, which is characteristic of the transactional leadership style.

4.3.6. Pacesetting leadership style

This is whereby the leader sets high-performance standards and expects team members to meet them quickly, often leading by example (Goleman, 2000). The principal demonstrates pacesetting leadership by setting high-performance standards and clearly communicating his expectations to teachers. During meetings, he informed teachers of the specific number of distinctions he expects from Grade 12 learners, establishing ambitious goals for academic achievement. This approach motivates teachers to focus on results and encourages them to perform at their highest level. For example, by setting a clear target, teachers are aware of the standards they must meet and can plan their teaching strategies accordingly, such as providing extra support to learners who are struggling or revising key topics to improve understanding. The principal’s focus on immediate performance and accountability reflects the essence of pacesetting leadership, where leading by example and expecting excellence drives both teachers and learners to achieve tangible results.

4.3.7. Situational leadership style

The leader adapts their style according to the situation, the task, and the development level of team members (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2013). The principal demonstrated situational leadership by adapting his approach according to the needs of his teachers and the situation at hand. He did not rely on a single method of leadership but responds flexibly depending on what is required. For example, when a teacher is struggling with a task or faces personal challenges, he provides guidance, advice, or refers them to the appropriate resources, showing responsiveness to their development needs. In contrast, when there is a need to meet specific academic targets, such as preparing Grade 12 learners for examinations, he sets clear expectations and monitors progress closely. By adjusting his leadership style based on the context and the abilities of his staff, he ensures that both teachers and learners are supported effectively, demonstrating adaptability, flexibility, and practical problem-solving in line with situational leadership principles.

4.4. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

In summary, as far the first question, “*what are the main leadership styles used by the two principals in their schools?*” is concerned, the study found that both principals adopted multiple leadership styles rather than relying on a single approach. Principal A’s leadership is mainly democratic, complemented by transactional, laissez-faire, and coaching elements, which manifested itself through collaborations, motivation through rewards, autonomy for teachers, and personal support, characteristics identified through observations in meetings. Principal B, on the other hand, predominantly uses transformational and visionary leadership, supported by democratic, servant, situational, transactional, and pacesetting practices, manifested through observation of his insistence on innovation, encouraging participation, prioritizing staff well-being, and setting high expectations.

As far as the second question, “*how do the two principals implement their leadership style in the daily management of the school?*” is concerned, the study found that both principals operationalize their leadership through active involvement of staff in decision-making, use of rewards and recognition to motivate learners and teachers, and by fostering environments that promote personal growth and collective responsibility.



Principal A implements his style by encouraging teamwork, delegating responsibilities, and using rewards to sustain performance, while Principal B emphasizes vision-driven planning, ICT integration, emotional support for staff, and setting high performance targets for learners.

5. CONCLUSION

This exploratory study on leadership styles in Gauteng township public primary schools revealed that principals do not rely on a single leadership style but rather adopt multiple styles that evolve according to their context and beliefs. Principal in school A demonstrated democratic, transactional, laissez-faire, and coaching leadership traits, focusing on consultation, recognition, autonomy, and support to guide his staff and learners. Principal in school B leaned more towards transformational, democratic, servant, visionary, transactional, pacesetter, and situational leadership styles, showing how inspiration, empowerment, high expectations, and emotional support can work together to improve teaching and learning. These findings confirm that leadership in public schools is multi-dimensional, context-driven, and deeply influenced by each principal's philosophy about human potential and professional responsibility. Both cases highlight that effective leadership is not rigid but adaptive, blending elements of theory with the lived realities of schools.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for further research. Firstly, future research could explore transformational and visionary leadership styles across a larger number of Gauteng township public primary schools, allowing for broader comparisons and the identification of patterns or trends that may not be evident in a small-scale study. Secondly, longitudinal studies could be conducted to examine how principals' leadership styles evolve over time and how these changes impact teacher performance, learner outcomes, and school development. Additionally, research could investigate the role of contextual factors, such as socio-economic conditions, school resources, and community involvement, in shaping effective leadership practices. Another potential area is the integration of digital leadership, examining how principals use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to support innovation, communication, and decision-making within [deleted for anonymity] schools. Finally, a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative insights with quantitative data on learner performance and teacher satisfaction could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between leadership styles and school effectiveness in these schools. These avenues for future research would not only build on the current study but also contribute to developing evidence-based strategies for leadership development in [deleted for anonymity] public education.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding leadership as a dynamic, context-driven practice rather than a rigid application of pre-defined theories. Both principals explained their leadership choices as rooted in personal beliefs about human potential and freedom, demonstrating that effective leadership is deeply shaped by values as well as the needs of the school community. These findings suggest that leadership development programmes should move beyond prescriptive models and instead provide principals with the flexibility to combine different approaches according to their unique school environments. Furthermore, the study offers practical insights for policymakers, teacher training institutions, and aspiring principals, highlighting the importance of collaboration, emotional intelligence, and adaptability in creating positive school climates. Future research could expand this study by exploring leadership practices across a wider range of schools to identify broader patterns and deepen the understanding of how context influences leadership effectiveness in South African public schools.

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7. DECLARATIONS

The authors, Alwande Samukelisiwe Majola and Morrison Moretsele Chakane, declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

8. ETHICAL APPROVAL

The necessary Ethics approvals were secured before any implementation of the study. The necessary Ethics Clearance Certificate was applied for, approved and received from Wits University Ethics Committee (Non-Medical).

9. COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors, Alwande Samukelisiwe Majola and Morrison Moretsele Chakane, declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

10. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Alwande Samukelisiwe Majola: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Validation, Visualisation, Writing - original draft. Morrison Moretsele Chakane: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Visualisation, Writing - review & editing. The authors confirm that this work is entirely their own, have reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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12. DATA AVAILABILITY

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and/or its supplementary materials.

13. DISCLAIMER

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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APPENDICES

A: Observation Guide

- Principal's interaction with teachers, learners, and parents
- Communication style (verbal and non-verbal)
- Decision-making during meetings or activities
- Leadership practices (delegation, support, discipline, motivation)
- Staff and learner responses to the principal's leadership
- *These observations were not limited to these stated above but can involve other powers to have followers, assist other teachers in their development areas.*

B: Interview Guide Questions

Research Questions

- 1) What are the main leadership styles do the two principals use in their schools?
- 2) How do the two principals implement their leadership style in the daily management of the school?
- 3) Why do the two principals lead the way they do in their respective schools?