

Collaborative leadership practices of principals in rural schools: Implications for improving educational quality

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Abstract

This paper explores the influence of principals' collaborative leadership on quality education in South African rural schools. The aim of this study was to explore how principals' collaborative leadership practices contribute to quality education in rural schools and the strategies that are most effective in this context. The authors conducted in-depth interviews with six principals of six rural schools in three South African provinces to gain insight into the phenomenon under investigation. This qualitative method allowed us to conduct an in-depth exploration of principals' interactions with educators, learners, and other stakeholders. As part of the theoretical-conceptual framework, we investigated the primary leadership that promotes collaboration in academic research. The findings revealed several essential collaborative behaviours of rural school principals that improved the teaching-learning process in their schools, consequently improving the quality of outcomes in their schools. These behaviours included developing strong relationships with different stakeholders, encouraging teamwork, and involving educators in decision-making processes. Furthermore, the principals addressed unique challenges in their schools by devising and executing ways to improve learner outcomes and foster a good school culture. These methods are consistent with earlier studies that highlighted the value of collaborative leadership and distributed decision making in educational contexts. Drawing on the findings that emerged from this study, we made two specific recommendations: first, tailored professional development programmes—focused on relationship building and team dynamics—should be presented to help principals improve their collaborative leadership skills and second, future research could compare urban and rural school contexts to explore how collaborative leadership promotes school development so as to suggest more targeted and effective leadership practices for long-term success.

Keywords: collaborative leadership, quality education, human capital, rural context

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Introduction and background

Education is the cornerstone of social growth and human capital; it empowers individuals and directs the course of communities and nations (Howells, 2018). The leadership style used in educational institutions therefore has a significant impact on educational quality and outcomes (Mincu, 2022). South Africa—a country with a rich but complicated past characterised by historical struggles and ongoing socioeconomic inequities—faces a unique set of conditions that has a great influence on its educational institutions. Despite significant attempts to address these disparities, schools in rural, low socioeconomic contexts continue to face various challenges including poverty, poor infrastructure, socio-political issues, and ineffective leadership styles (Spaull, 2013).

This study was conducted in South African rural schools that frequently face several obstacles that have an impact on their efficacy and educational quality (Spaull & Taylor, 2015). These schools are usually located in remote areas, making access to resources and infrastructure challenging. Many of these schools are located in low socioeconomic contexts with inadequate infrastructure, such as insufficient classrooms and a lack of power and clean water, leading to poor sanitation. Furthermore, these schools typically face a scarcity of competent instructors and such instructors are sometimes hesitant to work in remote areas owing to restricted professional development possibilities and bad living conditions.

Furthermore, these schools typically have a high student-to-teacher ratio, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and limited individual attention for learners. In addition, restricted access to educational resources and technology impedes the learning process, consequently challenging the style of leadership practised in these schools. Many rural children face socioeconomic obstacles, including poverty and hunger, which have an impact on their academic performance and school attendance.

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, rural schools often serve as critical community hubs, and are supported by strong local traditions and values (Chikoko et al., 2015). Educators in these schools are often deeply committed to their students' well-being and development, which fosters a resilient and community-oriented learning environment. Addressing the unique needs of rural schools is essential for improving educational outcomes and fostering social equity in South Africa.

The rural context just provides the background of the schools where the research was conducted. It is not the purpose of this paper to argue how and why the value of context may or may not influence the collaborative practices of leaders. In this context, understanding the role of school leadership is becoming increasingly important. The scope of this research was limited to collaborative leadership. School leadership, especially the leadership style practised by the principal, is essential for addressing challenges and promoting a conducive learning environment for learners (Mincu, 2022). Principals, as key decision makers, are responsible for navigating the

complex landscape of challenges their schools face while striving to build an enabling environment for effective teaching and learning (Weiner et al., 2021).

The application of collaborative leadership is explained in the context where there is a school management team (SMT), which normally consists of the principal, deputy principal(s), and departmental heads. Senior teachers may also form part of the SMT. Collaborative leadership is examined with the SMT as point of departure to determine how one can help schools improve their quality of education. However, we noted a significant gap in understanding which leadership style is most effective to enhance quality education in South African schools in low socioeconomic contexts (McCallum, 2021). This paper aims to fill this knowledge gap by discussing the collaborative leadership style principals adopt in such contexts and how it links to the provision of quality education. Collaborative leadership involves shared decision making, actively engaging with stakeholders, and building a collective vision (Kujala et al., 2022). Although existing research recognises the importance of leadership in an educational context, the specific application of collaborative leadership in the South African context is still unexplored (McCallum, 2021).

The study attempted to answer the following question: “How do principals in the South African rural context practise collaborative leadership?”

Collaboration

Collaboration is inherently linked to the establishment of trust and the cultivation of partnerships. Trust serves as the bedrock upon which collaborative efforts are built. Trust fosters open communication, promotes the sharing of ideas, and creates a supportive environment for collaborative decision making (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In the case of educational leadership, trust among team members is paramount for building cohesive relationships and encouraging a shared commitment to common goals. Leaders who prioritise the development of trust in collaborative teams create an atmosphere that values transparency and encourages the free exchange of different perspectives, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of collaborative endeavours (Coleman, 2012).

Partnerships play a pivotal role in collaboration, whether in teams or in groups. Short-term groups may be able to address problems in a partnership better than teams because groups know it is for a short time that they must partner and collaborate, then they can go their own way. Teams involve a long-term partnership—collaboration must be much stronger and deep-seated for the partnership to be sustainable. Partnerships extend the collaborative ethos to external stakeholders including parents, community members, and other educational institutions. According to Fullan (2007), effective partnerships strengthen the impact of collaborative efforts by mobilising a broader network of resources and expertise. In the realm of educational leadership, partnerships with external entities could yield fresh perspectives, added resources, and community support, all of which contribute to the success of collaborative initiatives. Therefore, the symbiotic relationship between collaboration, trust, and partnerships is fundamental to shaping a robust foundation for effective educational leadership.

Research has consistently underscored the interdependence of collaboration, trust, and partnerships in educational settings. The establishment of trust is not only an outcome of successful collaboration but also a prerequisite for it (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). When trust is present, individuals are more likely to engage in collaborative activities, share information openly, and contribute to collective decision-making processes (Coleman, 2012). Effective partnerships further reinforce trust by broadening the collaborative network, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and resources, and promoting a shared vision for educational success (Bryk et al., 2015). The dynamic relationship between collaboration, trust, and partnerships forms a synergistic triad that is essential for fostering a culture of collaborative leadership in education.

Aligned with and part of collaboration is the relationship between partners, which should be based on trust for the relationship to be sustainable over a prolonged period. Collaboration to achieve specific goals also implies decision making and individual and group thinking. These concepts are discussed in more detail later in this paper. Decision making also implies that there may be power at play as well as possible micropolitical activities that may influence collaboration as well as relationships and trust and hence the partnership. These complex interrelations linked to collaboration are discussed in the rest of the paper.

Collaborative leadership redefines responsibility and accountability by delegating these within a team. Shared responsibility fosters a collective commitment to achieving common goals and outcomes (Gronn, 2009). Collaboration in a school team, for example, an SMT, assumes accountability and responsibility.

Collaborative leadership

Literature shows that collaborative leadership improves school performance including student success, educator morale, and the overall school climate (Hafeez & Akhtar, 2022). First, collaborative leaders are more likely to engage with stakeholders, share decision-making power, inculcate positive relationships, and foster a sense of ownership among teachers and community members, yielding positive changes in the school environment (Wang et al., 2022). Second, the role of stakeholder engagement in collaborative leadership cannot be emphasised enough. This implies the active involvement of the SMT, the school governing body, educators, parents, learners, and the wider community, among others. This commitment not only supports the creation of a common vision but also fosters a sense of unity and collective responsibility to improve schools. Third, the literature shows that contextual factors—such as socioeconomic conditions, cultural dynamics, and historical heritage—significantly influence how collaborative leadership is applied and acted upon in South African schools (van der Vyver et al., 2021). Principals must adapt their leadership to account for these unique contextual factors. Finally, collaborative leadership can play a vital role in addressing issues of equality and inclusion in South African schools (Leithwood, 2021). By engaging various stakeholders, leaders can better understand and respond to the needs of disadvantaged learners, thereby fostering a more inclusive learning

environment.

Collaborative leadership intersects with shared and distributive leadership models, emphasising the decentralisation of authority and the equitable distribution of leadership responsibilities among team members (Spillane et al., 2004). This must be read with the findings of Hallinger and Heck (2010a, 2010b); not only collaborative leadership but also the organisational context and the ability to improve are key components of potential sustainable academic achievement. Collaborative leadership reflects a distributed and shared approach to leadership. It involves multiple individuals or teams working together, each contributing their expertise to achieve common goals. This concept aligns with ideas from complexity leadership theory, which emphasises the importance of adaptive processes, shared leadership, and distributed decision making (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Collaborative leadership must be well explained and understood by all collaborators and role players. There can be a collaboration process with many collaborators, but there may be only one leader for this collaboration process—a collaborative leader of the rest of the SMT and the rest of the staff members in the school. The SMT may also be a collaborative leadership team that takes the lead as collaborators. They become the leaders of the rest of the staff and the school. In this case, the roles and responsibilities, accountability and power relations, and trust and respect must be clearly understood and discussed before the process of collaborative leadership as a team is put into action.

Complexity leadership theory posits that effective leadership involves not only traditional hierarchical structures but also distributed leadership and adaptive processes. Collaborative leadership aligns with this perspective by emphasising the importance of shared decision making, collective problem solving, and distributed responsibilities (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) argued that collaborative leadership is well suited to navigate the complexities of modern organisational environments. It recognises that no single leader holds all the necessary knowledge and skills to address multifaceted challenges. Instead, leadership becomes a collective endeavour where diverse perspectives contribute to innovative solutions and adaptive responses.

An important aspect of collaborative leadership in a school organisation is that all members of the collaborative leadership team are not at the same level of experience, qualification, and dedication (motivation). This must be considered in the distribution of work among the team members and in working with the rest of the teachers and any other role player. Situational leadership theory suggests that leaders can adapt their styles based on the situation and the readiness of their followers (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). Collaborative leadership aligns with this adaptive approach, responding to the unique demands of different situations within the organisational context. In a dynamic, complex, and ever-changing environment, collaborative leaders determine and assess the context and adjust their approach to best fit the needs of the team and the goals at hand.

If collaborative leadership is accepted as the approach for an organisation, it must be clarified whether an individual would be the leader of a collaborative group or whether a collaborative team

assumes the leadership role. This may imply that one of the leaders would need to consider situational leadership theory and share leadership and responsibilities with the rest of the collaborative leadership team. In this case, it may be the principal as the leader of the collaborative leadership team who must ensure that the situational requirements of experience and commitment of the collaborative team are at least considered.

According to O’Leary et al. (2010), collaborative leadership involves a paradigm shift from traditional notions of individualised leadership where one figure has exclusive responsibility for outcomes and achievements to leadership that is shared with group or team members, encouraging shared responsibility and accountability. The essence of collaborative leadership lies in fostering a collective, cooperative environment where diverse perspectives can contribute to decision making and problem solving. As education systems worldwide grapple with multifaceted challenges, understanding and implementing collaborative leadership becomes pivotal to fostering innovation, adaptability, and sustained improvement.

Contextual leadership acknowledges the importance of considering the unique circumstances and challenges within a specific education environment. It involves tailoring leadership practices to the cultural, rural, and historical context of the South African education system. This understanding is crucial for effectively implementing collaborative leadership because one size does not fit all in diverse education settings (Bush, 2011).

Collaborative leadership in the organisational context

The relationship between individual and collaborative leadership is not dichotomous but exists on a continuum, and each approach influences the other in various organisational contexts. Carson et al. (2007) explored the idea of shared leadership and suggested that leadership responsibilities could be shared or distributed among team members, which blurs the lines between individual and collaborative leadership. This shared leadership dynamic allows organisations to benefit from the strengths of both approaches. Shared leadership blurs the boundaries of leadership roles, emphasising a collective influence that is not confined to an individual (Bolden et al., 2011). According to Uhl-Bien et al. (2007), in collaborative leadership, the emphasis is on teamwork, cooperation, and joint decision making, suggesting a distributed approach to leadership responsibilities. These blurred and overlapping approaches and theories are visible in the explanation of shared leadership. The latter relies on collaboration. At the core, collaborative leadership and shared/distributive leadership share a common thread—a departure from traditional top-down leadership models. In the school context, the SMT could follow a collaborative approach within the team and leadership is shared. This can also be labelled as collaborative leadership. It may be technical or there may be a slight difference between shared leadership and collaborative leadership. Both involve more than one person as a leader in complex organisations rather than allowing one leader to attempt leadership in a complex situation.

Individual leadership has certain advantages for the organisational landscape. Clarity in decision

making, swift responses in emergencies, and accountability are notable strengths associated with this approach. Bass and Riggio (2006) argued that individual leaders may have a profound impact on organisational culture, and inspire followers through their vision and charisma. In situations where a single visionary leader can provide a clear direction, individual leadership becomes an asset. On the other hand, collaborative leadership offers different advantages. The pooling of diverse perspectives and expertise fosters innovation and adaptability (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The collective intelligence of a team can lead to more informed and well-rounded decisions. Collaboration also enhances engagement and commitment among team members because they share a sense of ownership in the decision-making process (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Research design

We used a qualitative case study methodology to investigate principals' collaborative leadership styles and their link to better educational quality in rural school environments (Rule & John, 2011). We purposefully selected six schools in three provinces of South Africa and conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the principal of each school. The principals were chosen based on their seniority and leadership experience in their respective schools. This ensured that participants had adequate experience and understanding of leadership methods and their influence on quality educational.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for the exploration of many facets of the principals' leadership style. Each of the six principals—labelled P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6—participated in the individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted around an hour, allowing us to have detailed conversations and obtain thorough knowledge of their leadership styles. The interview questions focused on the principals' techniques to encourage teacher cooperation, their approaches to decision making, and the perceived impact of these practices on student achievement and school progress. The semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to delve deeper into the replies to gain insight into the collaborative leadership processes in these rural schools.

The data were analysed using a thematic approach and numerous essential processes to ensure a thorough study of the qualitative data. First, each interview was transcribed verbatim to accurately present the participants' opinions. The transcripts were then subjected to a rigorous coding procedure during which significant phrases and concepts were identified and categorised.

The coding approach revealed numerous recurring themes about collaborative leadership and educational quality. These themes were refined through iterative evaluation and comparison across the identified themes. This ensured that the analysis was consistent and thorough. The following main themes emerged: encouraging cooperation, developing trustworthy connections, collaborative accountability, team empowerment, and sharing a similar goal.

The thematic analysis emphasised how collaborative leadership strategies helped to increase educational quality in rural schools. The findings emphasised the diverse character of leadership

and its critical role in creating an inclusive and supportive school culture that is conducive to academic performance. The explication of each theme followed the pattern of developing descriptions, using the words of the participants, and “describing how the narrative outcome will be compared with theories and the general literature” (Creswell, 2014, p. 194).

The next section focuses on the data obtained from principals of rural schools in low socioeconomic contexts. The interviews focused on their collaborative leadership techniques and the contribution of this leadership style to quality education, based on their experiences.

Findings

In this section, we discuss the data that emerged from the semi-structured interviews with the participants regarding their understanding and experiences of collaborative leadership practices and quality education in their schools. Our discussion is categorised into the following themes: teamwork, trusting relationships, collaborative accountability, team empowerment, and sharing a common vision. These themes reflect the participants’ understanding and practising of collaborative leadership principles to improve quality education in challenging contexts.

Collaborative leadership does not happen by itself. It is an attitude, value, and part of a personal dedication to sharing and collaborating with all role players. There needs to be a change in perspective from a hierarchical and authoritarian position to a shared, flat leadership structure. Collaborative leadership is more aligned with a shared and democratic approach where the participants are equally responsible for the outcomes and the process to achieve the outcomes.

Teamwork

The participants’ experiences of collaborative leadership were that teamwork was a vital aspect of this leadership style. Importantly, participants emphasised that good teamwork usually enhanced quality education through a shared responsibility for the teaching–learning process. To achieve this all-encompassing aim, P2 stated that effective teamwork was the main creator of the collaborative environment and the enabler of academic progress. This view confirms Lasater’s (2016) standpoint that effective teamwork leads to the improvement of quality in learning and to the building of a learning community where the stakeholders engage to shape the vision and mission of the school. This view was strengthened by P3, who said the following:

Collaborative leadership is all about supporting each other to improve the functionality of any given organisational vision and, in our case, our schools’ vision. Collaborative leadership is getting together to put our thoughts together and devise the path that directs us to success. However, this happens when we plan together as a team.

P4 further shared that academic responsibilities and regular meetings were executed within a team. This participant also highlighted that teamwork came with its challenges:

Sometimes staff members have different backgrounds, political affiliations and agendas.

However, P5 noted that, in a genuine community, these differences could be overcome by focusing on building a learning community where their getting together was to build their abilities and skills in order to grow and improve the teaching–learning process in the school.

The views of these school leaders were in line with Wang et al.'s (2022, p. 48) definition of collaborative leadership: a “synergy of individuals or stakeholders” who have common interests, share a common vision and shared purposes, and work towards improving the organisational teaching–learning culture to provide improved school performance. The principal, teachers, learners, staff, and parents together with SMTs therefore work together (preferably as a team) to improve the quality of learning in the school.

Roberts (2018) supports the above-mentioned ideas. According to Roberts, groupwork is a critical element of a strong learning community and it can only be effective if focused on learners' learning and by involving teachers as active participants in this process.

Trusting relationships

Participants believed that the foundation for collaboration was trust, respect, and relationships. Collaboration must also be built on an equal understanding that the parties would share the same values and achieve the same results. Collaboration cannot be a one-sided process where one party gets the benefit, while the other party is responsible for taking action and doing the work.

It was clear that most participants viewed collaborative leadership as a critical aspect of human relationships. They indicated that collaboration between school leaders and staff as well as among staff revealed the quality of human relationships in a school. Furthermore, participants emphasised that trusting relationships, built through collaborative leadership, were the cornerstone of improving quality education in challenging contexts. This view was articulated by P3 when she said:

Our success in this particular context depends on our ability to inculcate a collaborative atmosphere with one another, as that works for the good of humanity.

P2 highlighted a trusting relationship among stakeholders as a source of quality education:

Despite the contextual challenges that affect our areas, I firmly noted that 100% pass of our school is the result of the trusting relationships built through the collaborative leadership style. We believe our success in creating a cooperative spirit has been established through the good relations between staff and learners alike and resulted in quality outputs.

P4 concentrated on the link between collaboration and leadership:

Today's changing context of the school landscape and school environment requires a collaborative leadership type that promotes mutual respect and support. Therefore, we cooperate with our principal, our parents, and the rest of the staff.

It is clear that P4, as a leader, believed that principals' ability to employ collaborative leadership had a positive influence on schools, which improved the quality of the teaching and learning environment.

Collaborative accountability

This section discusses participants' views on collaborative accountability for school performance as they practised collaborative leadership. According to participants, all parents, teachers, and SMTs played a pivotal role in the academic performance of their schools. P2 shared the following example:

Through our regular school meetings with the stakeholders, we create a decision-making platform, which serves as a reminder that when the school succeeds, it is the entire team that succeeds and, in the end, all are accountable as well.

P1 stated that leadership was in the hands of all stakeholders—teachers, parents, community, and SMTs alike. The positive relationships that were built, communication, and their common vision drove them to “pull [up their] socks” and work towards the common goal. These leaders also highlighted the challenges they faced as they motivated their school communities to understand the importance of collaborative accountability for school performance.

In her response, P4 stated that personal interests, selfish attitudes, poor communication skills, and conflicts were some of the factors that made it difficult to implement collaborative accountability in schools. However, she testified:

If my school [is] one of the top schools in the province, it is because every individual feels obliged to give the best of [themselves] for the success of the academic performance.

Team empowerment

This finding focuses on participants' views on empowerment as an aspect of collaborative leadership. Participants believed that everyone in their school context had the responsibility to do whatever they could to enhance the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of all staff.

P5 provided the following example:

We have our monthly get-together with the major emphasis on the importance of each student, parent, and staff member helping each other to build a healthy person and healthy school community.

P2 shared:

I am confident to say we are empowered through coaching and regular encounters we have among ourselves and with our parents as we listen to their concerns.

P6 noted:

I believe in capacitating our educators to the point that they . . . feel they share in the leadership of the school. They should be proud of being part of the leading team. We all learn to lead. To do so, I motivate the staff to develop themselves to be leaders.

P3 said:

The aim of the whole exercise is to ensure that the needs of the management staff are fulfilled and

that they are enabled to cope with the challenging situation of our schools and are capacitated to be better leaders.

The aspect of empowerment is strongly associated with the previous theme (i.e. trusting relationships). Nash and Hwang (2012) noted that by creating an atmosphere of trusting human relationships, staff members feel empowered and respected and become more willing to give of themselves to develop the school.

Sharing a common vision

Participants reported a link between leadership and learner academic performance. This could be ascribed to these schools inculcating a strong collaborative leadership style and positive relationships in their context. Consequently, over the previous five years, these schools were able to provide quality education. P2 noted that they had established a focus on the vision and mission of the school. As a result, decision making was in line with what the school wanted to achieve academically.

P5 noted:

I develop a purpose and vision by actively working with teachers, parents, and learners to establish common values and goals. I attempt to express a clear and compelling vision that represents our school's distinct goals and objectives. This vision informs my decisions and contributes to a united, purpose-driven school culture.

P6 shared:

I collaborate closely with our school community—teachers, students and parents—to develop our purpose and vision. This is how I inculcate collaborative leadership practices, which has greatly improved quality education.

P3 said:

We [have] open dialogues with the staff, students, and parents. I focus on understanding the unique strengths and needs of our community, then craft a vision that reflects our commitment to excellence and inclusivity.

According to Hughes and Pickeral (2013), effective leadership, as one aspect of a positive school climate, comprises leadership characteristics and the decision-making style of the school's administration, such as establishing and communicating a clear vision, supporting and appreciating teacher development, involving teachers in key decisions, and becoming friendly and approachable.

Conclusion

The participating principals ascribed their schools' success to collaborative leadership style efforts with their stakeholders (teachers, parents, and SMTs). What emerged as a unique aspect of the principals' collaborative leadership and quality education was the perception that these leaders built positive relationships, inculcating a common vision and collaborative accountability for

improving quality education in a challenging context.

Regardless of the context in which these leaders practised their collaborative leadership, it was clear that they were committed to developing their staff. This is in line with what (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008) and (Supovitz et al., 2009) suggested—empowering educators enables better quality education in the school environment. Furthermore, the principals' collaborative leadership was built on positive relationships and trust. These leaders believed their open communication promoted a supportive environment for collaborative decision making (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Finally, participants said that not all educational leaders had learners' academic performance at heart. From the findings, the following themes emerged as important for improving quality education: sharing a common vision, understanding collaborative accountability, and creating positive relationships with co-workers and parents. The participants agreed that shared responsibility fostered a collective commitment to achieving common goals. Furthermore, regardless of the challenging contexts under which these leaders operated, quality academic performance was maintained in these schools through a distributed and shared approach.

This study focused solely on schools in rural contexts as a case study. Future studies could compare rural and urban schools (comparative research) with the focus on collaborative leadership.

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