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More than a game: Exploring teachers' views on the game of chess in rural South African schools

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Background: Education is recognised as a cornerstone for national development and economic sustainability. However, many challenges arise that result in the compromise of quality education, especially in middle- and low-income neighbourhoods. Various interventions, including chess, are explored as solutions to the challenges of deteriorating education standards.

Aim: The study explores the game of chess as an intervention to improve academic performance in the Foundation Phase in rural schools and offers insights into how transformational leadership influences the success and sustainability of chess programmes.

Setting: The study was conducted in public primary schools in the King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, a district comprising of rural, semi-urban, and urban communities. It focused on schools implementing the Tsogo Sun Moves for Life programme, which integrates chess into the Foundation Phase curriculum.

Methods: Through the lens of Transformational Leadership Theory, this qualitative study used observations and interviews with 14 teachers in South Africa's King Cetshwayo District schools under the Tsogo Sun Moves for Life chess programme to gather data.

Results: The study found that the success or failure of a chess programme depends on several factors, including the quality of preparation and training, perceived educational benefits, level of support and motivation and the contextual challenges. Participants shared that chess has an educational value, but the sustainability of the benefits depends on the leadership of the programmes. The study reveals that a mismatch between goals and incentives, a lack of training and insufficient contextualisation can lead to programme failure.

Conclusion: The study concludes that transformational leaders are important for chess programmes to thrive in rural schools.

Contribution: The findings of this study contribute to the discourse on innovative educational strategies in under-resourced contexts and offer recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders aiming to enhance learning outcomes in South Africa and similar settings.

Keywords: chess education; transformational leadership; rural schools; educational interventions; under-resourced schools.

Introduction

Quality education is critical in a country as it demonstrates progress in empowering citizens and fostering social and economic development. Therefore, it is important for nations to provide quality education that enables citizens to be productive and contribute to economic growth. Numerous tests are administered globally to assess educational standards, such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Howie et al. 2017; Reddy et al. 2020, 2021). South Africa participates in these assessments, and the scores indicate that it is underperforming compared to other countries. The country also has its own national assessments known as the Annual National Assessment (ANA), which evaluates learner performance and monitors the quality of education in schools (Mensah, Pillay & Mohammad 2023). The academic challenges faced by the country can be traced back to past injustices that segregated the education system by race (Soudien 2024). The OECD (2023) emphasises that when people in a country are educated, they are more likely to secure good jobs, leading to increased salaries and improved living standards. The higher the level of education within a country, the fewer social ills are experienced (OECD 2023). It is therefore crucial that learners develop essential 21st-century skills, known as the 4Cs: critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration, to thrive in an ever-changing world. Education School (2023) asserts that children who receive proper instruction in basic reading, writing and mathematics are more likely to excel in school and develop critical and analytical thinking skills

that will aid them both academically and beyond. In South Africa, to ensure that primary school learners acquire these skills, chess was introduced into the curriculum in three provinces: KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape and Gauteng.

Chess has been identified as one of the best interventions used in various countries to ensure that learners get a quality education, which not only helps them do well in school but also ensures their success even beyond school years as they join the workforce. It is therefore essential that the learners be given support in their learning journeys. Literature shows that chess in schools has been successful in enhancing learners' cognitive and academic abilities in several countries, including Italy, Indonesia, Turkey, Germany and Spain (Sala & Gomez 2016). However, the incorporation of chess in the curriculum in South Africa has not shown the good results as seen elsewhere (Kakoma & Giannakopoulos 2016). The lack of success of the chess programmes in South Africa can be attributed to many factors, including the lack of proper training, motivation and interest of the teachers and the language of instruction used (Christian & Sayed 2023). This study aims to explain the implementation of a good chess programme, which will ensure that the learners are not compromised in the quality of education, as according to the teachers already involved in the Tsogo Sun Moves for Life programme in the King Cetshwayo district. The study is guided by two main research questions:

- *How do Foundation Phase teachers in rural South African schools perceive the integration of chess into the curriculum?*
- *What leadership factors influence the successful adoption and sustainability of chess programmes in rural schools*?

Background

All learners have the potential to do well if they are given the necessary assistance and support that they need. Pur, Mbahi, and Audu (2019) states that the underperformance of learners in school is a result of many causes, such as personal factors, environmental variables or emotional factors. Pur et al. further argues that these learners can perform reasonably or even well with the necessary support from schools. OECD (2013) adds that there are numerous ways that learners can be supported in the learning process; one example is through the introduction of pedagogical models and programmes, such as inquiry-based learning, game-based learning, peer tutoring, flipped classrooms and structured intervention programmes such as reading clubs or numeracy enrichment sessions. Good programmes are needed to uplift the education level in the country, which has been identified as a poor performer because of its performance when compared with other countries in tests such as PIRLS, SACMEQ and TIMSS (Howie et al. 2017; Reddy et al. 2020, 2021).

Poor literacy and numeracy scores have been a problem for quite some time in South Africa. Chess has been identified as the solution not only to this problem but also to developing intelligence and many other benefits that come with chess education, which include problem-solving and reasoning heuristics (Sala & Gobet 2016). Chess was introduced in schools to be incorporated into the curriculum through programmes. Chess programmes have been implemented in different countries for different purposes, such as Italy, Turkey, Spain, Germany and Indonesia (Sala & Gomez 2016). Gevorgyan, Manukyan and Sargsyan (2023) describe playing chess as a way of stimulating thinking.

There have been many programmes introduced by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the King Cetshwayo Education District to improve teaching and learning in King Cetshwayo; among those programmes is a chess programme known as the Tsogo Sun Moves for Life. The focus of this programme is on the learners in the Foundation Phase, where they are taught life skills, numeracy and literacy through chess. Among the three provinces where the chess programme is currently piloted, this article focuses on 14 of the 20 schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

Educational programmes made to enhance teaching and learning are crucial in ensuring that learners get the necessary extra support they need to succeed. However, if the programmes are not well planned and implemented, they do not yield the expected results, as was the case in the King Cetshwayo district in a study conducted in 2018 by Dlamini, where the teachers revealed challenges of the lack of chess expertise, yet they had to teach chess both in theory and practice. Another challenge they raised is that of increased workload, as they had additional workbooks for chess that they had to monitor and mark. The programme provided the learners with workbooks, which helped them with more activities. The teachers found the workbooks not very appealing to the learners because of the advanced content and the fact that they were not colourful, as Foundation Phase learners are at the age of being attracted to bright and colourful objects, as is the case in the DBE workbooks. Having said this, it is then important to consider the context where the programme is implemented so that it addresses exactly the needs of the people it is intended for. The programme must have clear aims that must not only be known to the programme developers but also to the implementers, so that they drive the programme towards what it is aimed for.

The Tsogo Sun Moves for Life programme was launched in 2010 by the then president of the country, Mr Jacob Zuma, in partnership with the Minister of Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga and the Deputy Minister of Sports and Recreation, Mr Gert Oosthuizen, who attended the launch with The International Chess Federation (FIDE) and Chess South Africa (CHESSA) (Kobese 2010). The programme was commended by the president for being uniquely South African, which raises questions, as it came across many challenges in its implementation, according to the teachers implementing it in classrooms. The programme was supported by the Department of Basic Education Minister, Mrs Angie Motshekga, who assured the chess community of the department's unwavering support for the programme and the willingness to take care of the training of the teachers,

which she said would take place the following year, that is, 2011. However, literature shows that teachers involved in the Moves for Life programme in South Africa complained about the challenge of lacking chess expertise (Dlamini 2018; Kakoma & Giannakopoulos 2016). It was not for the first time that the Moves for Life programme was implemented, as it is also in countries such as Ireland and Turkey, specifically where it was incredibly successful (Kobese 2010).

Theoretical framework

This study was informed by James MacGregor Burns' 1978 Transformational Leadership Theory, which was later developed by Bernard M. Bass in 1985. This theory is mainly used by leaders in creating a conducive environment for their employees and employees working freely and coming up with innovative and creative ideas, but it can equally be used in programmes such as those implemented in schools with the aim of enhancing teaching and learning. Burns (1978) defines the Transformational Leadership Theory as a process whereby advancing to higher levels of morale and motivation is a result of the leaders working hand in hand with the followers. Bass and Bernard (1985) further outlined the importance of fairness and integrity, setting clear goals, having high expectations, encouraging others, providing support and recognition, stirring the emotions of people, encouraging them to look beyond their self-interests and reaching for the improbable. In this study, the focus is mainly on the dimensions of providing support, recognition and setting clear goals, as these leadership practices are viewed as central to influencing teachers' motivation and the successful adoption of the chess programme in schools. This theory is one of the most important ideas in business leadership (Mind Tools Team 2019). While the programmes in schools are not established with business ideas in mind, they require immense leadership to succeed. If the programmes are to be sustained and make a difference in schools, they need to have clear goals, which should be communicated to all the stakeholders, such as the Department of Education offices and the school community at large. This theory is particularly suitable for the integration of chess in Foundation Phase classrooms because such programmes require leadership that motivates teachers, fosters innovation and sustains commitment to the programme's aims. In rural school settings, the key elements of transformational leadership, such as inspiring a shared vision, encouraging creativity and providing individualised support, translate into practical ways of helping teachers use chess meaningfully in their classrooms despite the challenges they face. The leaders need to be supportive towards those implementing the programmes and give recognition where it is due for motivational purposes. If this is implemented well, the teachers will ensure they go beyond what is expected of them and initiate productive ideas to develop the programme.

Literature review

This section examines the literature reviewed on this study's three key concepts: chess, education and rural areas. The benefits of chess, the perceptions of teachers on game-based activities, as well as the challenges and opportunities that exist in rural areas for these to thrive. The gaps that exist in the literature are then explored towards the end.

The place of chess in schools

Incorporating chess into the curriculum means every child gets an opportunity to learn chess and enjoy all the benefits that come with this game, which include developing cognitive skills, increasing self-motivation and improving behaviour and attendance at school (Ibrahim 2014). Chess is part of the curriculum in more than a 1000 schools in over 30 countries worldwide, and more than 25 universities and colleges in the United States offer chess scholarships (Dangauthier et al. 2007). In other countries, like Iceland, Russia and Venezuela, chess is a compulsory school subject, taught and assessed like other subjects in the curriculum (Linder 1990). Ferguson (1995) states that education in Venezuela is one of the best in the world because of the inclusion of chess in the curriculum. This is supported by the more recent literature from the World Population Review, which indicates that the literacy rate in Venezuela was 97.50% in 2022.

Literature review shows that the game of chess comes with many cognitive and academic skills while also helping players with life skills. Benefits of chess include problem-solving, concentration and spatial reasoning. These skills are very important in the 21st century, and they can be transferred to subjects in school such as mathematics, languages and science. A study conducted by Kakoma and Giannakopoulos in 2014 involving 1800 learners and 10 teachers in South Africa found that playing chess improved the learning outcomes of learners. In addition to supporting academic learning, chess encourages behaviours such as patience, discipline, emotional control and teamwork, skills that contribute to more positive classroom interactions and learner confidence (Dlamini & Maphalala 2021). This shows that chess helps develop learners holistically and can help improve the deteriorating education standard in South Africa, and also help with better classroom behaviour.

Chess in South Africa

Chess in South Africa has been recognised as an important educational tool, and it is well supported by the government, both in communities and schools. There have been national initiatives such as Moves for Life, which was launched in 2010 and reached over 31 000 learners in more than 100 schools in different provinces by 2014 (Bizcommunity 2013). Literature shows that the inclusion of chess into the curriculum in South Africa can be a success, given the extent of support. However, this also depends on the perception of teachers about the overall success of game-based learning. Their perception plays a big role in adopting innovative strategies in teaching because they are the implementers of the curriculum. Positive perceptions of game-based

learning, such as this one of chess, can lead to enthusiastic feelings about the adoption, but negative perceptions may hinder the implementation. The chess-in-school initiative in South Africa included a key aspect of teacher training, which is crucial to the success of a programme. Bizcommunity (2013) reports that the programme trained over 900 teachers in chess. Moreover, chess is one of South Africa's top 16 priority sporting codes for inclusion in schools, as it aligns with the government's educational initiatives (Bizcommunity 2013).

Game-based learning in rural schools

Game-based learning refers to the use of games as instructional tools to enhance learner engagement and understanding (Joel, Ndomba & Mhagama 2023). It allows learners to acquire knowledge and skills through play, interaction and problem-solving. In educational settings, game-based learning promotes active participation and motivation, making learning more meaningful and enjoyable (Zakaria & Zakari 2025). Game-based learning can be a powerful tool to enhance learning, particularly in rural areas where there are often limited resources, thus limiting the teaching methods and strategies. However, while game-based learning can be implemented through imaginative, low-cost or discussion-based activities in resource-limited rural schools, these approaches cannot fully replicate the range of opportunities and experiences available in contexts where sufficient teaching materials and resources are accessible. According to Mbukanma et al. (2024), geographical barriers can hinder access to quality education because of the lack of resources. In any classroom, there is a diverse learner population with different learning needs and styles; this is also true for rural areas. The use of games allows different learning styles to be accommodated, including visual, auditory, read or write and kinaesthetic learners. Literature shows that game-based learning allows learners to be actively engaged in the learning process (Mbukanma et al. 2024). A study by Nadeem, Oroszlanyova and Farag (2023) on the effect of digital game-based learning on student engagement and motivation found that the incorporation of the gaming element in learning has a positive impact on the academic performance of students and provides an enjoyable experience for them.

South Africa is classified as a developing country. It is characterised by the gap between the haves and the have-nots. The chess initiative, Moves for Life, is said to have reached schools in different localities, including rural areas, where it was impactful. In areas such as Mamelodi in Gauteng, teachers reported noticeable improvements in the learners' concentration and cognitive skills (Bizcommunity 2014). In another province, the Free State, the Department of Education launched a chess league for schools and gave schools over 700 chess sets (Murugan 2014). All these are to help schools enjoy the benefits of chess, contributing to academic success.

Research methods and design

Understanding the philosophical foundations of this study, the researcher employed a qualitative approach, which is embedded in the interpretivist paradigm. This approach emphasises understanding subjective meanings and experiences within their social context (Pervin & Mokhtar 2022). The research focused on the personal experiences of the participants, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their perceptions. As Ayton (2023) notes, qualitative research seeks to uncover the richness of human experiences, making it particularly suited for studies aiming to understand individuals' perspectives.

Sampling

The target population for this study consisted of primary school Foundation Phase teachers involved in the Tsogo Sun Moves for Life chess programme in King Cetshwayo District. There was a total of 20 teacher facilitators participating in the programme across the district. These teachers were purposively sampled for their rich knowledge of the chess programme because they were implementing it in their schools. Of these, 14 were purposively selected to participate in the study. Only the teachers serving as facilitators of the programme in their respective schools formed part of this study. The selection was based on two main criteria: (1) the teachers' active facilitation of the chess programme in their respective schools, ensuring they had direct, ongoing experience with its implementation and (2) a deliberate effort to achieve balanced representation across the Circuit Management Centres (CMCs) within the district. To get a clearer picture of the insights of the teachers towards this chess programme, of the 20 facilitators who are part of the programme in the district, 14 participated in this study. These criteria were chosen to ensure that participants had relevant, first-hand insights and to capture diverse perspectives across the district's educational substructures. Dahal (2023) stresses the importance of selecting participants wisely so that you get rich information from them, which will ultimately bring change and improvement in our practices and how we view certain things in general.

Data collection

Data were collected through one-on-one in-depth interviews with the 14 sampled teachers in their schools. The in-depth interviews provided the researcher with an understanding of how the participants feel about the chess programme they are involved in and how they make sense out of it (De Vos et al. 2011). Because the interviews were semi-structured, the researcher was able to probe further into the answers of the participants with the aim of exploring the information they provided. This allowed the researcher to get clarity for a better understanding of the participants' perceptions. De Vos et al. (2011) recommend this way of interviewing and state that it allows the elicitation of further information by the researcher, which helps in understanding the participants' point of view on the matter at hand. Observation was also

used to enhance the data gathered through interviews. Observation was also conducted to complement the interview data, providing additional insights into teachers' practices and interactions that could not be fully captured through interviews alone.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The process began with familiarisation with the interview transcripts, followed by initial coding to highlight meaningful data segments. Codes were then organised into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the teachers' views. This type of analysis was particularly helpful in interpreting and making sense of the participants' experiences within the chess programme, allowing the researcher to capture both shared and unique perspectives of the participants.

Research participants

Ethical matters pertaining to confidentiality and anonymity were addressed through the usage of pseudonyms to conceal the participants' actual identities. The participants participated willingly in the study and understood that they could withdraw at any time if they so wished (Creswell & Poth 2018).

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of Zululand Research Ethics Committee and ethics consent was received on 12 July 2017. The ethics certificate number is UZREC: 171110-030 PGD 2017/169. Permission was granted by the KwaZulu-Natal DBE, King Cetshwayo Education District and Tsogo Sun Moves for Life.

Results

The findings of this study are presented according to the themes generated from the data gathered from the participants. The following themes were generated: Getting it right from the start: good preparation, chess educational values, support and motivation, and implementation challenges.

Theme 1: Good preparation

Preparation takes place prior to the start of the programme. This includes the planning stage of a programme. The participants stated that good preparation lays a good foundation for the upcoming programme. Among what they believe should occur in the preparation stage, they identified the selection of teachers with an interest in chess and training. The teachers believe that if one does not have an interest in the game, they are not going to give it their all in making it effective, as was the case with some of them.

Participant J stated:

> 'I was told that because I teach Grade 2, I have to use chess; all Foundation Phase teachers do. I have never played chess before, but I was told to teach using it when I do not even know how to play it myself. I do not think that is fair. I am not interested in chess, and it is unfortunate that I happen to be in Grade 2, and now I have to teach it to my learners.' (Participant J, Teacher, Grade 2)

This shows a disconnect between programme expectations and individual readiness, suggesting that compulsory participation without adequate preparation can negatively affect teacher engagement and possibly learner outcomes.

In contrast, Participant G, who had a more positive attitude, stated:

> 'I never imagined that I would be involved in chess teaching. It is a good game, and my learners seem to enjoy it when Njabulo [*one of the learners*] teaches them.' (Participant G, Teacher, Grade 3)

This highlights differences in teachers' experiences, with some adapt and find intrinsic value in the programme despite initial reluctance.

In the interviews, the participants unanimously stated that for a chess programme to be successful, there must be thorough training of the teachers. They shared that in the current programme, they did receive training, but they feel that it did not prepare them enough for the implementation process when they are alone in the classrooms. When asked about the intensity of the training, they alluded that it should depend on the level of expertise of the teachers with the subject.

Participant D stated:

> 'I believe that if there was a workshop for maybe a week or more where we were taught how to play chess and how we should teach using it,. I think I would do a better job if I could get more training. The trainings we get are usually a day or two and are not enough for someone who is new to chess like me.' (Participant D, Teacher, Grade 1)

This indicates a tension between programme design and the diverse expertise levels of teachers, emphasising the need for differentiated training that considers prior knowledge and confidence. The brevity of training sessions appears to undermine teacher preparedness, which could affect the programme's effectiveness.

Overall, this reveals that 'good preparation' is not simply about scheduling a training session but involves careful teacher selection based on interest and experience, as well as providing tailored, ongoing support. Failure to address these factors risks disengagement and inconsistent delivery, ultimately affecting learners' experiences. Observation of classroom sessions further confirmed these findings, showing that teachers with limited preparation often struggled to engage learners effectively, while those with prior interest and experience demonstrated greater confidence and smoother implementation.

Theme 2: Chess educational values

The participants in this study recognised the educational potential of chess, besides it being a recreational activity. They highlighted the cognitive, academic and social benefits that learners gain through engaging with chess, especially in the context of rural schooling settings where they are situated with limited learning resources. Participant B stated:

> 'I can see that chess helps them think better; I have noticed that even their school work has improved since they started playing. And if they played it more, I'm sure they would be far.' (Participant B, Teacher, Grade 1)

This suggests that chess has a positive transfer effect on general academic performance, possibly enhancing learners' concentration, problem-solving and memory skills.

Several participants emphasised that chess created an inclusive and motivating environment for learners who struggle academically. Participant K shared:

> 'I have learners who do not perform well in class, but they really try in chess; this helps them to be proud about something.' (Participant K, Teacher, Grade 3)

Such reflections highlight chess as a level playing field, helping to build learners' confidence and affirming their self-worth, especially when traditional academics present challenges.

Participant E added a social-emotional perspective:

> 'I like that in chess, they shake hands before the game starts and again when the game ends. After the games, even if they lost, they still shake hands and not cry like they used to when they first started playing.' (Participant E, Teacher, Grade 1)

This shows how chess fosters resilience, respect and emotional regulation. Participant J also emphasised behavioural change:

> 'When I saw my fidgety learners sitting through for the game, I just knew that it was good for them and me as well.' (Participant J, Teacher, Grade 2)

While the educational benefits were clear, some teachers also implied that these outcomes are possible only if there is proper facilitation and learner engagement, suggesting that teacher preparedness is key to unlocking these values. Observations of classroom sessions supported these perceptions, showing that learners actively engaged with chess, demonstrated improved concentration and exhibited positive social interactions, confirming the educational values highlighted by the teachers.

Theme 3: Support and motivation

Support from the programme organisers played a key role in the teachers' ability to implement the chess programme. Most participants expressed appreciation for the resources provided, such as chess sets, which allowed all learners to participate without disruption. They also valued the support from the programme coordinator, who was seen as helpful when available:

Participant H stated

> 'There are many chess sets that we got from Moves for Life; all the learners have chess sets with their partners. I also like that the coordinator always comes to the school when we ask for help in chess, even though it has been a while, because we are very busy and have to finish the trackers first.' (Participant H, Teacher, Grade 2)

However, teachers also found that the coordinator's visits had become less frequent because of increased teaching demands, making it harder to ask for help or clarification.

Motivation also kept coming from the participants. While some teachers appreciated receiving certificates of appreciation, others felt they needed more tangible forms of recognition. Participant C said:

> 'This year, the coordinator gave us certificates of appreciation and thanked us for using chess. I liked that a lot … At least now I have something showing that I teach using chess.' (Participant C, Teacher, Grade 2)

In contrast, Participant G said:

> 'If they were giving me a raise in my salary, it would really make a difference, not just a certificate. What am I going to do with a certificate?' (Participant G, Teacher, Grade 3)

Many felt that teaching chess added to their workload and that extra effort deserved more than just symbolic gestures. The theme highlights that both material support and meaningful recognition are needed to keep teachers motivated and invested. Classroom observations complemented these findings from interviews, showing that teachers who received adequate support and motivation were more confident in implementing chess activities and engaged learners more effectively, whereas those who did not seek support sometimes struggled to maintain learner participation.

Theme 4: Implementation challenges

Although teachers were generally positive about the chess programme, they also shared several challenges they faced. One of the biggest issues was the added administrative workload. Teachers felt that the chess-related admin, such as workbooks and reporting, compounded their already heavy responsibilities under the Department of Education.

Participant B shared:

> 'We already have so much work to cover in the annual teaching plan, and now there is chess admin to be done as well …' (Participant B, Teacher, Grade 1)

Participant F echoed this:

> 'Workbooks are the worst part; we already have workbooks from the Department of Education that we must monitor, and now there are chess workbooks as well … it is just too much.' (Participant F, Teacher, Grade 3)

Another challenge was the language used in chess materials. Since Foundation Phase instruction is delivered in learners' home language (like isiZulu), English-only resources were difficult to use and created confusion for learners and additional work for teachers.

Participant F shared:

> 'These workbooks are written in English when we teach learners in IsiZulu … these workbooks just confuse them.' (Participant F, Teacher, Grade 3)

In some cases, the chess content was also seen as too difficult, even for teachers. Participant A pointed out:

> 'Some of these activities are too difficult even for us, how much more for the learners?' (Participant A, Teacher, Grade 3)

These challenges suggest that while the programme has potential, it needs better alignment with the school curriculum, simpler materials and resources translated into home languages. Without these improvements, implementation remains a burden for many teachers. Observations of classroom sessions supported these findings, showing that teachers often struggled to manage chess activities alongside other responsibilities, and learners sometimes became confused when resources were not aligned with their home language or ability level.

Discussion

The study aimed to explore the perception of teachers on the integration of chess in rural South African schools with the theoretical lens of the Transformational Leadership Theory. The findings reveal a nuanced view of how chess programmes can either succeed or fail, depending on the quality of preparation, perceived educational value, available support and motivation, and implementation challenges experienced. Transformational leadership offers a powerful framework for understanding and responding to these themes because of its emphasis on inspiring a shared vision, individualised support, intellectual stimulation and modelling high expectations (Bass & Riggio 2006).

The participants stated the importance of intentional preparation prior to the launch of a chess programme. This finding is aligned with this study's theoretical framework, transformational leadership, which emphasises visionary planning and building commitment (Leithwood & Jantzi 2005). It is important to select teachers with an interest in chess and provide them with adequate training, which indicates the importance of individual consideration, which is a key pillar of transformational leadership. When leaders require teachers who are not interested in teaching chess or not trained, as Participant J's experience indicates, it demotivates them and also compromises the success of the programme. Effective transformational leaders engage teachers early in the planning stages, identify their strengths, and offer support based on their skill levels and interests (Northouse 2018). The lack of satisfaction indicated by participants about limited training shows a gap in leadership practices that fail to empower and build teacher capacity adequately. Observations of classroom sessions supported this finding, showing that teachers with limited preparation often struggled to engage learners effectively, while those with prior interest and experience demonstrated greater confidence and smoother implementation. Literature shows that successful educational innovations require materials, ongoing professional development and teacher buy-in (Desimone & Garet 2015).

All the participants acknowledged the important educational benefits of chess, including improvements in cognitive skills, learner focus and emotional resilience. These findings resonate with literature suggesting that chess enhances executive functions, problem-solving skills and academic achievement, particularly in math and reading (Kazemi, Yektayar & Abad 2012; Sala & Gobet 2016). The motivational impact of chess on learners with academic difficulties reflects the intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation central to transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio 2006). A leader who recognises such potential could use chess not only as a teaching tool but also as a vehicle for inclusion and learner empowerment. The social and emotional benefits described by teachers include respect, discipline and perseverance, to name a few. Support literature states that chess contributes to holistic learner development (Scholz, Hung & Jerschke 2008). These findings align with the transformative goal of education to shape not just academic but also ethical and emotionally intelligent pupils (Burns 1978). Classroom observations confirmed these educational benefits, with learners actively participating, demonstrating improved concentration and showing positive social interactions, supporting the teachers' perceptions.

Teachers appreciated the support they got, such as enough chess sets and responsive coordinators. However, they also stated the need for more training, recognition and monetary incentives. This indicates that while structural support was there, motivational and emotional support, as found in transformational leaders, was not consistently applied. According to the transformational leadership theory, recognising staff contributions and encouraging professional growth are key to sustaining motivation (Leithwood & Jantzi 2005). The participants appreciated the certificates of appreciation, viewing them as a tool for career advancement. However, the participants also indicated interest in monetary incentives, and incentives without money were considered inadequate. This means that the chess leaders need to understand what drives different individuals. Literature emphasises the importance of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in sustaining teacher engagement in educational reforms (Ryan & Deci 2000). While the certificates inspired and satisfied some of the participants, others wanted tangible rewards for their sustained commitment, especially becausethis initiative demands extra work beyond what is required from them by the Department of Education.

Observations further highlighted that teachers who received adequate support and motivation were more confident in implementing chess activities, while those who lacked sufficient support sometimes struggled to maintain learner engagement.

While recognising the value of chess, participants stated that they were still not happy about administrative overload, advanced materials and language barriers. These challenges align with findings from other studies that indicate that the sustainability of programmes based in schools is often characterised by poor alignment with existing workloads and curricula of teachers (Fullan 2007). The teachers' frustration with English materials in isiZulu-medium classes indicates that the programme leaders failed to check the context first. Transformational leaders are expected to adapt strategies to local needs and engage in culturally relevant planning (Shields 2010). Ignoring language considerations not only increases teacher workload but also diminishes the effectiveness of the programme for learners. Also, the complexity of chess workbooks, which they said even for them (teachers), shows a lack of intellectual scaffolding necessary for programme success. Observations confirmed these challenges, showing that teachers often struggled to manage chess activities alongside other responsibilities, and learners were sometimes confused as resources were not aligned with their home language or ability level. Leaders must ensure that materials are developmentally appropriate and aligned to the local educational context, a key aspect of transformational leadership's intellectual stimulation domain.

The findings suggest that while the participants view the chess programme as having strong educational potential, its success hinges on transformational leadership, responsive to teachers' needs, empowering in its vision and committed to equitable support structures. For chess to thrive in rural schools, leaders must engage teachers as co-creators, invest in thorough training, provide differentiated support and recognise the contextual realities that influence teaching and learning.

Recommendations

- Chess programme leaders should identify teachers who are interested in chess to lead the programme instead of assigning teachers without interest or background in chess. As shown in the findings, this can result in reduced commitment and programme effectiveness. Transformational leaders must check the teachers' strengths against their responsibilities.
- The first training should be according to the teachers' prior knowledge of chess. More extensive workshops should be offered to novices, followed by ongoing mentoring and refreshers. Experienced teachers and local chess coaches could provide support and growth in the long term.
- Chess leaders must translate the materials into learners' home languages (e.g., isiZulu) to reduce cognitive overload and to make learning more accessible for the learners. Instructional resources must also be aligned with local contexts and developmental levels of both learners and teachers.
- To give teachers more time to focus on teaching and learner development. Handouts and interactive activities could be used occasionally instead of workbooks that require regular marking.
- Chess programme leaders should implement intrinsic factors such as professional recognition, certificates and extrinsic factors such as stipends or performance-based rewards and incentives. This will help to recognise the additional responsibilities teachers have, and it aligns with transformational leadership's emphasis on individualised support and motivation.

Conclusion

Ensuring quality education is important, which is why intervention programmes to enhance teaching and learning are introduced in schools. However, running programmes in schools is not without challenges, which is why it is important to foresee them and try to prevent them beforehand. It becomes more of a problem, particularly if brought to people who were not involved during its beginning, unless there are good strategies for making them buy into the idea. Getting views during the implementation through evaluations is critical and ensures success. Chess is a complex game that requires teachers to understand it first before they can be able to teach it well. This study explored the perceptions of Foundation Phase teachers in rural South African schools regarding the use of chess as an educational tool, guided by transformational leadership theory. The findings revealed that while teachers recognise the cognitive, academic and social benefits of chess, its successful implementation depends on elements such as adequate preparation, ongoing support, appropriate resources and leadership that values and motivates teachers.

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Competing interests

The author, Ntandokamenzi P. Dlamini, declares that there are no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Ntandokamenzi P. Dlamini: Conceptualisation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Visualisation, Writing-Original Draft, Writing-Review & Editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the author, Ntandokamenzi P. Dlamini. The data are not publicly available because of the confidentiality of the participants.

Disclaimer

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