

Exploring hybrid leadership's influence on school-based support teams in no-fee primary schools



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Background: School-based support teams (SBSTs) play a crucial role in facilitating inclusive education in South African schools; however, their effectiveness often depends on the leadership style adopted within the school.

Aim: This study explored how different leadership styles influence the functioning of SBSTs in two no-fee public primary schools in South Africa to identify practices that support effective and collaborative learner support.

Setting: The study was conducted in two no-fee public primary schools in a socio-economically challenged township in the Gauteng province, South Africa.

Methods: A qualitative narrative case study design guided by transformational and distributed leadership theories was adopted for this study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion involving 13 participants, including SBST members and deputy principals.

Results: Leadership practices dominated by autocratic and laissez-faire styles negatively affected team morale, collaboration and overall effectiveness. Limited communication, lack of recognition and insufficient structured support hindered team cohesion and learner support delivery. Without transformational traits such as inspirational motivation and individualised consideration, staff morale was further lowered. While distributed leadership was limited, its few instances indicated potential for more collaborative practice.

Conclusion: A hybrid leadership model integrating transformational, distributed and participative elements can strengthen SBST functioning, particularly in under-resourced contexts.

Contribution: The study provides evidence for adopting context-sensitive, equity-oriented leadership approaches to enhance collaboration, morale and learner support in inclusive education.

Keywords: school leadership; school-based support teams; transformational leadership; distributed leadership; inclusive education; South Africa.

Introduction

Understanding the roles and responsibilities of school-based support teams (SBSTs) is essential for recognising the critical role of school leadership in fostering inclusive education. According to Makoele (2014), SBSTs are school-level structures responsible for coordinating institutional support provided by the school, including identifying learners with barriers to learning and developing strategies to address these identified barriers, particularly those related to learning. Their effectiveness depends significantly on the leadership provided by school management, which influences how inclusive practices are implemented and sustained (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2025; Shabalala 2025). In the South African context, SBSTs, also referred to as site-based or teacher support teams, play a pivotal role in identifying and responding to learning challenges (DBE 2005), and their success is closely tied to the strategic and relational capacities of school leaders. However, these teams often faced challenges, including insufficient support, role ambiguity and a lack of capacity (Rulwa-Mnatwana 2014). These systemic issues highlighted a broader leadership gap in promoting collaborative and empowered support structures within schools.

This study explored how school leadership, particularly transformational and distributed approaches, affected the functioning of SBSTs in two no-fee public primary schools in South Africa (SA). These leadership styles were selected based on both theoretical relevance and

empirical evidence. For instance, Bass and Avolio (1994) emphasise the importance of vision, motivation and individualised support, which are crucial for empowering teams in under-resourced environments. Similarly, Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2004) conceptualised distributed leadership as a leadership that promotes shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making, aligning well with the team-based nature of SBSTs.

Empirical literature such as Makhalemele and Tlale (2021) and Naicker and Mestry (2022) demonstrates that these leadership models enhance inclusive education practices and team functionality in South African schools. Furthermore, Williams (2011) highlights how hybrid and distributed leadership approaches foster teacher agency and improve support structures in no-fee school contexts. These frameworks were therefore deemed most suitable for examining the influence of leadership on SBST functioning.

This study specifically examined how these leadership styles influenced the responsiveness and inclusivity of educational practices through their impact on the effectiveness of support teams. However, in no-fee schools where resources are scarce, the enactment of inclusive education often depends on the effectiveness of SBSTs, which require strong adaptive leadership. Baysa (2025) highlights how transformational leadership enhances teacher motivation and school performance, contributing to inclusive school climates. Adams, Hussain and Tan (2023) further emphasise that distributed leadership fosters collective responsibility and shared decision-making, both of which are essential for the collaborative functioning of SBSTs. Despite the growing recognition of SBSTs as key drivers of inclusive support, limited research has examined how leadership styles directly influence their operations and impact.

There is growing international interest in exploring hybrid leadership. Despite this interest, there is a notable gap in the literature on how hybrid leadership influences school support structures in no-fee schools where SBSTs are crucial for addressing barriers to learning but often function with minimal resources and uneven leadership support (Netshipale, Tlale & Phala 2025). Recent literature also demonstrates that school leadership significantly influences the definition and implementation of inclusion through its impact on teacher attitudes, resource allocation and school climate (Wang, Deng & Tian 2025), highlighting the importance of understanding leadership's role in inclusive support systems.

Addressing this gap is important for understanding how leadership practices can enhance inclusive education within under-resourced educational settings. This study, therefore, explores how hybrid leadership, which is an integration of transformational and distributed practices, influences the functioning of SBSTs in two no-fee public primary schools in SA. By focusing on the interplay between leadership styles and team effectiveness, the research provides insights into

how school leaders can foster responsive, collaborative and sustainable learner support systems. This emphasis enhances the broader discussion on inclusive education by demonstrating how hybrid leadership models can serve as a driving force for establishing effective support systems in schools with limited resources.

Zinn (1997) and Hayak, Avidov-Ungar and Bitton (2024) observed that leadership in South African public schools remained predominantly top-down, with principals and school management teams (SMTs) sometimes appearing reluctant to share decision-making authority. This tension posed significant barriers to the development of teacher leadership and the effectiveness of SBSTs, particularly in under-resourced areas.

The focus of the research was two no-fee primary schools in Olievenhoutbosch, a rapidly growing but socio-economically challenged township in the Gauteng Province of SA. The area experienced significant poverty, unemployment and limited-service access, which placed considerable strain on schools and underlined the essential role of SBSTs in assisting vulnerable learners (DBE 2001; Mohale 2021). Exploring leadership practices within this context provided critical insight into how school leaders could better enable support teams to respond effectively to complex learner needs.

Theoretical framework

The study is underpinned by a hybrid theoretical framework that combines transformational, distributed and participative leadership theories. This framework explores the interplay between leadership and collaborative support structures in schools. Rooted in the work of Burns (1978) and expanded by Bass and Avolio (1994), transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating employees. In education, transformational leadership boosts teacher morale, fosters trust, supports professional development and enhances learner performance (Bush 2018; Naz, Afzal & Javed 2023). The four core dimensions, idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration, foster a culture of trust, creativity and reflection that drives innovation and effective problem-solving within SBSTs. Mulford (2003) and Hoque and Raya (2023) postulated that school principals who exhibit transformational leadership foster stronger team cohesion and morale. While this leadership style promotes motivation and trust among teachers, its focus on individual emphasis can create challenges in highly collaborative environments, such as SBSTs, where collective decision-making and shared responsibilities are vital for effective learner support.

Spillane et al. (2004) argue that leadership involves multiple individuals, not only formally appointed leaders. In a similar vein, Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999) describe distributed leadership as a sustainable and inclusive approach, especially in contexts where the complexity of challenges exceeds the capacity of any one leader.

This decentralised approach aligns with SBSTs' structure, where teachers and support personnel collaborate to provide learner support. Similarly, as postulated by authors such as Choi and Drago-Severson (2024) and Mondal (2020), participative leadership promotes democratic decision-making and inclusive school practices. Leithwood (2021) and Turner-Cmucha and Óskarsdóttir (2020) highlight that distributed and participative leadership in SBSTs fosters mutual accountability and shared responsibility. These approaches promote collaborative planning and structured decision-making, enabling teams to align strategies for diverse learner needs. They also empower professionals to exercise their expertise, enhancing SBSTs' capacity for inclusive and responsive support.

Literature review

This literature review examines key leadership styles relevant to inclusive education, laying a foundation for understanding the development of a hybrid leadership approach.

Towards a hybrid leadership model

Recognising the constraints of relying on just one leadership approach, this research proposes a hybrid framework that integrates transformational, distributed and participative leadership. Transformational leadership provides the vision and moral focus crucial for guiding under-resourced schools, whereas distributed and participative leadership executes this vision through collaborative efforts and joint decision-making.

This hybrid framework enhances team structures, teacher leadership and school-wide support systems, promoting equity-oriented, context-sensitive leadership models that advance inclusive education in South African schools.

Leadership and inclusive education

Research emphasises the importance of systemic leadership in promoting inclusive education. For instance, White, Lowery and Johnson (2025) noted that high-quality leadership is often associated with collaborative, equity focused and data-driven practices.

In under-resourced schools, strategic resource allocation and leadership responsiveness to learner contextual needs are crucial. Balantucas (2025) discovered that effective school leaders in disadvantaged contexts often use narrative-based strategies to maximise scarce resources.

Leadership is foundational in enabling inclusive education, particularly in under-resourced schools with complex learner needs and limited resources. Department of Basic Education (2005) and Rulwa-Mnatwana (2014) highlight that SBSTs are designed to organise support services and foster collaboration in addressing obstacles to learning. However, these teams frequently operate with insufficient clarity of roles and responsibilities within SBSTs, as well as

inadequate support and leadership capacity, particularly in areas with socio-economic challenges (Mohale 2021; Zinn 1997).

Inclusive leadership is characterised by administrative oversight and the fostering of collaborative and responsive school cultures. Turner-Cmucha and Óskarsdóttir (2020) emphasise the importance of leadership's strategic and relational aspects in fostering inclusion within educational institutions. In this light, effective leadership is about creating conditions in which teachers and support staff can function as empowered agents of change (Bwalya 2023; Tebid 2019).

According to Gonzales, Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz and Pashiardis (2025), effective school leadership is critical in shaping school culture, providing clear pedagogical direction and fostering collaborative team environments. Effective and inclusive leadership becomes even more crucial in the context of inclusive education, where school leaders are responsible for managing multi-professional support teams such as SBSTs, which strive to address learning barriers and promote equity within the school environment. Hallinger (2003) argues that leadership must go beyond management to encompass instructional and transformational roles that foster shared responsibility. Leithwood et al. (1999) emphasise integrating strategic vision with participatory engagement, enabling teachers and support staff to contribute meaningfully to decision-making in evolving contexts. In under-resourced settings, where demands on educators and support structures are high, shared leadership models have been shown to foster innovation and resilience among school teams (Leithwood 2021).

Transformational leadership and team empowerment

Transformational leadership has been widely studied in education for its positive impact on school culture, team morale and staff motivation. Naz et al. (2023) and Wahjono et al. (2021) highlight that transformational leadership fosters enhanced teacher collaboration, strengthened learner support and the professional development of team members. Similarly, Mulford (2003) and Hoque and Raya (2023) associate transformational traits within SBSTs with greater team cohesion and elevated morale. Empirical studies also show that leadership styles influence how effectively a team fulfills its role. For instance, schools led by principals who adopt transformational behaviours are more likely to foster environments that recognise contributions, support innovation and align teams to a shared vision (Akpa, Asikhia & Nneji 2021; Carter et al. 2020). By contrast, autocratic or laissez-faire leadership often results in poor communication and role ambiguity, undermining support structures (Jaafar, Zambi & Fathil 2021; Kumar & Dhiman 2021).

This body of literature highlights the practical significance of leadership that is empowering, visionary and attuned to the needs of teachers and learners, particularly within inclusive education settings.

Shared leadership and hybrid models

While transformational leadership emphasises influence and vision, distributed leadership emphasises the collective distribution of responsibilities and expertise (Leithwood et al. 1999; Spillane et al. 2004). Studies suggest that this model is particularly effective for structures like SBSTs, where cross-functional collaboration is essential. In this study, the concept of a hybrid leadership model is defined as a combination of transformational, distributed and participative leadership aspects, aiming to balance vision-based direction with collaborative application. This hybrid approach enables school leaders to inspire and motivate staff while promoting shared accountability and collective decision-making, which is a key requirement for the effective functioning of SBSTs in inclusive education contexts. Drawing on White et al. (2025), hybrid leadership is further understood as a systemic practice that connects policy, organisational culture and classroom realities to promote equity and inclusion. Their analysis highlights collaborative leadership, equity-oriented decision-making and professional development as essential practices for advancing inclusive education through integrated leadership methods.

Choi and Drago-Severson (2024) and Mondal (2020) emphasise that participative leadership, which is closely linked to distributed leadership, fosters staff involvement in decision-making, promoting ownership and collaborative problem-solving. Likewise, Johnson (2021) highlights that participative structures enhance school culture and teacher engagement, particularly in team-based settings.

In South African public schools, hierarchical leadership structures often inhibit these collaborative models. Zinn (1997) and Hayak et al. (2024) highlight the persistence of centralised control, which limits innovation and professional agency among support teams. To this end, Turner-Cmuchal and Óskarsdóttir (2020) stress the importance of leadership that fosters open communication and shared accountability, particularly in schools that advance inclusive education.

School-based support teams

Leadership styles have a significant impact on the effectiveness and morale of support teams. Autocratic and laissez-faire leadership have been associated with poor communication, low motivation and role ambiguity (Jaafar et al. 2021; Kumar & Dhiman 2021). These styles contrast with the relational and empowering approaches embedded in transformational and distributed leadership models. Wilson et al. (2023) note that transformational leadership strengthens team engagement and contributes to a positive school culture, while Leithwood (2021) links distributed leadership to greater equity and professional development among staff. Effective leaders create enabling conditions for teamwork, communication and shared accountability, which are essential for implementing inclusive education (Mestry 2017). In SA, structural and cultural barriers, such as hierarchical norms and underfunded systems, often hinder

collaborative leadership (Hayak et al. 2024; Zinn 1997). These realities highlight the need for context-responsive leadership that inspires, shares responsibility and supports capacity building within teams like the SBST. In this study, context-responsive leadership is understood not as a separate leadership style, but as the adaptive application of transformational, distributed and participative practices tailored to the unique challenges of under-resourced schools. In practice, many effective SBSTs operate under a hybrid leadership model that combines transformational and distributed characteristics, fostering innovation and trust while maintaining strategic control (Walker 2022). Such hybrid approaches can enhance the responsiveness and sustainability of support systems in no-fee schools, where resources are limited but learner needs are complex.

School-based support teams are institutional structures mandated by the DBE under Education White Paper 6 (DBE 2001) and the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) (DBE 2014). These teams are responsible for coordinating the identification, initial assessment, teacher support and referral processes for learners facing educational barriers. Although primarily led by teachers, according to Johnson and Erasmus (2025), SBSTs work collaboratively with district teams and related professionals. The SBST is typically chaired by the school principal or a delegated member of the school support team and is constituted by members of the SMT, such as the principal or deputy principal, learning support or remedial teachers, grade heads and class teachers who have expertise in identifying and addressing learning barriers (DBE 2024).

Critique of related findings

Studies conducted in SA highlighted critical gaps in leadership development and inclusive practice. For instance, Naidoo and Peterson (2015) revealed that school leaders often lack clarity on their instructional leadership roles, interpreting their responsibilities as largely administrative. Such findings point to a need for leadership programmes that emphasise curriculum leadership and inclusive pedagogical support. Similarly, Skae, Brown and Wilmot's (2020) study revealed that teachers in foundation phase classrooms strive to implement inclusive education; however, challenges such as limited support and unclear roles within SBSTs become a barrier. These findings echo this study's findings, where leadership is often described as autocratic or disengaged, while collaboration within SBSTs is inhibited by structural and cultural barriers (Barnett & Maarman 2020; Zuze & Juan 2020). While valuable, these findings may reflect conditions where structured leadership development systems are more established. In contrast, this study highlights that school leaders often lack access to such development opportunities or the institutional culture necessary to apply them effectively in many South African no-fee schools (Barnett & Maarman 2020; Zuze & Juan 2020). Leadership is often described as autocratic or disengaged, with limited collaboration and unclear roles within SBSTs.

Research methods and design

This section outlines the methodological approach employed in this study, including research design, sampling, data collection and data collection procedures. It forms the framework guiding the research and ensures the rigour and trustworthiness of the findings.

Research design

This study employed a qualitative narrative case study design to explore how school leadership influences the functioning of SBSTs. A narrative case study was selected for its ability to capture the complexity of leadership practices through an interpretive, participatory lens that situates individual experiences within their broader social and contextual realities (Creswell 2013; Jiang et al. 2023). This design allowed the researcher to explore how leadership support shapes SBSTs through the lived narratives of teachers in different school contexts.

Using narrative case studies enabled a thorough exploration of leadership dynamics and their implications for inclusive education practices. By focusing on the stories and subjective perspectives of participants, this approach is consistent with the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises the importance of meaning-making through both individual and collective experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius 2020). This design was particularly appropriate given the context-sensitive and relational nature of school leadership and support team functioning.

Methodological triangulation

A methodological triangulation strategy was used to enrich the collected data and enhance credibility. This included semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group discussion to capture both personal and group perspectives on how leadership practices influence SBST operations. Using both methods provided a deeper and more thorough understanding of the research topic (Creswell 2013).

Participants and sampling

Participants were drawn from two no-fee primary schools in Olievenhoutbosch, a township in the Gauteng Province of SA. These schools, anonymised as School A and School B, were purposively selected based on contextual relevance and prior findings from one of the researchers' doctoral work, which identified notable challenges in SBST performance linked to leadership support. These challenges included unclear role descriptions, insufficient administrative support, limited professional development opportunities and inconsistent communication between the SMT and SBST members. Both schools are located within the Tshwane South District, sharing similar socio-economic environments, which allowed for a focused, contextually grounded comparison.

A total of 13 participants took part in the study. School A had only two SBST members, who were individually interviewed alongside the deputy principal, who was not actively part of the SBST. Because of the team's small size, a focus group was not feasible. School B, with a larger and more structured SBST, offered broader participation: the deputy principal (who served as the SBST coordinator) was interviewed individually, and a focus group discussion was conducted with seven SBST members, including learner support educators (LSEs) and members of the SMT actively involved in the SBST.

Both purposive and convenience sampling were used to select participants who had direct experience with SBST functioning and school leadership practices. The schools' proximity and willingness to participate facilitated access, which was crucial for conducting in-depth, site-specific qualitative research (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim 2016; Salkind 2010).

Data collection

Data collection methods were tailored to each school's context to preserve ethical integrity and methodological rigour. At School A, the limited number of SBST members necessitated individual interviews, allowing each participant to reflect deeply on their experiences. The larger team size at School B allowed for individual and focus group interviews, which helped surface shared patterns and contrasting viewpoints within the SBST.

Although there was a methodological variation between the schools, every effort was made to ensure an equitable opportunity for participants to express their views. This flexibility, grounded in ethical research practice, allowed the study to adapt to real-world school dynamics without compromising the richness or credibility of the data.

Data collection procedures

Data collection occurred over 6 weeks during the academic term, enabling researchers to engage with participants without disrupting school routines. Before data collection, the researchers obtained ethical clearance and permission from the Gauteng Department of Education and school principals.

At School A, due to SBST comprising only two members, data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews with both SBST members and the deputy principal. These interviews were conducted privately on school premises, each lasting approximately 45–60 min. The small number of team members made it impossible to use focus group methodology in this situation.

A larger and more diverse SBST at School B enabled individual and group data collection strategies. The deputy principal, who also served as the SBST coordinator, participated in an individual interview. A focus group

interview was conducted with 10 SBST members, including LSEs and SMT representatives actively involved in the SBST. The focus group was held in a conference room at the school and lasted approximately 90 min.

Participants' consent was sought to record focus group interviews and discussions, which were later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also taken during each session to capture contextual observations, non-verbal cues and emerging reflections relevant to the study. Interview guides were aligned with the study's research questions and were intentionally open ended to allow participants to express their experiences and perceptions in their own words.

Rigour and trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed:

- **Member checking:** Participants were given an opportunity to review the data and determine their authenticity (Creswell 2013).
- **Audit trail:** A detailed audit trail was maintained throughout the research process by documenting each stage from data collection to analysis. So, transparency and reproducibility were promoted (Yin 2018).

These measures helped to establish the credibility, dependability and confirmability of the study, reinforcing the validity of the findings derived from participant narratives.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee (Ref. No. 2022/11/09/90214331/41/AM), and permission to access the research sites was granted by the Gauteng Department of Education. All participants provided informed consent, and participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time. To maintain confidentiality, schools were anonymised as School A and School B, and participants were assigned pseudonyms. (e.g. A-DP, B-FG-T6, B-T1) corresponding to their roles within the SBST. This coding ensured clarity in data presentation and analysis while upholding ethical standards.

Results

The coding system used for participant identification ensured confidentiality while enabling the reader to distinguish between participants. Participants from School A are referred to as A-T1, A-T2 (teachers who are members of the SBST) and A-DP (Deputy Principal). Participants from School B are referred to as B-T1, B-T2 (teachers who are SBST members) and B-DP (Deputy Principal).

Additionally, a focus group discussion was conducted at School B, comprising seven SBST members (coded B-FG-T1 to B-FG-T7), two of whom also served on the School Management Team (SMT).

This study examined how the operations of school leadership influence how the SBST functions. The study emphasised how various leadership styles influence team dynamics, morale and the provision of learner support services. The findings point to the complex interplay between transformational, distributed and laissez-faire leadership traits within the participating schools. The themes below are discussed in relation to the relevant leadership styles.

Laissez-faire leadership: The impact of passive leadership on school-based support team functionality

A laissez-faire leadership style emerged as most prominent in both schools, marked by disengagement, lack of support and absence of clear guidance or accountability. This kind of leadership hindered SBSTs from functioning effectively and created an environment of frustration and demoralisation. One participant noted:

'Should big decisions need to be made, they will be delayed because he might not be available.' (B-T1)

Lack of consistent meetings, minimal oversight and lack of recognition led SBST members to feel abandoned:

'We feel we are undervalued.' (B-FG-T6)

'Sometimes I ask myself, where am I working? How are these people seeing me?' (B-FG-T7)

This hands-off approach led to fragmented support services, ineffective communication among stakeholders and uncertainty regarding team roles:

'The principal did not support us; we had to operate on our own.' (A-T2)

'We were like the players, referees, and judges, with no one to oversee or judge whether we were correct.' (B-T2)

One SBST member in the focus group said:

'Sometimes you work hard, but it's like no one notices. It feels like you're working in the dark' (B-FG-T3).

Despite these shortcomings, the few examples of shared responsibility point to distributed leadership's potential. When SBST members were empowered, even minimally, they demonstrated commitment to collaborative problem-solving:

'We meet informally and try to discuss learners' needs even if leadership is not involved.' (B-T1)

Transformational leadership: The missing motivation and vision

There was little to no evidence of transformational leadership from either school, particularly in terms of inspirational motivation and individualised support. Participants rarely described leaders who offered encouragement, opportunities for professional growth or an inspirational vision for inclusive education. One participant said:

'Our principal was a problem because he was not interested in developing the people ... I've been long on the SBST, and I didn't learn anything.' (A-T1)

The absence of morale-boosting leadership negatively impacted staff motivation and engagement. In School B, a participant emphasised the need for recognition:

'No, it is about what he wants, and it will be done his way ... we would have to do things independently and report.' (B-T1).

In both schools, SBST members felt that leadership did not demonstrate transformational leadership values, including inspiring others, fostering trust and encouraging innovation:

'No, it is about what he wants, and it will be done his way. I do not remember him calling a meeting with the SBST to discuss learners' challenges. In most cases, we would have to do things independently and report.' (B-T1)

Similar patterns were evident in School A, where SBST members expressed frustration over the principal's lack of support and developmental leadership. One participant noted:

'Our principal was a problem because he was not interested in developing the people ... the teachers, or what. That's why he would just say that one colleague was a member of the SBST, and she did something that irritated the principal. The principal will remove the colleague and replace her or him with someone else ...' (A-T1)

This quote highlights a lack of transformational leadership qualities, such as personalised attention, empowerment and inspiring motivation. Instead, the principal exercised control without vision and discouraged participation, which directly undermined the SBST's growth and effectiveness.

Distributed leadership: Limited but promising instances of collaboration

Although distributed leadership was not widely observed, some participants reported isolated instances of collaboration or delegated authority. These occurrences, however, often reflected individual initiative or contextual necessity, rather than consistent school-wide practice. One participant remarked:

'He delegated everything and even allowed us to use his signature.' (A-DP)

Although this might imply a degree of trust, it also highlights a lack of direct involvement, which, in the absence of strategic guidance or participation, does not align with principles of distributed leadership that focus on purposeful collaboration and collective responsibility. Similarly, instances of distributed leadership and collaboration were reported in school B:

'He is not involved with the SBST at all. The person who was running the SBST was the Deputy Principal.' (B-T2)

'He allows us to implement, but cannot be part of the implementation; he leaves everything up to us ...' (B-T1)

These examples suggest that while certain tasks were delegated, leadership in School B largely withdrew from active engagement,

resulting in a form of passive delegation rather than intentional, shared leadership. Genuine distributed leadership cannot be achieved without structured collaboration and a commitment to shared accountability.

Discussion

Overview of the findings

The study's findings revealed that laissez-faire and autocratic leadership styles within the two no-fee primary schools compromised the effectiveness of SBSTs, leading to low morale, unclear role definitions, poor communication and fragmented learner support. Transformational leadership traits, such as inspirational motivation, support for professional development and individualised consideration, were largely absent, while distributed leadership was sporadically applied. There were, however, isolated instances of shared responsibility that suggested potential for more collaborative leadership models.

Significance of the study

These findings support prior research indicating that passive and authoritarian leadership undermines team cohesion and inclusive practices (Jaafar et al. 2021; Kumar & Dhiman 2021). However, the significance of these findings lies in their contextual implications: leadership gaps extend beyond internal team dynamics to directly influence the ability of SBSTs to identify and respond to learning barriers. The ability of SBSTs to offer prompt and effective support diminishes when leaders fail to provide guidance, recognition or strategic direction. This suggests that leadership style is not merely a superficial concern but rather a fundamental factor influencing equity in education.

The absence of transformational leadership traits echoes the observations of Naz et al. (2023) and Hoque and Raya (2023), who link such traits to enhanced collaboration and staff motivation. Similarly, while distributed leadership has been widely endorsed as a sustainable model in complex school environments (Leithwood et al. 1999; Spillane et al. 2004), this study found its implementation to be limited. However, where elements of distributed or participative leadership did emerge, they reflected the benefits of collaborative structures for inclusive education, as noted by Choi and Drago-Severson (2024). This gap is significant because distributed leadership relies on collective leadership to address diverse learner needs, and this expectation cannot be met without intentional structures for shared leadership.

Contribution to existing knowledge

This study theoretically enhances the conversation on inclusive education leadership by proposing a hybrid leadership model that integrates transformational, distributed and participative elements. Rather than treating these leadership styles separately, the findings suggest that their combined application is essential for strengthening SBST functionality in under-resourced settings. By framing

leadership as an adaptive practice that responds to contextual realities, the study contributes to leadership theory within environments marked by educational inequity.

Implications for practice and policy

In practical terms, the results highlight the need for leadership development programmes that cultivate hybrid leadership skills. Leadership training should extend beyond administrative management to encompass strategies for motivating staff, promoting collaboration and integrating shared decision-making into school processes. Policymakers should incorporate such competencies into governance frameworks to strengthen SBST operations, particularly in no-fee schools. At the school level, establishing formal recognition systems for SBST contributions could enhance morale and reinforce a culture of collective responsibility.

Future studies should explore the scalability of hybrid leadership models across diverse educational contexts, including rural and urban schools, and examine their long-term impact on learner outcomes. Quantitative research could complement these findings by measuring the correlation between hybrid leadership practices and specific performance indicators of SBST.

Strengths and limitations

The strength of this study lies in its qualitative narrative case study design, which allowed for in-depth exploration of lived experiences within two distinct school contexts. Methodological triangulation achieved through interviews and focus groups and enhanced the credibility of the findings. However, the use of two schools in one township is a limitation that affects the transferability of the findings to other contexts. Furthermore, relying on self-reported data may introduce bias, and the lack of direct observation of leadership practices may have limited the depth of analysis.

Recommendations

The study highlights the urgent need for leadership development programmes that foster hybrid leadership models in under-resourced schools. Policymakers should consider integrating collaborative leadership strategies into professional development frameworks, while schools should institutionalise structures that support shared decision-making and acknowledge SBST contributions. Furthermore, collaboration between the government and higher education institutions to design context-responsive short learning programmes could enhance leadership capacity and better equip school leaders to implement inclusive education effectively.

Conclusion

This study proposes a hybrid model of leadership that combines transformational and distributed leadership as a context-sensitive framework for inclusive education in

no-fee schools. By integrating the visionary and inspirational elements of transformational leadership with the cooperative and capacity-enhancing features of distributed leadership, this model addresses the challenges faced by resource-limited school environments, where collective efforts are crucial for maintaining support systems, such as SBSTs. This integration acknowledges that effective leadership in these settings cannot only depend on hierarchical authority or shared responsibility, but rather on a dynamic interaction between the two. The hybrid leadership model, therefore, offers both a theoretical contribution by providing a deeper understanding of leadership within inclusive education and a practical tool for school leaders seeking to enhance SBST effectiveness through collaboration and empowerment.

This study highlights the crucial role of school leadership in influencing the effectiveness of SBSTs in under-resourced educational settings. Autocratic and laissez-faire leadership styles were found to undermine collaboration, morale and learner support, while limited instances of distributed leadership revealed potential for more inclusive practices.

In response, the study proposes a hybrid leadership model that integrates the visionary and motivational strengths of transformational leadership with the collaborative and participatory principles of distributed and participative leadership. This model offers a context-sensitive framework for empowering SBSTs to deliver inclusive education more effectively.

Beyond the South African context, this model holds relevance for global education systems, particularly in low-resource settings. By emphasising shared responsibility, emotional support and strategic vision, it contributes to the international discourse on equity-driven school leadership and offers practical insights for school leaders, policymakers and researchers. It also provides practical guidance for school leaders, policymakers and researchers seeking to enhance inclusive education through adaptive and collaborative leadership practices.

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Competing interests

The authors reported that they received funding from the Women in Research project at the University of South Africa, which may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed publication. The authors have disclosed those interests fully and have implemented an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from their involvement. The terms of these funding arrangements have been reviewed and approved by the affiliated university in accordance with its policy on objectivity in research.

CRedit authorship contribution

Mmapeu M. Manyaka: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft. Francis Simui: Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take 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 corresponding author, Mmapeu M. Manyaka. The data are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and participant confidentiality.

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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