

Leadership Development and School Transformation in Underserved South African Schools: A Phenomenological Study of the Dinaledi STP

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ABSTRACT

Leadership development in underserved educational contexts requires approaches that go beyond principal-centric training to bolster collective instructional capacity. This study investigates the Dinaledi School Transformation Programme (STP), an extensive year-long leadership development initiative implemented across six underserved South African schools. Guided by frameworks of transformational, constructive developmental, and distributed leadership, the research adopts a phenomenologically informed instrumental case study methodology to explore how participation influenced the leadership practices, organisational culture, and perceptions of contextual constraints among School Management Team (SMT) members. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 SMT members, including principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Participants reported shifts from hierarchical, compliance-driven leadership toward more relational and instructionally engaged practices. Their narratives indicated improved collaboration, a clearer shared vision, enhanced support for teachers, and more structured stakeholder engagement. Nonetheless, challenges such as administrative overload, resource scarcity, and resistance to change moderated the sustainability of these developments. The findings underscore the importance of team-based, embedded leadership development and highlight the influence of structural conditions on instructional transformation.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite three decades of democratic reform, South Africa's schooling system remains characterised by profound structural inequalities that persistently influence educational outcomes. Public schools classified in Quintile 1–3 no-fee categories, primarily situated in rural and township communities, face ongoing challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited instructional resources, high learner-to-teacher ratios, and restricted opportunities for professional development (Khumalo & Van der Vyver, 2020; Magner, 2008). In these environments, school leaders are expected not only to ensure effective instructional delivery but also to navigate complex socio-economic realities, community expectations, and systemic inefficiencies.

Consequently, leadership in underserved schools requires adaptive, relational, and strategic competencies that go far beyond routine administrative management.

The importance of school leadership for educational improvement has long been established in the international literature. Foundational studies suggest that leadership significantly influences school effectiveness and student outcomes, particularly through its impact on teaching and learning processes (Hallinger et al., 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1998). At the same time, some scholars caution that the relationship between leadership and measurable student achievement is indirect and context-dependent (Witziers et al., 2003). These debates underscore the need not merely to affirm the importance of leadership, but to understand better how leadership capacity can be meaningfully developed, especially in resource-constrained environments where systemic pressures are acute.

Leadership development initiatives are widely adopted within educational systems; however, many of these initiatives rely on short-term workshops, compliance-oriented training, or sporadic professional development activities that yield limited, unsustainable behavioural change. This issue is especially acute in rural and historically marginalised educational settings, where leaders often operate in relative isolation and lack consistent access to developmental resources (Raney, 2020). Further research indicates that principals in rural and township areas must concurrently address instructional improvements alongside broader community and organisational challenges, necessitating leadership strategies that are collaborative, transformational, and responsive to specific contexts (Boyd, 2021; Webber-Jones, 2020). Nevertheless, many school leaders in these environments report receiving inadequate and fragmented leadership development support, which restricts their capacity to serve as effective agents of transformational change.

Recent scholarly research indicates that embedded, practice-based leadership development programmes may offer a more promising avenue for enhancing leadership capacity in underserved contexts. For instance, investigations conducted in Tanzania and Botswana reveal that structured leadership development initiatives that incorporate coaching and reflective practices can improve instructional supervision and clarify leadership roles (Bush & Anania, 2023). Similarly, research on rural leadership coaching underscores its potential to refine professional judgement and bolster leaders' abilities to navigate complex educational environments (Raney, 2020; Lindle et al., 2015). Nonetheless, the extant literature often examines coaching as an isolated intervention or concentrates narrowly on individual principals, thereby providing limited insights into the functioning of leadership development when integrated into comprehensive, school-wide transformation programmes. Furthermore, empirical evidence from the Global South remains relatively underdeveloped (Klar et al., 2024), leaving significant contextual questions unresolved.

In response to these challenges, the Dinaledi School Transformation Programme (STP) was designed as a comprehensive leadership development intervention targeting School Management Teams (SMTs) in Quintile 1–3 underserved schools in South Africa. In this study, the term “underserved schools” refers to no-fee public schools located in rural and township communities that face systemic resource and capacity constraints. Unlike isolated training initiatives, the Dinaledi STP integrates leadership coaching within a broader, structured transformation framework delivered over a sustained 12-month period. The programme is premised on the assumption that strengthening instructional leadership, enhancing team collaboration, and cultivating a learner-centred organisational culture require ongoing, relational, and contextually grounded developmental support.

Within this architecture, coaching functions not as a standalone intervention, but as a developmental mechanism embedded within a systemic leadership reform approach. Coaching sessions aim to enhance reflective practice, strategic alignment, and collaborative leadership behaviours among SMT members, including principals, deputy principals, and heads of department. By extending participation beyond the principal to the broader SMT, the programme aligns with distributed leadership perspectives that emphasise

shared responsibility and collective agency in school improvement processes (Bush & Glover, 2012; Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017). This team-based approach is particularly relevant in underserved contexts, where leadership responsibilities are often dispersed among multiple actors to address systemic demands.

Although leadership coaching has garnered increasing scholarly interest, significantly less is understood regarding its operation within comprehensive leadership transformation programmes in resource-constrained environments. Much of the existing academic inquiry focuses on behavioural changes among individual leaders or on the effectiveness of coaching in relatively well-resourced settings. There remains a paucity of empirical research exploring how integrated leadership development initiatives influence instructional leadership practices, organisational culture, and stakeholder engagement within historically marginalised school systems. Furthermore, many studies rely predominantly on quantitative metrics, thereby providing limited insight into how school leaders interpret and experience leadership development processes.

This study, therefore, seeks to contribute to the emerging literature on systemic leadership development in underserved contexts by examining the Dinaledi STP as an embedded leadership transformation programme. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, the research explores the lived experiences of SMT members who participated in the programme over 12 months. Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

1. How does participation in the Dinaledi STP shape SMT members' leadership practices and instructional engagement?
2. In what ways does the programme promote a culture of teaching and learning within participating schools?
3. What systemic barriers constrain the impact of leadership development efforts in underserved contexts?

By concentrating on SMT-level leadership development within a structured transformation programme, this study advances beyond limited assessments of coaching techniques to analyse how comprehensive developmental interventions operate in intricate, resource-limited environments. In doing so, it enriches the theoretical discourse on transformational, distributed, and developmental leadership while providing pragmatic insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to establish sustainable solutions to enhance instructional leadership in underserved schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership in Underserved African School Contexts

Across sub-Saharan Africa, school leadership operates within deeply stratified educational systems shaped by historical inequities, resource disparities, and unequal access to professional development. In South Africa, no-fee schools in Quintiles 1–3, primarily located in rural and township communities, face structural constraints that complicate instructional leadership practice (Khumalo & Van der Vyver, 2020; Madonsela et al., 2025). Similar patterns are observed across West and Southern Africa, where headteachers and departmental leaders must simultaneously manage curriculum implementation, teacher development, resource allocation, and community engagement in contexts characterised by administrative overload and funding limitations (Akhimien, 2025; Ansong et al., 2025; Ndongwe, 2025).

Instructional leadership in these environments extends beyond curriculum oversight. African scholarship consistently identifies core dimensions including curriculum alignment, classroom monitoring, teacher mentoring, data-informed diagnosis, and learner-centred pedagogical support (Aphane & Agyeman, 2025; Sonagnon, 2026). However, the enactment of these responsibilities is frequently constrained by heavy administrative workloads, insufficient subject-specific expertise, and limited formal leadership preparation

(Mestry, 2025; Malinga et al., 2021; Kubheka et al., 2025). Even where instructional leadership practices correlate positively with learner outcomes, returns tend to be weaker in under-resourced settings (Homphashe, 2024), underscoring the moderating role of contextual constraints.

Research across Ghana, Benin, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Eswatini reinforces similar themes: instructional leadership requires relational influence, strategic alignment, collaborative decision-making, and professional development support, yet is often hindered by competing demands and systemic pressures (Agbenyo & Esia-Donkoh, 2025; Phebeni & Mpofu, 2024; Akhimien, 2025). Collectively, this body of scholarship suggests that strengthening instructional leadership in underserved schools requires more than individual capacity-building; it necessitates systemic leadership development approaches that address structural, relational, and organisational dimensions simultaneously.

School Management Teams (SMTs) and Distributed Leadership Capacity

Within the South African educational framework, School Management Teams (SMTs), typically comprising principals, deputy principals, and department heads, serve as the principal leadership body responsible for curriculum oversight, teacher development, policy enforcement, and stakeholder engagement (Elias et al., 2014). Modern research increasingly recognises SMTs as mechanisms for distributed leadership, wherein leadership duties are delegated rather than centralised in a single principal (Ramango & Naicker, 2022; Tapala et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, empirical research indicates persistent tensions between aspirations for distributed leadership and the practical realities. School Management Teams (SMTs) often face limited time for mentoring, insufficient induction frameworks for new departmental heads, and inadequate training in instructional supervision (Mahome & Mphahlele, 2024; Nogobo et al., 2025). Administrative responsibilities frequently encroach upon instructional leadership activities, while apprehensions concerning classroom visits and professional support can undermine collegial trust (Nwosu et al., 2022). Gendered pressures and systemic apathy further complicate leadership practice within specific contexts (Nhlumayo & Nkosi, 2025). Despite these challenges, evidence indicates that when SMTs operate cohesively, characterised by collegiality, shared vision, and professional accountability, they significantly enhance teacher commitment, inclusive practices, and pedagogical advancement (Madimetsa & Saltiel, 2021; Maceke, 2025). Consequently, capacity building within SMTs is widely regarded as essential for sustainable school improvement across African settings (Nzarugarura & Ndagijimana, 2025; Ampah-Mensah, 2024). The principal challenge resides not in defining SMT roles but in designing developmental interventions that effectively translate structural responsibilities into proficient leadership practices.

Leadership Development Interventions in African Contexts

Leadership development initiatives within African educational systems have increasingly integrated reflective practices, peer learning, and ongoing engagement, moving away from singular workshops. Programs such as Partners for Possibility in South Africa incorporate coaching, experiential learning, and stakeholder collaborations over extended durations, demonstrating improved resilience, communication, and team cohesion among school leaders (Kok et al., 2023). Analogous initiatives in Rwanda, Ghana, and other settings highlight structured workshops, action planning, reflection cycles, and collaborative forums as effective mechanisms for enhancing leadership practices (Nzarugarura & Ndagijimana, 2025; Ampah-Mensah, 2024; Bush & Glover, 2016).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have also emerged as platforms for embedding collaborative learning and leadership development, particularly where supported by coaching and structured feedback processes (Al-Mahdi et al., 2021; Chiazor et al., 2025). Evidence from Nordic contexts further demonstrates that group coaching models can enhance reflective capacity and experimentation with new

leadership approaches when embedded within national leadership training programmes (Slettbakk & Aas, 2025; Leo et al., 2025). Importantly, studies of rural leadership coaching highlight its potential to reduce professional isolation and foster peer-supported growth (Klar et al., 2024).

While these interventions demonstrate promising outcomes, such as improved collaboration, more precise role alignment, and enhanced instructional focus, the literature reveals two notable gaps. First, many studies focus primarily on individual principals rather than SMT-level leadership development. Second, interventions are often evaluated in terms of programme activities rather than examining how embedded developmental mechanisms shape organisational culture and distributed instructional leadership over time.

Coaching as a Developmental Mechanism within Systemic Leadership Reform

Coaching is typically characterised as a structured, relational, and reflective process of professional development aimed at enhancing the adaptive capacity and strategic actions of leaders (Mmaditla & Ndlovu-Hlatshwayo, 2022). Fundamental features include the utilisation of probing questions, structured reflection, commitments to action, and the establishment of safe spaces for peer challenge (Slettbakk & Aas, 2025). In African contexts, coaching has been incorporated into broader school development initiatives to foster collaboration, resilience, and shared leadership (Kok et al., 2023).

However, coaching in these settings is most effective when embedded within wider reform architectures rather than implemented as isolated interventions. Transformational leadership theory aligns with coaching's emphasis on empowerment, relational trust, and motivational vision-setting (Sutisna et al., 2024; Mawela & Msimeki, 2025). Distributed leadership perspectives further support coaching's potential to strengthen collective agency and shared decision-making within SMT structures (Amos, 2024; Zuma et al., 2025). Additionally, relational philosophies such as Ubuntu underscore the importance of communal values and participatory leadership approaches in African educational contexts (Nkambule, 2023).

Nonetheless, systemic barriers often impede the full realisation of coaching and leadership development initiatives. Administrative overload, inconsistent district support, inadequate induction systems, resource shortages, and gendered leadership pressures hinder the transformation of developmental insights into sustained instructional practice (Mashiane-Nkabinde & Nkambule, 2025; Mestry, 2025; Madonsela et al., 2025). These challenges indicate that leadership development must function not solely at the level of individual reflection but also within organisational structures and cultural norms.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature across African contexts demonstrates three consistent patterns. First, instructional leadership in underserved schools is multidimensional and contextually constrained. Second, SMTs are structurally positioned to enact distributed leadership but frequently lack sustained developmental support. Third, leadership development interventions incorporating coaching, peer learning, and reflective practice show promise, particularly when sustained over time.

However, there remains limited empirical exploration of how coaching operates as an embedded developmental mechanism within comprehensive SMT-focused leadership transformation programmes in underserved schools. Much of the existing research examines isolated coaching interventions or principal-only development models, providing insufficient insight into how integrated, year-long programmes collectively influence instructional leadership practices, organisational culture, and stakeholder engagement.

This study addresses this gap by examining the Dinaledi School Transformation Programme (STP) as a systemic leadership development intervention in South African schools in Quintiles 1–3. By focusing on the lived experiences of SMT members participating in a structured, embedded programme, the study contributes to emerging scholarship on distributed leadership development, instructional reform, and context-sensitive educational transformation in resource-constrained environments.

Theoretical framework

This study frames the Dinaledi School Transformation Programme (STP) through three complementary theoretical lenses: transformational leadership, constructive developmental theory, and distributed leadership (Kegan, 2009; Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017; Ytterstad & Olaisen, 2023). Together, these perspectives position coaching not as a standalone intervention, but as a developmental mechanism embedded within systemic school reform.

Transformational leadership theory elucidates how leadership development can help school leaders transition from transactional management to vision-driven, relational, and motivational practices. Transformational leaders articulate a shared purpose, stimulate critical thinking, and provide individualised support (Bass, 1990; Samodien et al., 2024). In under-resourced educational institutions, where principals often operate in isolation, developmental processes that foster reflective vision-setting and relational engagement are particularly pertinent (Bush & Glover, 2012). Constructive developmental theory offers insights into the internal dimension of leadership growth. By emphasising vertical development and identity reframing, it explains how leaders enhance their capacity to interpret complexity, regulate emotions, and assume broader systemic responsibilities (Kegan, 2009). Research indicates that reflective professional development approaches, including coaching, fortify adaptive judgment and resilience among school leaders (Raney, 2020; Lindle et al., 2017; Lewin et al., 2019).

Distributed leadership theory shifts the analytical focus from individual leaders to collective leadership processes (Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017). Sustainable improvement in resource-constrained schools depends on shared responsibility among principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads. This perspective, therefore, justifies the study's SMT-level focus and aligns with evidence indicating that distributed leadership enhances collaborative problem-solving and instructional alignment (Mifsud, 2024). Collectively, these perspectives frame leadership development in the Dinaledi STP as relational, developmental, and collective. They provide the conceptual foundation for interpreting how participation in the programme influenced instructional leadership, organisational culture, and stakeholder engagement in underserved schools.

METHODS

Research design and sampling

This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenologically informed instrumental case study design to examine the Dinaledi School Transformation Programme (STP) as a systemic leadership development intervention in underserved South African schools (Ilac, 2018; Parfitt & Rose, 2020). The case under investigation is the Dinaledi STP itself, conceptualised as a structured 12-month leadership development programme. School Management Team (SMT) members across six participating schools constituted embedded units of analysis within this single case.

The phenomenological approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences concerning leadership development. It concentrated on how SMT members perceived changes in instructional leadership, organisational culture, and stakeholder engagement (Sahertian & Jawas, 2020; Mourlam et al., 2019). Instead of assessing programme effectiveness solely through performance metrics, the research aimed to comprehend how leadership transformation was experienced and demonstrated by those directly engaged.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who had sustained engagement in the programme (Patton, 2002; Andrade, 2020). The study initially aimed to conduct interviews with 18 SMT members across the six participating institutions to ensure representation across various leadership roles. These roles encompassed principals, deputy principals, acting principals, and heads of department.

Nevertheless, data collection was concluded after 12 interviews upon achieving thematic saturation, as no substantially new themes or interpretive insights emerged from subsequent interviews (Kuzel, 1992; Creswell, 1998; Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). Saturation was evaluated through continuous comparison of emerging codes across interviews, with the final interviews serving to confirm rather than expand upon existing thematic categories. Considering the relative homogeneity of participants' roles and their shared exposure to the 12-month programme, the research team concluded that further interviews were unlikely to contribute novel conceptual insights.

Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. The interview protocol focused on three domains: (1) perceived impact on leadership practice, (2) influence on school culture and instructional leadership, and (3) systemic barriers affecting programme implementation. Open-ended questioning enabled participants to provide detailed experiential accounts consistent with the study's phenomenological orientation. Table 1 provides the characteristics of the sample, limited to their positions in their respective schools.

Table 1. Participants

Participants	Positions
Participant 1	Deputy Principal
Participant 2	Principal
Participant 3	Department Head
Participant 4	Acting Principal
Participant 5	Department Head
Participant 6	Acting Departmental Head
Participant 7	Departmental Head
Participant 8	Principal
Participant 9	Departmental Head
Participant 10	Principal
Participant 11	Principal
Participant 12	Deputy Principal

Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step framework. Transcripts were coded iteratively using ATLAS.ti to enhance systematic organisation and traceability (Ang et al., 2016). Themes were developed through repeated engagement with the data, refined through comparison across cases, and interpreted in light of the study's theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022). Network diagrams were used as analytic tools to visualise conceptual relationships among themes.

Researcher reflexivity was preserved through analytic memoing and peer debriefing discussions during the coding process to scrutinise interpretive assumptions and bolster credibility. Trustworthiness was reinforced through transparent documentation of coding procedures, the use of verbatim quotations to support thematic assertions, and the consistency between the research questions and the thematic development.

Research ethics

The Dinaledi School Transformation Programme (STP) engaged an independent, external team of researchers to assess the impact of its year-long initiative for STP members. Consequently, the data utilised in

this research are retained and managed by the programme sponsor and are available upon request. The inclusion of external reviewers aligns with best practices in programme monitoring and evaluation, addressing concerns regarding potential biases inherent in internal self-assessment conducted by programme sponsors. To adhere to ethical standards in data collection, researchers provided participants with information regarding the study's purpose and objectives, which aimed to enhance leadership development and educational progress within schools. Subsequently, oral consent was obtained from participants. The literature underscores that obtaining informed consent is essential for upholding the ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice, as it ensures that participants are adequately informed about the nature of the study and the implications of their participation (Xu et al., 2020). Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were also advised of their right to withdraw at any time. Measures were taken to prevent harm to participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded by removing identifiable information during data transcription and analysis, and pseudonyms were employed in reporting the findings. To protect data security, researchers adopted measures including encrypted storage of digital recordings and compliance with South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA). Furthermore, the external research team conducted data analysis and reporting independently, with no editorial influence from the programme sponsor or facilitators. Following the completion of the study, the results were submitted to the programme sponsor.

RESULTS

Question 1. How does participation in the Dinaledi STP shape SMT members' leadership practices and instructional engagement?

Two major themes emerged in response to this question: leadership competencies (Figure 1) and instructional leadership practices (Figure 2).

Leadership Competencies

Analysis of participant narratives suggests that participation in the programme coincided with notable shifts in leadership practice, particularly in conflict management, empowerment, and communication. Participants frequently reported becoming more reflective and deliberate in their interactions with staff, attributing these changes to their engagement in the coaching process.

Participant 4 (Acting Principal) explained:

"I now don't just go off at someone. I think before reacting, and I ask myself what the bigger issue is."

Such reflections indicate greater emotional regulation and situational awareness, which several participants linked to reduced interpersonal tension and a more constructive staff climate. These shifts were frequently associated with more intentional relationship-building and a deeper consideration of staff perspectives.

Empowerment emerged as a prominent sub-theme. Many SMT members described increased willingness to delegate responsibilities and trust team members' capabilities. Participant 9 (Department Head) reflected:

"I used to do everything myself... I now realise I need to trust my team. They're capable, and when I involve them, we all win."

While most participants reported greater confidence in delegating authority, a few acknowledged that entrenched staff hierarchies and resistance to change sometimes limited the depth of distributed leadership in practice.

Communication was also repeatedly identified as a transformative competency. Participant 12 (Deputy Principal) noted:

"I've learnt to listen more and not dominate every meeting. I let others speak first now."

Participants associated improved listening and dialogue with greater trust, clearer expectations, and more substantial team alignment. Collectively, these accounts indicate a shift from compliance-oriented, hierarchical management approaches toward more relational and participatory leadership orientations within the school context.

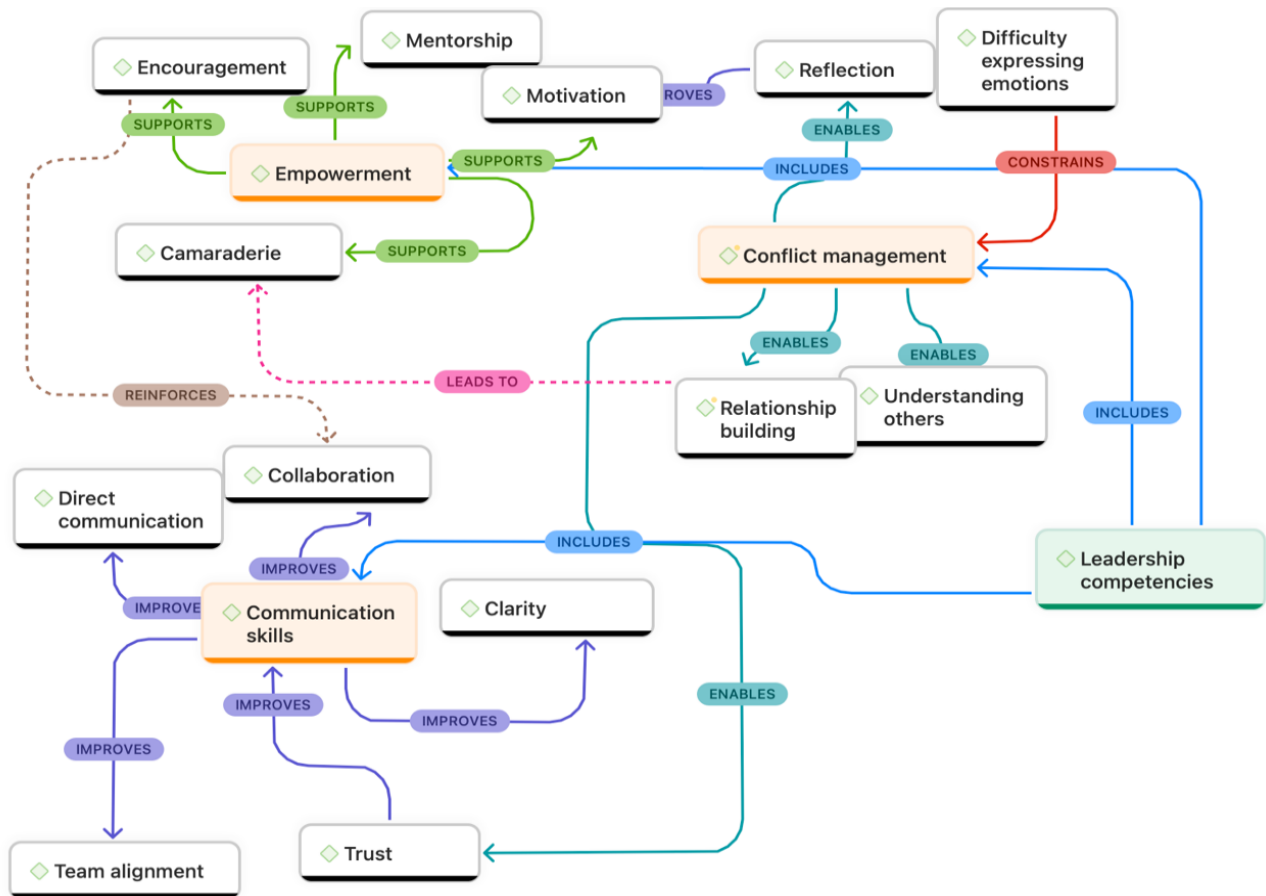


Figure 1: Leadership Competencies– Development of strategic, relational, and adaptive leadership skills through coaching

Instructional leadership

Analysis indicates that participation in the programme corresponded with a transition from primarily administrative oversight to more instructionally engaged leadership practices. Participants articulated increased involvement in teacher support, collaborative planning, feedback mechanisms, and alignment between school objectives and classroom activities.

Ten of the twelve SMT members, particularly principals and departmental heads, indicated that their leadership focus expanded beyond monitoring curriculum coverage to actively supporting teaching improvement.

Participant 3 (Department Head) described this transition:

“We used just to monitor curriculum coverage, but now we sit and plan together. Teachers share ideas, and I give feedback with a better attitude.”

Similarly, Participant 6 (Acting Department Head) reflected:

“The coaching helped me realise I need to focus more on teacher development, not just compliance. It’s about growing people.”

Participant 10 (Principal) further noted:

“Instructional leadership became part of how I lead every day. I visit classes more, but also, we use feedback to improve.”

These accounts suggest a reorientation from supervisory monitoring toward developmental instructional support. However, while most participants described increased instructional engagement, a small number noted that time constraints and administrative demands occasionally limited the consistency of classroom-focused practices.

The ATLAS.ti network diagram (Figure 2) delineates conceptual linkages among elements of instructional leadership, including collaborative lesson planning, informal feedback, data-informed decision-making, and peer mentoring. Codes such as "feedback," "teacher collaboration," and "curriculum alignment" frequently co-occurred in interview excerpts, indicating perceived connections between relational leadership development and instructional practice. Collectively, these narratives imply that the programme contributed to an enhanced instructional focus among SMT leadership, although the depth of implementation remained constrained by contextual factors.

Question 2. How does the Dinaledi STP promote a culture of teaching and learning within participating schools?

Analysis of participant accounts suggests that the programme contributed to shifts in organisational norms, particularly in relation to collaboration, shared accountability, and instructional dialogue. Rather than isolated behavioural changes, participants described emerging patterns of collective engagement around teaching and learning. These are illustrated in Figures 3 and 4.

Analysis of participant accounts suggests that participation in the programme coincided with shifts in organisational norms, particularly in relation to collaboration, professional accountability, shared vision, and trust among staff. This theme was represented in 9 of the 12 interviews, including all four principals, several department heads, and deputy principals, indicating a widespread perception of a cultural movement across leadership levels.

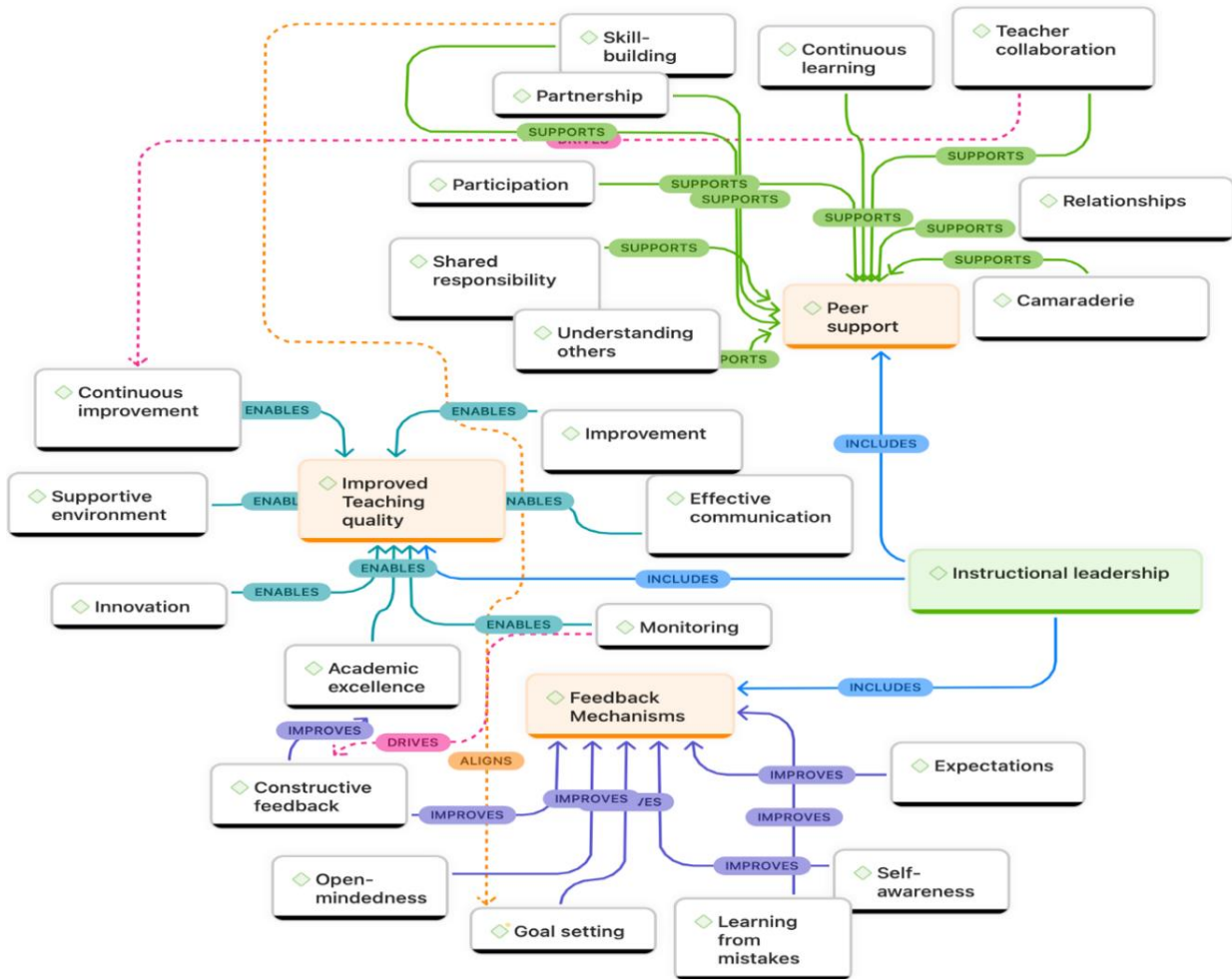


Figure 2: Instructional Leadership and Teacher Support – *Impact of coaching on mentoring, curriculum alignment, and data-driven decision-making*

Participant 11 (Principal) described a transformation in staff accountability and clarity of direction:

“Now we have a vision. Everyone knows what we’re working towards. That alone changed how people show up.”

Similarly, Participant 1 (Deputy Principal) noted that changes in leadership tone influenced morale:

“People felt excluded before... Now we make decisions together, and it shows in the mood and work ethic.”

These reflections suggest a shift from hierarchical communication patterns toward more inclusive and participatory leadership practices. For many SMT members, such cultural adjustments were viewed as intertwined with the coaching process. Participant 4 (Acting Principal) reflected:

“The coaching taught me to trust my staff more. I started sharing responsibilities, and people stepped up. That changed the atmosphere.”

While most participants reported improvements in transparency and collaboration, some acknowledged that deeply rooted hierarchical norms necessitate ongoing efforts to change, indicating that cultural transformation is a gradual rather than an instantaneous process.

As illustrated in the network diagram (Figure 3), participants frequently correlated organisational culture development with the emergence of shared vision, morale, open communication, and leadership

modelling behaviours. The co-occurrence of codes such as “shared vision” and “collaborative decision-making” reflected perceived alignment between leadership behaviour and collective staff engagement.

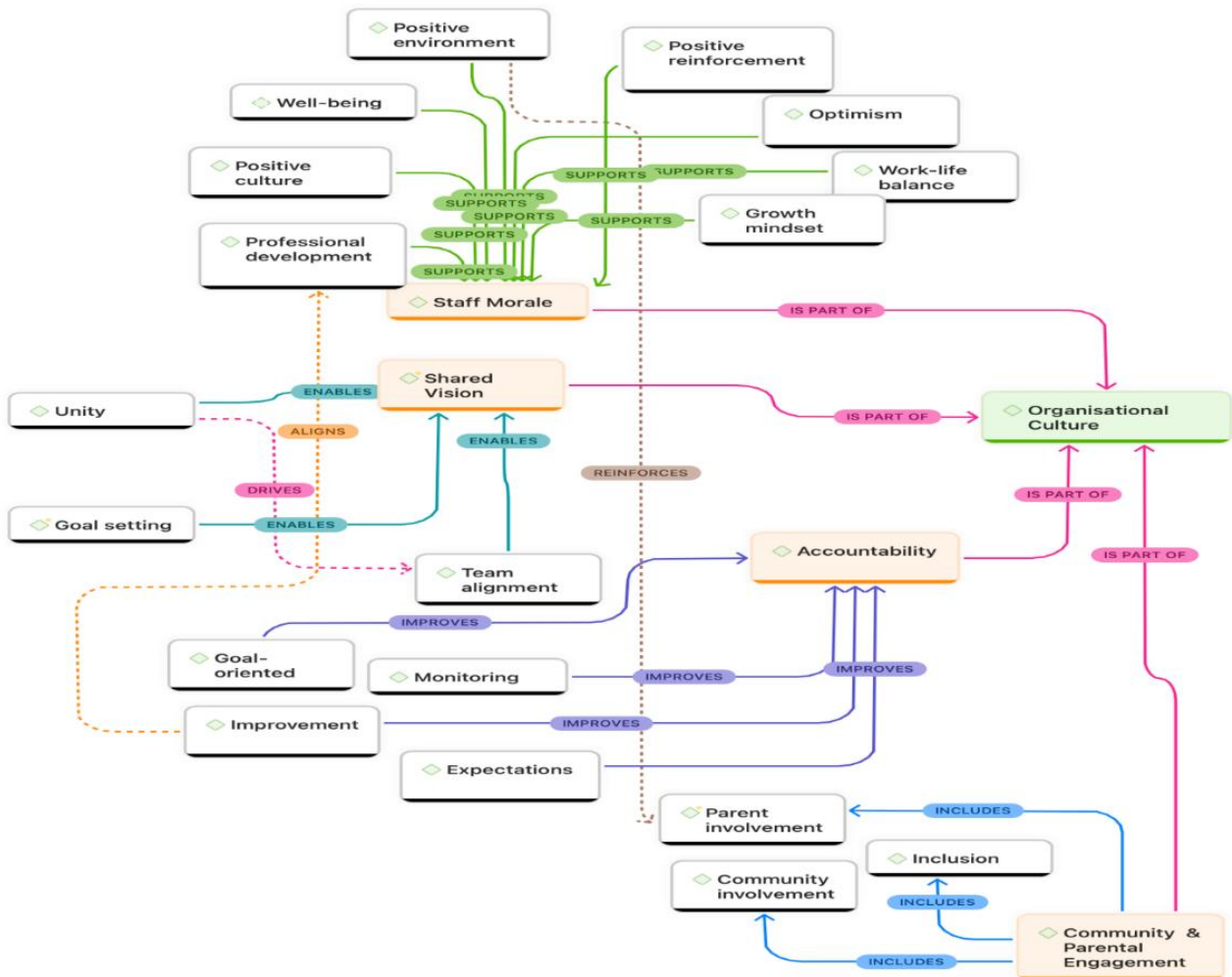


Figure 3: Organisational Culture – Transformation from hierarchical leadership to collaborative, teaching-focused practices

Parental and Community Engagement

Participants also described shifts in how SMT members engaged with parents, School Governing Bodies (SGBs), and community partners. This theme emerged in 7 of the 12 interviews, particularly among principals and deputy principals, who reported increased intentionality in stakeholder communication and inclusion.

Participant 8 (Principal) described this change:

“We had to change how we talk to parents. Before, they felt excluded. Now we have proper meetings, and they are part of the process.”

Participant 12 (Deputy Principal) explained:

“We created channels of communication that didn’t exist before. Parents now give feedback, and we actually use it.”

Similarly, Participant 2 (Principal) emphasised greater strategic inclusion of SGBs:

“It’s not just about informing the SGB. Now we plan things with them, they understand our goals and support us more.”

These accounts suggest a shift toward more structured and reciprocal stakeholder engagement. Codes such as “parental involvement,” “stakeholder communication,” “shared decision-making,” and “community

collaboration” frequently co-occurred within the same interview segments, indicating that participants perceived external engagement as reinforcing internal school alignment. The ATLAS.ti network diagram (Figure 4) visually represents these conceptual linkages.

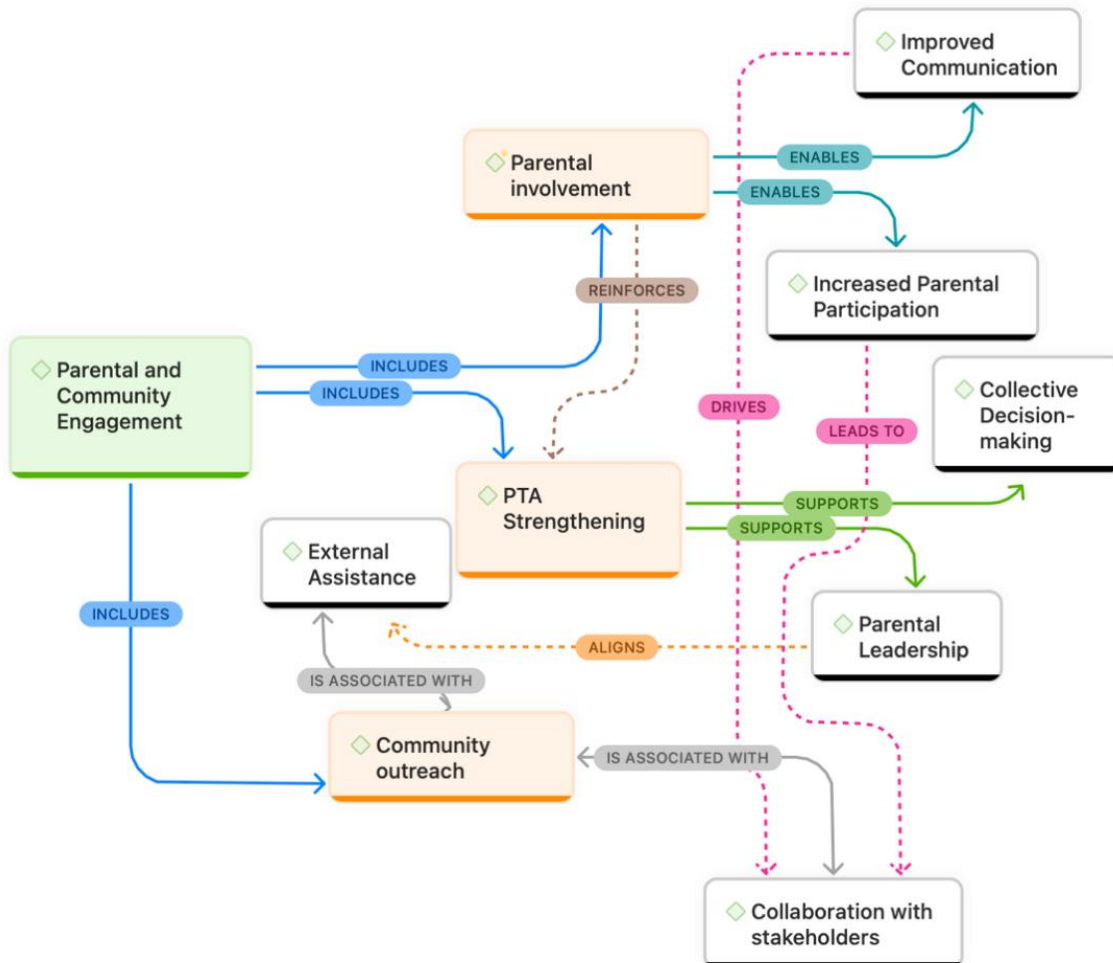


Figure 4: Parental and Community Engagement – Enhanced stakeholder involvement through leadership coaching

While participants described improved transparency and partnership, several acknowledged that socio-economic pressures and historical mistrust occasionally limited consistent community participation. Nonetheless, leaders reported increased empathy, accountability, and responsiveness in their external relationships.

Collectively, these findings indicate perceived movement toward a more collaborative and learning-oriented school culture. Participants described changes in shared vision, accountability structures, and stakeholder engagement that extended beyond individual leadership behaviours to influence broader organisational dynamics. However, sustaining such cultural shifts was described as dependent on continued reinforcement and remained shaped by contextual pressures within underserved school environments.

The coaching process helped leaders develop greater empathy, intentionality, and accountability in their relationships with external stakeholders, ultimately fostering trust and partnership. This shift is particularly significant in underserved contexts, where disengagement or adversarial relationships with the community have historically undermined school improvement efforts.

Collectively, these findings indicate movement toward a more collaborative and learning-oriented school culture. However, participants noted that sustaining such cultural shifts required continued reinforcement and was influenced by contextual pressures.

Question 3. What systemic barriers constrain the impact of leadership development efforts in underserved contexts?

While participants described meaningful shifts in leadership practice and school culture, their accounts also revealed persistent structural constraints that moderated the depth and sustainability of programme impact. These barriers were consistently framed not as failures of the leadership development process itself, but as contextual conditions shaping its implementation.

Administrative Overload and Time Constraints

A dominant theme across interviews was administrative burden. Several SMT members reported that extensive compliance requirements, reporting demands, and operational pressures limited the time available for sustained instructional engagement.

Participant 8 (Principal) noted:

"The paperwork never stops. Sometimes you want to focus on teachers, but the system pulls you back."

Such accounts suggest that while leaders may develop reflective and relational capacities, structural workload demands can constrain the consistent application of instructional leadership practices. Even participants who reported positive transformation acknowledged difficulty balancing strategic leadership with day-to-day administrative responsibilities.

Resource Limitations

Resource scarcity emerged as another recurring constraint. Participants described shortages in teaching materials, infrastructure challenges, and limited access to external support services.

Participant 9 (Department Head) explained:

"We have ideas now, but without resources, it's hard to implement everything we plan."

These reflections indicate that leadership growth alone does not automatically translate into organisational transformation. Rather, resource limitations shaped the extent to which newly adopted leadership approaches could be operationalised in classrooms.

Resistance to Change and Cultural Inertia

Several SMT members also identified staff resistance as a moderating factor. In schools where hierarchical or compliance-oriented leadership had been historically entrenched, some teachers were initially hesitant to embrace collaborative practices.

Participant 1 (Deputy Principal) reflected:

"Some staff were sceptical at first. They were used to being told what to do."

Such responses highlight the complexity of shifting organisational culture in contexts marked by longstanding patterns of authority and compliance. While many participants described gradual improvement, they acknowledged that behavioural and attitudinal change required sustained reinforcement.

Collectively, these findings suggest that leadership development initiatives function within systemic environments that may either facilitate or hinder their long-term impact. Administrative overload, resource scarcity, and cultural resistance emerged as structural moderators influencing the translation of leadership growth into sustained instructional transformation. Participants did not depict these barriers as insurmountable; rather, they underscored the importance of continuous support, alignment with district structures, and reinforcement of collaborative norms. In underserved contexts, leadership development appears to be most effective when integrated within broader institutional and equity-focused reforms.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how participation in the Dinaledi School Transformation Programme (STP) influenced leadership practices, organisational culture, and stakeholder engagement within underserved schools. Analysed through the perspectives of transformational, constructive developmental, and distributed

leadership theories, the findings indicate that leadership development integrated within a systemic reform initiative can impact both individual leadership behaviours and collective organisational dynamics.

Transformational Leadership: From Compliance to Vision-Driven Practice

The findings indicate a transition among SMT members from leadership characterised by task orientation and compliance to practices that are more relational and driven by vision. Participants reported heightened focus on shared purpose, reflective communication, and team empowerment. These changes are consistent with the principles of transformational leadership, which emphasise articulating vision, stimulating intellectual growth, and considering individuals (Bass, 1990; Samodien et al., 2024). In resource-constrained educational settings, where leadership often becomes reactive and administrative, the programme seemingly facilitated a reorientation of leaders towards long-term instructional priorities (Bush & Glover, 2012). Nonetheless, despite participants noting improvements in motivation and relationships, the lack of direct learner performance data constrains the ability to draw definitive conclusions regarding measurable instructional outcomes.

Constructive Developmental Growth: Identity and Adaptive Capacity

Participants not only experienced behavioural changes but also noted internal shifts in self-regulation, confidence, and reflective judgment. Viewed through a constructive developmental framework (Kegan, 2009), these insights point to increased adaptive capacity in managing complex school settings. Leaders discussed reframing conflicts, engaging more intentionally with staff, and taking on broader systemic roles, especially regarding community engagement. This supports evidence that reflective professional development can boost resilience and judgment among school leaders (Raney, 2020; Lindle et al., 2017; Lewin et al., 2019). However, growth was achieved within existing structural constraints, suggesting that internal change alone may not be sufficient without systemic support.

Distributed Leadership: Strengthening Collective Agency

The inclusion of deputy principals and departmental heads within the programme reflects a distributed leadership orientation. Findings suggest that leadership responsibilities became more collaborative, with greater shared decision-making and teacher involvement. This supports distributed leadership scholarship, which emphasises collective agency and shared instructional responsibility (Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017; Mifsud, 2024). SMT members reported increased collaboration, shared planning, and improved stakeholder communication, suggesting that leadership development at the team level may strengthen organisational coherence. However, systemic barriers, such as administrative overload and resource shortages, continued to constrain the depth of distributed practice, reinforcing prior findings on structural limitations in underserved contexts.

Systemic Constraints and Contextual Realities

In line with the broader scope of African scholarship, resource constraints, workload pressures, and resistance to change have moderated the programme's impact (Mestry, 2025; Madonsela et al., 2025). While leadership development has promoted reflective and relational growth, translating these developments into enduring instructional transformation remains dependent on structural conditions. This underscores a significant implication: leadership development in underserved contexts must function concurrently with institutional reform, rather than presuming that behavioural change alone will result in systemic improvement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings indicate that leadership development initiatives within underserved educational institutions are most efficacious when conceptualised as systemic, team-oriented, and ongoing processes, rather than one-off training sessions. Analysing these through the frameworks of transformational,

constructive developmental, and distributed leadership reveals several significant implications. Firstly, at the policy level, leadership development strategies should advance beyond principal-centric models to explicitly encompass School Management Teams (SMTs). The theory of distributed leadership emphasises that sustainable improvement in school performance requires collective capacity-building rather than reliance on individual champions. Consequently, national and regional professional development policies ought to institutionalise development pathways focused on SMTs, thereby reinforcing shared instructional responsibilities and fostering collaborative decision-making structures.

Secondly, from a developmental perspective, leadership programmes should integrate structured reflective components that facilitate identity reframing and the development of adaptive capacity. Constructive developmental theory indicates that behavioural change is unlikely to be maintained without internal transformations in judgment, resilience, and systemic awareness. Incorporating coaching, peer reflection, and facilitated dialogue within leadership development programmes may thus augment leaders' ability to manage complexity in resource-constrained environments. Nevertheless, such developmental processes necessitate adequate duration and follow-up support to convert insights into enduring organisational change.

Third, at the school level, leadership development should align with instructional priorities and be integrated into comprehensive school improvement strategies. The principles of transformational leadership emphasise the significance of a shared vision, relational trust, and motivational coherence. Consequently, programmes ought to explicitly connect leadership development to instructional leadership practices, teacher development frameworks, and stakeholder engagement processes, rather than viewing leadership development as an isolated professional activity.

Importantly, the findings also indicate that leadership development alone cannot compensate for systemic resource inequities. Administrative overload, infrastructure deficits, and limited district-level support constrain the depth of instructional transformation achievable through leadership reform. Policy efforts should therefore integrate leadership development within broader equity-driven reforms that address structural barriers in underserved schools. Collectively, these implications suggest that leadership development in resource-constrained contexts must be relational, developmental, and collective, while simultaneously supported by institutional and policy alignment.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study investigated the influence of the Dinaledi School Transformation Programme (STP), a comprehensive leadership development initiative, within underserved South African schools. By concentrating on the lived experiences of members of the School Management Team (SMT), the research advances current scholarship beyond principal-centric coaching models to consider how integrated, team-oriented leadership development influences instructional practices, organisational culture, and stakeholder participation.

Interpreted through transformational, constructive developmental, and distributed leadership frameworks, the findings indicate that participation in the programme contributed to shifts in relational leadership behaviour, reflective judgement, and collective instructional responsibility. SMT members reported movement from compliance-oriented management toward more collaborative, vision-driven leadership practices. However, translating these shifts into sustained instructional improvement remained contingent on structural factors, including resource availability and systemic support.

The study contributes to the expanding body of scholarship on Global South leadership by illustrating that leadership development in underserved contexts is most effective when it adopts a relational, developmental, and collective orientation. Instead of positioning coaching as a standalone remedy, the

findings emphasise its function as a developmental mechanism integrated within wider organisational reform initiatives.

Nevertheless, the study is constrained by its dependence on self-reported perceptions and its exclusive focus on SMT members without triangulation from teacher or learner performance data. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method designs to evaluate the sustainability of leadership transformation and its correlation with quantifiable student outcomes. Ultimately, leadership development programmes such as the Dinaledi STP possess the potential to enhance instructional leadership capacity in underserved schools. However, sustainable transformation necessitates alignment among leadership development initiatives, institutional support, and structural equity reforms.

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