

## **Creating a conducive teaching and learning climate at a rural school in South Africa: The management team's role**

**Selaelo Maifala**

*University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa*

This article reports on an inquiry that explored how a school management team (SMT) in a rural school in Limpopo Province, South Africa, understood their role in creating a school climate conducive for improving teaching and learning. I used a qualitative case study design to investigate how their understanding informed their practices. A single high school was purposely selected, with all seven members of its SMT participating through semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion, and each SMT member being observed for periods of one week. Teachers were also involved as information-rich participants, with six teachers sampled for a focus group discussion. My findings revealed that the SMT failed to create a conducive learning climate, owing to various barriers including the SMT's limited understanding of their roles, lack of agency, teacher hostility and external forces such as teacher unions.

### **Introduction**

School leaders play a key role in school effectiveness and student learning and achievement (Leithwood et al., 2020; Gómez-Leal et al., 2022). There is also a significant body of research suggesting that to be efficient in their roles, school leaders must create a climate that nurtures teaching and learning (Naidoo, 2019; Stronge & Xu, 2021). Velarde et al. (2022) defined the school climate as, "the quality of the organisational dynamics of the school characterised by the relationship between key stakeholders and other school factors contributing to the sustainability of the teaching and learning environment" (p.167). As Dutta and Sahney (2015) affirmed, the influence of school leaders on student learning is indirect and mediated by their support and empowerment of teachers. Thus, if school leaders are to influence student learning, they must start by creating a safe ground for teachers and learners to have positive experiences and satisfaction. Among its benefits, creating this conducive climate is recognised as leading to teacher motivation, job satisfaction and efficacy, thus enhancing learning (Leithwood et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021).

Another aspect of school leadership which has received significant attention in research is the perspective that principals are not sole leaders whose actions alone lead to school success (Liu et al., 2021). Rather, the leadership roles played by middle managers and teachers are recognised as important (Gurr, 2019; Sengai & Mokhele, 2021). As such, this study is undertaken on the assumption that to be successful in creating a conducive school climate, principals must work with other school management team (SMT) members. In South Africa, the SMT consists of the principal, the deputy principal (or two deputies in large schools) and respective departmental heads (DHs) for different subjects. This article explores how an SMT working in a South Africa rural context understand their role in creating a conducive school learning climate and how their understanding of their roles impacts the school climate.

## Contextual setting of the study

The challenges of schools in the rural context of South Africa have received significant attention in education research. These include challenges that have been in the literature for years, such as difficulty enlisting and retaining qualified teachers (Smit, 2017; Hannaway et al., 2019), lack of resources and infrastructure (Van Niekerk & Delpont, 2022; Mkhize & Davids, 2023), poor parental involvement (Myende & Maifala, 2020; Mbhiza & Nkambule, 2022), teacher absenteeism (Mothibeli, 2017), and community poverty with consequences on the running of schools (Smit, 2017). Furthermore, there is also the phenomenon of child-headed families in which parents have either died or are working in other provinces, leaving older children to raise siblings (Pillay, 2016). Then, there are relatively new challenges in the literature, some of which are attributable to 21st-century demands and failures by rural schools to meet these demands (Dube, 2020; Tigere & Netshitangani, 2022). Tied to this, is the reality that schools in the rural context often face crime and have limited security or support from South Africa's Department of Basic Education (DBE) (Mojapelo, 2016; Myende & Maifala, 2020).

The current inquiry, which formed part of a larger study, was conducted at a rural high school outside the city of Polokwane in the Limpopo province. This is a school that falls under quintile three of the *National Norms and Standards for School Funding* (NNSSF) (DBE, 2012) which categorises schools into five quintiles, from least (quintile 1) to most resourced (quintile 5). Under the policy, schools falling between quintiles 1 to 3 are exempt from paying school fees and largely rely on the government for financial assistance. However, relative poverty, as I find to be the case in these categories, does not mean the school is without challenges common in rural schools. At the time of conducting this research, the learner enrolment at the school was about 1200 with 21 classrooms and 41 teachers including seven SMT members. These numbers highlight the challenge of overcrowding and high teacher-learner ratios.

## Profiles of the SMT

Table 1 depicts positions held by SMT members (pseudonyms) and their departments or designations.

Table 1: Profiles of the SMT

Participant	Position	Department/Subject areas
Mr Football	Principal	Overall Head of School
Mrs Fencing	Deputy Principal	GET Phase (Grade 8 & 9)
Mr Golf	Deputy Principal	FET Phase (Grade 10-12)
Mr Rugby	DH	Sepedi Home Language and Human and Social Sciences
Mr Tennis	DH	Physical and Natural Sciences
Mrs Volleyball	DH	Tourism and Business, Commerce and Management Studies
Mrs Badminton	DH	English First Additional Language and Technology

## Literature review

The review of literature in this inquiry is divided into three themes discussed below.

### The school leader's role in creating a conducive climate

Hallinger and Murphy (1985) outlined five key roles in creating such a climate: promoting teacher professional development (TPD), protecting instructional time, providing incentives for teachers, providing incentives for learners and maintaining high visibility. This has been supported by a significant body of international literature. For instance, a quantitative inquiry in Malaysia seeking to understand the connection between school climate and teacher commitment in excelling schools found that the positive climate in the five participating schools was a mediating factor in teacher commitment (Raman et al., 2015). Similarly, studies that explored the relationship between the school climate and student learning have also found a positive correlation between the two. These include Dulay and Karadag's (2017) inquiry which sought to understand the relationship between the two aspects, was conducted through a meta-analysis of 90 international studies on the topic. Their findings revealed that there was a positive causal relationship between the climate of the school and student learning and achievement.

### Creating a conducive school climate in resource-constrained contexts

In high-needs, resource-constrained contexts around the globe, the school leader's role of creating a conducive teaching and learning climate has also been found to have a significant impact on school effectiveness and student learning. This includes studies carried out in rural areas in other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa including Ghana and Zimbabwe (Gyamerah, 2021; Sengai & Mokhele, 2021). Gyamerah's (2021) inquiry in Ghana sought to examine the differences in practices between rural, underperforming schools and urban, high-performing schools. The findings showed that in the high-performing schools, the school leaders created a conducive school climate through roles such as promoting TPD.

Similarly, in high-needs, inner-city schools in the United States of America (USA), studies have shown that leaders who overcome challenges and succeed, prioritise promoting TPD (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Cohen, 2015), a vital component of creating a conducive climate. These practices were also observed in schools in troubling contexts in Canada and Australia, particularly those serving in Indigenous communities. In Australia where learners in Indigenous communities often perform well below their grade (year) level in national benchmark assessments (Ford, 2013), and the education system remains Eurocentric, requiring Indigenous children to assimilate (Sarra et al., 2018), research has shown the positive impact of creating a conducive teaching and learning climate. For example, Riley and Weber (2016) carried out a study to investigate the role played by the school principal in leading a government reading program in an Indigenous context. Their findings revealed that creating a conducive environment through TPD was vital. In particular, principals could have more impact if they worked with community members to understand the Indigenous culture and identify the type of TPD necessary for teachers to

better understand the school context, argued by the authors as important to school climate.

### **Creating a conducive climate in resource-constrained South African contexts**

Although this inquiry is about the rural context, resource-constraint and multiple deprivations in South Africa, while concentrated in such communities, are not limited there. For example, townships often have similar challenges such as poverty, lack of parental involvement and child-headed families (Chikoko et al., 2015). As such, in this section, I discuss literature findings from resource-constrained contexts including townships and rural schools. Studies conducted in such contexts have shown that creating a conducive climate can make a sufficient difference including, improving teacher satisfaction and learner achievement and learning. For example, a study by Gabuza (2015) exploring the role of the SMT in curbing teacher absenteeism in the rural areas of KwaZulu Natal, found that non-monetary incentives such as recognition and certificates could be useful in dealing with the challenge.

This is similar to findings made by Heystek and Terhoven (2015) who conducted a study to identify teacher motivating factors in resource-constrained, underperforming schools. Their findings suggested that along with teachers' intrinsic motivation, teachers also indicated that non-monetary incentives such as praise and recognition, were an important motivator. Similarly, in Limpopo rural schools in which this inquiry was conducted, a study by du Plessis (2017) seeking to understand factors that lead to effective leadership in that context, found that the practices of the five principals included prioritising tasks that create a conducive climate, such as providing teacher incentives and supporting TPD. The above findings, from various contexts in South Africa and the globe, are indicative that the role of creating a conducive school climate is fundamental to school success.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study employs Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) three-dimension instructional leadership model. In particular, it draws on the third dimension of the model of promoting the school climate, in which the authors outline five instructional leadership practices. These are protecting instructional time, promoting TPD, providing incentives for teachers, providing incentives for learning, and maintaining high visibility. Under the role of protecting instructional time, the instructional leader is expected to work with teachers and learners to ensure that time allocated for teaching and learning is optimised and unnecessary disruptions such as intercoms, calling learners to the office and others are discouraged or avoided. This is followed by the role of promoting TPD in which the instructional leaders must use their influence to promote teacher learning and growth. This includes providing workshops in the school, creating opportunities for teachers to learn from each other through mentoring and peer coaching, and informing teachers of external opportunities (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). The instructional leader's role of promoting the school learning climate also includes providing incentives for teachers to motivate them, including through recognition, praise and other means available to the school. Similarly, Hallinger and Murphy (1985) also argued that the instructional leader

must provide incentives for learners such as honour rolls, certificates, praise and recognition. Lastly, to create a conducive climate for teaching and learning, instructional leaders must spend less time in the office and more time around the school being visible to teachers and learners.

## Method

This study sought to explore how members of an SMT at a rural school in the Limpopo Province understand their roles in creating a conducive school learning climate and how their understanding influenced the school climate. A qualitative case study design was adopted, and a single high school was purposively sampled to participate. Qualitative researchers are interested in studying phenomena or topics in their natural setting and exploring the meanings and interpretations that those in the phenomenon place on their experiences, rather than seeking quantifiable, objective truths (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010), which made it suitable for this inquiry. Similarly, the case study design would allow for a thorough exploration of the phenomenon, thus gaining a deeper insight into the participants' experiences and how they make sense of their roles as instructional leaders within their context (Bryman, 2016).

I employed purposive sampling to select a school in the rural context of Limpopo and information-rich participants, comprising SMT members in the selected school and a group of six teachers working in the school. All seven members of the SMT were considered information-rich and selected to participate. In addition, a group of six teachers working in the school also participated in a focus group discussion (henceforth focus group). Data were generated through four key methods. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with each SMT member. These interviews allowed SMT members to share their individual perspectives about their roles.

Second, I conducted a focus group with the seven SMT members which created a platform for participants to have a discussion, share their perspectives and perhaps even remind each other of aspects that would otherwise be overlooked in in-depth interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The primary languages spoken in Limpopo are Sepedi (most dominant), Xitshonga and Tshivenda, while English is also widely spoken. The language spoken in the area of the school is Sepedi which is also my first language. As such, the interviews were conducted in both English and Sepedi and participants switched between the two languages. I transcribed all interview recordings and translated Sepedi parts into English before the data analysis process.

In addition to interviews with these participants, I also observed each member of the SMT for one week to understand how they enacted the role of creating a conducive climate. This also allowed me to observe the different dynamics of the school and the climate beyond what the different participants discussed (Hays & Singh, 2012). Lastly, I conducted a focus group with a group of six teachers to understand their perspectives on the SMTs' role in creating a conducive school climate. Using these four data generation methods ensured that the different perspectives and voices of the participants were

included in the inquiry, leading to triangulation and enhancing the trustworthiness and rigour of the findings (Hays & Singh, 2012).

### **Data analysis**

The data analysis process for the different data sets was guided by the inductive content analysis approach where the researcher has no preexisting data codes but follows the direction the data leads to answer the research questions (Thomas, 2006). All the interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim within days which was particularly helpful for distinguishing among the different speakers in the focus groups. Once I exited the field, the data analysis process consisted of reading each data set multiple times and breaking it into patterns and codes which led to themes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations in this inquiry included seeking permission from various authorities, non-maleficence, informed consent, voluntarism and confidentiality. To protect the identities of the participants and their school, I use pseudonyms to present findings. SMT members are represented by names of sports while teacher participants are represented by names of fruits.

### **Findings**

The findings of this inquiry, divided into six themes, are discussed below.

#### **Over-reliance on government for teacher professional development**

It was evident from the different datasets that members of the SMT do not understand their role in creating opportunities for TPD within the school. Instead, there is an over-reliance on the government to provide such opportunities. During the SMT focus group when I asked about TPD opportunities the SMT provides for teachers in the school, two participants responded:

Some of the opportunities that we have include some bursaries from the government even though one must apply and then if it is approved one gets a bursary. (Mr Tennis)

Another thing is that the department (DBE) sometimes has curriculum workshops which teachers can attend. This includes things teachers did not do when they were in university. (Mr Golf)

By contrast, Mrs Badminton indicated:

Sometimes there are workshops in the school in which you see that there is a part which teachers are not seeing as they should. As a member of the SMT, there can be workshops such as that in which I want to teach them to apply a particular thing they are struggling with for them to apply it with learners and in their lives.

Similarly, Mrs Volleyball stated during the in-depth interview:

Another one of my roles is training novice teachers to show them how we work. Giving them support and helping them on how to prepare a lesson and arrange their file.

Despite the perspectives, the teacher focus group seemed to suggest that like other SMT members who viewed it as the role of the DBE, teachers also perceive SMT members to overly rely on the DBE for this role. For example, two teachers indicated:

Normally within the school, we cannot say we have such workshops. We get our workshops from the department. (Mr Guava)

I think the school is too reliant on the department (DBE). (Mrs Plum)

Similarly, Mrs Lemon, a newly qualified teacher indicated:

I will speak about myself because I'm new to the system. Sometimes I find that I need guidance, someone to say this is what you must do. I need someone to check on me and say, "Are you okay with this? Are you coping? What do you need help with?" Unfortunately, we do not have that.

These findings have revealed opposing views. On one side, it is the perceptions of some SMT members that the DBE provides such opportunities. This relates to teacher perceptions that they do not receive adequate internal TPD support or opportunities. On the other side, some SMT members indicated that there are efforts on their part to mentor novice teachers while providing internal workshops for others to develop. This could mean that SMT members are failing to work as a collective as some departments could be providing some TPD while others fail in this regard. However, it could also mean that such opportunities are few and far between. Moreover, I also wondered if the two participants who alluded to TPD were sharing a perspective they deemed favourable, rather than revealing the SMT's approach to TPD in the school (Marczyk et al., 2005). If this is the case, it would suggest that some SMT members understand that promoting TPD is integral to creating a conducive school climate, while lacking the agency to enact this role. This phenomenon of understanding role expectations without agency to perform roles was certainly seen in the SMT's role of protecting instructional time.

### **Failure to protect instructional time**

The data suggest that when it comes to the role of protecting instructional time, there is a discrepancy between what members of the SMT profess to do and reality. During the in-depth interviews, they indicated that as part of their leadership roles in the school, they have developed a system to conduct school walkabouts and period registers to ensure that teachers are in class and learners learning. The excerpts below illustrate:

We have established a system that we call "Monitoring by Walking". I mean you can see that now they are in classes, right? I will leave here with my file, and go check class by class, and if the teacher is not there, I have to know (Mr Golf)

In addition to walkabouts, Mr Tennis commented:

The period register is kept by the learners and it ensures that each of the days' periods are being attended by teachers. If there is no teacher in period two, the register will inform us that learners missed a particular lesson at that time. (Mr Tennis)

The above suggests that members of the SMT may recognise the importance of protecting instructional time. This is also supported by teacher perspectives indicating that one of the leadership roles of the SMT was ascertaining that teachers and learners go to their classes. Mr Guava commented:

Sometimes there are no teachers in classrooms, or some have gone somewhere. SMT members go to the staffroom to find out whose period it is and make sure the teacher goes to class.

While conducting my observations, various chaotic practices took place, suggesting that protecting instructional time was not prioritised. For example, at the end of each of the two breaks, learners and teachers lingered around their break time areas for long periods before moving to their classes. On most days, learners were sitting and chatting nonchalantly, eating or queuing in hopes of receiving second servings from the school feeding scheme workers, even after the break had ended. Each morning after the bell had rung, teachers would sit for some time in the staffrooms before casually walking to their classes. It was also apparent that some teachers completely skipped their classes in favour of sitting in the staffroom. For example, while observing, Mr Golf, who was supervising grass cutters around the school, noticed two classes without teachers and sent learners to call them from the staffroom. While observing Mr Football encountered learners roaming around the school and when he asked where they were supposed to be, they indicated that their class did not have a teacher.

During those seven weeks, I observed only one SMT member, Mr Football, being consistent in conducting walkabouts at the start of the day and end of break and informing learners and teachers to go to their classes. Outside of that, on one occasion I observed two SMT members standing together outside their office to inform learners to go to class. The problem of teachers skipping classes also did not seem to bother the SMT enough to make changes. This suggests that while members of the SMT understand this role as important, in reality, they were neglecting it. Indicating a disparity between knowledge and translating it into actions, suggesting that the bigger problem could be a lack of agency rather than knowledge.

### **Inability to model high expectations**

Some of the practices and behaviours of the SMT in the school fail to uphold high standards for teachers and learners, therefore undermining the SMT's efforts in creating a positive learning climate. During my first two weeks of observations, it emerged that teachers in the school had the habit of seeking permission to come in late the next day, leave early or leave and return during contact time to deal with personal matters. One, for example, sought permission to go home to lock the house, informing the deputy principal



that his wife had forgotten to lock when she left. Others also had different personal reasons to be excused and it was surprising that the SMT never resisted or asked relevant questions before deciding to grant permission. I initially understood this to relate to the SMT's inability or lack of agency regarding protecting instructional time. However, as the weeks progressed, it was evident that the issue was more complex than I thought. This is because in observing more SMT members, I discovered that they were also engaging in the same behaviours and habits. For example, one SMT member left school before 9:30 AM one morning to attend the chief's advisory committee meeting in the same village and did not return to the school. While school/ community partnerships are important, especially in the rural context (Myende, 2019), these should not come at the expense of school effectiveness. Another SMT member came in after 9 AM one day, indicating that she had to call her electricity provider regarding an issue at home. These findings indicate that the SMT's failure to uphold high standards for teachers, alongside their own similar behaviours, undermines their ability to create and maintain a conducive school climate.

### **Negative influences of teacher unions**

The findings of this inquiry suggest that one of the obstacles in the SMT's role of creating a conducive climate is the negative influence of teacher unions in the school. This has meant that despite the SMT's efforts and their understanding about creating a positive climate, the negative influences of teacher unions impede the roles of the SMT, and the climate created in the school. For instance, while Mr Golf was discussing his role in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning in the school, I probed to find out if he thought his methods were effective. He spoke at length about the influences of politics on schools and the negative influences of teacher unions. He asserted:

You understand that here in South Africa, our biggest problem is, especially in terms of our education system, the politics and the politicians have used teachers a lot because teachers are many. They used them a lot to fight the former government too [the apartheid government]. Even our unions are the ones that made it possible for... in fact what we are doing [monitoring teachers] we are trying to rectify and go back to what we used to do well, but because the unions influence teachers not to do this or that, they follow what they are told. The problem is that these things that they said they must not do, are the things that we came here for. (Mr Golf).

The above quotation reveals many dynamics at play with teachers and teacher unions including national politics which negatively affect the school climate. It is also clear that SMT members have difficulty creating a conducive climate because they must negotiate with the influences of unions. He then went on to explain that instructional aspects such as lesson planning could not be monitored properly because many teachers did not want to work and because of their affiliations with unions, whatever the school tried to enforce, teachers would retaliate by contacting their unions to defend them, therefore impeding relationships and subsequently, the climate in the school.

During my observations, chaotic practices prevailed which could be attributed to the influences of teacher unions. For example, while observing Mr Football, I observed a School Governing Body (SGB) meeting regarding a new teacher who had been hired for a

certain subject and upon starting, complained about not being able to teach the subject, requesting a change. Upon the principal's refusal, the teacher contacted union representatives in the school to challenge the decision. One of the representatives was another SMT member Mr Rugby, creating a conflict of interests for Mr Rugby to serve in the best interest of teaching and learning as an SMT member and representing the teacher. The SGB decided in the meeting that the principal must not change his decision and should inform her of the SGB's affirmation of that decision. This incident and other matters surrounding the involvement of teacher unions in the school, confirm that although teacher unions are supposed to serve an important role of professionalising teaching through involvement in policymaking and implementation (Mafisa, 2017), their influence can hinder the SMT's role in creating a conducive climate.

### **Non-participative decision-making**

The SMT in the school failed to include teachers in decision-making processes which lessened teacher confidence in such decisions, thus isolating the SMT. Teachers who participated lamented the SMT's decisions including those related to curriculum and acquisition and allocation of school resources. For example:

The other thing is that the SMT does not seem to consult teachers in the school. They need to come back to us and sit down to discuss steps we can take in order to bring progress to the school and benefit the learners and teachers. (Mrs Plum)

They shouldn't be a remote team making rules that are meant for all of us without including us in those decisions. (Mrs Lemon)

The observation supported teacher assertions that the decision-making in the school was not collaborative. Instead, SMT members made most decisions while others were made by Mr Football and Mr Golf alone. In my first week in the school which was at the beginning of a new school term, the timetable, including who was teaching which grades and some subjects, was changed by the SMT. This quickly revealed itself to have been a decision made without consultation or transparency and created mayhem among teachers. For that whole first week, teachers stormed Mr Golf's office who oversaw timetabling, to demand answers and request that changes be made to accommodate them. While this also revealed teacher insubordination and suggested intimidation as some refused to teach classes they did not want, it also put the practices of SMT in the spotlight, suggesting that teachers could not take ownership of these decisions because they were not included in making them (Leithwood et al., 2020). The SMT then held a meeting to hear teachers' grievances. In that meeting, it did not seem that efforts were made to redraft the timetable collaboratively. Instead, Mr Golf and Mr Football set out to a private meeting to amend the timetable. I was politely denied permission to observe this meeting between the two, thus, I am not clear on how they made decisions although it did appear to resolve the problem.

### Poor rapport and teacher hostility

In addition to not being involved in decisions, another obstacle that strained the relationship between teachers and the SMT is teacher hostility and the perception that the SMT is autocratic and overly critical without providing support. During the focus group with teachers, when I asked them about the SMT's influence on teaching and learning, overwhelmingly, they believed that the SMT had a negative influence on instruction because it diminished teacher motivation. For instance, two expressed:

I want to be frank and truthful; sometimes they have a very negative influence given the teacher-DH relations. My understanding is that when you are my HoD and you see some faults in my work, the aim should be to empower me, show me and mentor me. However, many times it is more of a personal thing than what we are here for. Because I may have committed a certain number of mistakes, but it is not like I must be sentenced to death. (Mr Guava)

I think it is about power, when they are in a certain position most of them want to suppress those under them. It is as if to say, 'You must know that I'm your departmental head' not necessarily giving us support. (Mrs Lemon)

The observational data supports the assertions that relations were largely negative. However, instead of showing teacher suppression and autocracy of the SMT, I observed instances of teacher hostility and disrespect towards the SMT. These include when I observed a staff meeting alluded to in the previous section, to address teacher complaints about the new timetable. One teacher, for example, stood up and informed the SMT that the previous year, they had assigned some unsuitable teachers to teach Grade 12 who in turn, produced "rubbish" results. Another stood up, informing the principal that they had asked him to fix the staffroom door as weather conditions were sometimes harsh with the door broken. He loudly added that because the principal sits in a nice office with a door that closes, he has no regard for them.

Contrarily, I did not witness disrespect or hostility from the SMT to teachers during my observations. In that meeting, the principal maintained professionalism towards teachers. Moreover, I also witnessed various efforts by the SMT to build rapport with teachers despite these tensions. Mrs Fencing, for example, sat with teachers in the staffroom during breaks to have informal conversations unrelated to work.

### Discussion

The findings of this inquiry highlight some key obstacles related to the SMT's role understanding and practices of their instructional leadership role of creating a conducive learning climate. The findings also indicate that knowledge of one's roles does not result in agency, as there are disparities between SMT perceptions about their roles and their practices. In addition, the findings point to other internal and external barriers the SMT face within their work environment, unrelated to knowledge or agency, which make it difficult for the SMT to be effective in creating a conducive learning climate.

To begin, SMT members regard the role of promoting TPD as the responsibility of the DBE. Although one SMT member and the teacher participants acknowledge the importance of internal TPD initiatives, what prevails within the school is an over-reliance on the DBE. The findings are consistent with Mkhize and Davids (2023) whose inquiry sought to uncover challenges with resource mobilisation in rural schools. Their findings suggested an undervaluing of stakeholders and an over-dependence on the DBE. This is despite literature suggesting that the DBE falls short in its support of rural schools (Myende & Maifala, 2020). Moreover, some of the training needs of teachers may not be met through generic TPD initiatives by the DBE. Instead, the SMT's knowledge of its context and teachers and learners within their school could have better success in tailoring programs that address teaching and learning needs of the school. Thus, by not recognising their importance in this role, the SMT are limited in their ability to improve the school learning climate and teaching and learning outcomes.

Data sources in this study showed that the SMT had no agency to protect instructional time. They perceive this role as important in creating a conducive school climate, however their practices reveal a complacency with the chaos of learners and teachers being late to classes. This shows that knowing one's roles does not always translate to agency in performing such roles. It contradicts suggestions in education leadership research that how a school leader conceives their leadership roles, influences their leadership positively (Devos & Bouckennooghe, 2009). Moreover, what these findings point to is a culture in which teachers and learners expect authority to remind them of what they should already know, getting to classes on time. Suggesting, therefore, that the solution lies in the SMT devising strategies to change how teaching and learning time is viewed rather than this continued role of herding teachers and learners to classes.

Another important finding made in this study is the SMT's inability to model high expectations for teachers and learners. Their lackadaisical attitude to teachers leaving early, coming in late and being excused during instructional time led to the discovery that they also engage in similar behaviour and practices. While it is reasonable to believe that at times people in an organisation will have emergencies, at this school, asking and being granted permission for such seemed like part of the daily operations. It suggests that teachers could be following the lead of the SMT in this and that the SMT may not have stricter rules regarding this behaviour either because they do not see it as a problem or because they know they also engage in these behaviours. Thus, it suggests that the culture that has been created in part due to the SMT not modelling high expectations, harms the climate for teaching and learning.

Decision-making in the school also lacked transparency and teacher involvement, which frustrated teachers and contributed to teacher hostility and insubordination. These indicate that SMT members do not understand that for teachers to have confidence in decisions and take ownership of them, they must be involved in decisions (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Coupled with that is the SMT's inability to model high standards and expectations. Members of the SMT have behaviours and habits such as coming in late and leaving early that could be normalising disorder and disregard for school rules and regulations. This means that if the SMT is going to succeed in creating an environment in which teachers

and learners respect teaching and learning time, they must begin by changing their leadership behaviours to have a positive influence on the rest of the school.

Furthermore, while this study sought to explore the SMT's understanding of their roles in creating a conducive school climate, other findings emerged indicating that this role is complex and influenced by more than the SMT's understanding of their roles. Teacher unions are one such obstacle that if members of the SMT are going to succeed in creating a conducive climate, they must first overcome. Teacher insubordination and hostility towards the SMT are rife in part due to some teachers believing that their unions will defend them against the SMT, even against performing tasks they were hired for. Despite the findings also pointing to members of the SMT attempting to build rapport, there is no evidence that their efforts were successful, which would have had negative consequences on teaching and learning (Lambersky, 2016). These highly politicised teacher unions therefore undermine the authority of the SMT and interfere with practices and decision-making processes, thus making it difficult for the SMT to create a conducive climate. Like Bhengu et al. (2014) noted, the impact of these unions can be “devastating and acidic” (p. 209). These findings confirm a growing body of evidence emerging in South Africa that teacher unions can become an obstacle to the functioning of schools and the roles of SMTs (Maifala, 2017; Msila, 2021).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study illuminates various barriers making it difficult for SMT members in the sampled rural school to be effective in their roles of creating a conducive school climate, revealing that effectiveness in this role depends on a multitude of factors and mutual effort from different stakeholders. Such barriers include those in the SMT's understanding of their roles, overly relying on the DBE to provide TPD, and inadequacy or lack of agency to protect instructional time.

Moreover, poor relationships in the school are arguably the most threatening to the SMT's role of creating a conducive learning climate. This relationship breakdown is attributable to the influence of teacher unions and some of the SMT's practices such as the inability to model high expectations and lack of teacher involvement in decisions, which exacerbated the situation, further impeding the SMT's effectiveness. It is therefore also important to acknowledge that poor leadership, even when one is attempting to build, can have a detrimental impact on the organisation as was found in this case. To eradicate these challenges and improve the SMT's odds of success, these barriers must be addressed. This includes the DBE working with SMTs and teachers to design and develop programs to improve the instructional leadership skills of SMTs. In addition, negative external forces such as teacher unions must be counteracted. This could include practitioners, teacher unions and the DBE collaborating to improve their influences of unions in schools and working towards developing cultures of respect and mutual accountability between teachers and SMT members.

## Future research

Often in education leadership scholarship, the focus is on how school leaders can build rapport to improve school cultures. However, as my findings show, the roles played by school leadership alone are not sufficient. Thus, we should start asking, what is missing from current understanding and what support can be provided for school leaders to have better chances of success in their attempts to build relationships to improve the school learning climate? Moreover, while there is also a propensity to view school leadership through the lenses of school effectiveness theories, this study has shown that knowledge of roles do not always lead to agency. Thus, future research should consider exploring the human factors such as values and emotional intelligence of school leaders and how these influence roles and practices.

## References

- Bhengu, T. T., Naicker, I. & Mthiyane, S. E. (2014). Chronicling the barriers to translating instructional leadership learning into practice. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 40(2), 203-212. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271014721\\_Chronicling\\_the\\_barriers\\_to\\_Transformational\\_leadership\\_learning\\_into\\_practice](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271014721_Chronicling_the_barriers_to_Transformational_leadership_learning_into_practice)
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press. [6th ed.] <https://www.oup.com.au/books/higher-education/social-sciences-and-humanities/9780198796053-social-research-methods>
- Chikoko, V., Naicker, I. & Mthiyane, S. (2015). School leadership practices that work in areas of multiple deprivation in South Africa. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 43(3), 452-467. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143215570186>
- Cohen, M. J. (2015). *Principal leadership in high-performing, high-poverty elementary schools*. EdD dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cehsedadiss/247>
- DBE (Department of Basic Education, South Africa) (2012). *Amended National Norms and Standards For School Funding*. <https://www.saide.org.za/resources/Library/National%20Norms%20and%20Standards%20for%20School%20Funding.pdf>
- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011) *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Sage. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/the-sage-handbook-of-qualitative-research/book242504>
- Devos, G. & Bouckenooghe, D. (2009). An exploratory study on principals' conceptions about their role as school leaders. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 8(2), 173-196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700760902737196>
- Dube, B. (2020). Rural online learning in the context of COVID 19 in South Africa: Evoking an inclusive education approach. *REMIE: Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, 10(2), 135-157. <https://doi.org/10.17583/remie.2020.5607>
- Dulay, S. & Karadağ, E. (2017). The effect of school climate on student achievement. In E. Karadağ (Ed.), *The factors effecting student achievement: Meta-analysis of empirical studies*, 199-213. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56083-0\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56083-0_12)
- Dutta, V. & Sahney, S. (2016). School leadership and its impact on student achievement: The mediating role of school climate and teacher job satisfaction. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 30(6), 941-958. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-12-2014-0170>

- Ford, M. (2013). Achievement gaps in Australia: What NAPLAN reveals about education inequality in Australia. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 16(1), 80-102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2011.645570>
- Gabuza, S. R. (2015). *Exploring school management teams' approaches for managing teacher absenteeism in rural schools*. Masters dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. <http://hdl.handle.net/10413/13960>
- Gómez-Leal, R., Holzer, A. A., Bradley, C., Fernández-Berrocal, P. & Patti, J. (2022). The relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership in school leaders: A systematic review. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 52(1), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1927987>
- Gurr, D. (2019). Australian considerations in relation to instructional leadership and leadership for learning. In T. Townsend (Ed.), *Instructional leadership and leadership for learning in schools: Understanding theories of leading* (pp. 77-104). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-23736-3\\_4](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-23736-3_4)
- Gyamerah, A. K. (2021). *Instructional leadership practices that support increased student achievement in Ghana's rural districts*. PhD thesis, Walden University, USA. <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/11192/>
- Hallinger, P. & Murphy, J. (1985). Assessing the instructional management behavior of principals. *The Elementary School Journal*, 86(2), 217-247. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1001205>
- Hannaway, D., Govender, P., Marais, P. & Meier, C. (2019). Growing early childhood education teachers in rural areas. *Africa Education Review*, 16(3), 36-53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2018.1445974>
- Hays, D. G. & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. Guilford Press.
- Heystek, J. & Terhoven, R. (2015). Motivation as critical factor for teacher development in contextually challenging underperforming schools in South Africa. *Professional Development in Education*, 41(4), 624-639. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2014.940628>
- Hitt, D. H. & Tucker, P. D. (2016). Systematic review of key leader practices found to influence student achievement: A unified framework. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(2), 531-569. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315614911>
- Klar, H. W. & Brewer, C. A. (2013). Successful leadership in high-needs schools: An examination of core leadership practices enacted in challenging contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 49(5), 768-808. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X13482577>
- Lambersky, J. (2016). Understanding the human side of school leadership: Principals' impact on teachers' morale, self-efficacy, stress, and commitment. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 15(4), 379-405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2016.1181188>
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A. & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>
- Liu, Y., Bellibaş, M. Ş. & Gümüş, S. (2021). The effect of instructional leadership and distributed leadership on teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction: Mediating roles of supportive school culture and teacher collaboration. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(3), 430-453. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220910438>

- Mafisa, L. J. (2017). The role of teacher unions in education with specific reference to South Africa. *The Online Journal of New Horizons in Education*, 7(4), 71-79. <https://tojqih.net/journals/tojned/articles/v07i04/v07i04-08.pdf> [also in *Gender and Behaviour* at <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-c1f20de04>, viewed 8 Aug 2024]
- Maifala, S. S. (2017). *Leading 21st century schools: An exploratory case study of leadership practices adopted by principals in rural context*. Masters dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. <http://hdl.handle.net/10413/15072>
- Marczyk, G., DeMatteo, D. & Festinger, D. (2005). *Essentials of research design and methodology*. Wiley. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Essentials+of+Research+Design+and+Methodology-p-9780471470533>
- Mbhiza, H. & Nkambule, T. (2022). Reimagining the needs of rural schools: Teachers' and parents' experiences of parental involvement in school activities. *Africa Education Review*, 19(2), 100-115. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-educare-v19-n2-a6>
- McMillan, J. H. & Schumacher, S. (2010). *Research in education: Evidence-based inquiry*. Pearson. [7th ed.] <https://www.pearson.com/en-us/subject-catalog/p/research-in-education-evidence-based-inquiry/P200000007783/9780133846416>
- Mkhize, T. R. & Davids, M. N. (2023). Resources mobilisation challenges in rural schools of South Africa: What can we learn? *REMIE: Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, 13(3), 295-312. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=9136584>
- Mothibeli, T. R. (2017). *The causes and effects of uncontrolled teacher absenteeism in selected public primary schools in Mangaung Metro Municipality*. Masters dissertation, Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa. <http://hdl.handle.net/11462/1920>
- Mojapelo, M. S. (2016). (Re)thinking and (re)positioning library programmes and services in public high schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa. *Mousaion: South African Journal of Information Studies*, 34(3), 60-88. <https://doi.org/10.25159/0027-2639/420>
- Msila, V. (2021). Revisiting Robert Axelrod: Cooperation, school management and teacher unions. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 20(4), 284-301. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.20.4.15>
- Myende, P. E. (2019). Creating functional and sustainable school–community partnerships: Lessons from three South African cases. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 47(6), 1001-1019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143218781070>
- Myende, P. E. & Maifala, S. (2020). Complexities of leading rural schools in South Africa: Learning from principals' voices. *International Journal of Rural Management*, 16(2), 225-253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973005220930382>
- Naidoo, P. (2019). Perceptions of teachers and school management teams of the leadership roles of public school principals. *South African Journal of Education*, 39(2), article 1534. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v39n2a1534>
- Pillay, J. (2016). Problematising child-headed households: The need for children's participation in early childhood interventions. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 6(1), 1-8. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC195059>
- Raman, A., Chang, C. L. & Khalid, R. (2015). Relationship between school climate and teachers' commitment in an excellent school of Kubang Pasu District, Kedah, Malaysia. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(3 S1), 163-173. <http://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n3s1p163>



- Riley, T. & Webster, A. (2016). Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC) building relationships: One school's quest to raise Indigenous learners' literacy. *Teaching Education*, 27(2), 136-155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2015.1049261>
- Sarra, C., Spillman, D., Jackson, C., Davis, J. & Bray, J. (2018). High-expectations relationships: A foundation for enacting high expectations in all Australian schools. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 49(1), 32-45. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2018.10>
- Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237-246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748>
- Tigere, M. T. & Netshitangani, T. (2022). School management teams' perceptions of ICT integration in township and rural secondary schools of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa: Infrastructure challenges. *Gender and Behaviour*, 20(3), article 29. [https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-genbeh\\_v20\\_n3\\_a29](https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-genbeh_v20_n3_a29)
- Sengai, W. & Mokhele, M. L. (2021). Examining the role of instructional materials in the implementation of History 2166 syllabus in Zimbabwe. *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching & Learning*, 5(1),1. [http://ulspace.ul.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10386/3301/sengai\\_examination\\_2021.pdf](http://ulspace.ul.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10386/3301/sengai_examination_2021.pdf)
- Smit, B. (2017). A narrative inquiry into rural school leadership in South Africa. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 6(1), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.17583/qre.2017.2276>
- Stronge, J. H. & Xu, X. (2021). *Qualities of effective principals*. ASCD. <https://ascd.org/books/qualities-of-effective-principals-2nd-edition>
- Van Niekerk, M. & Delpont, M. (2022). Evolving flipped classroom design in a cost/management accounting module in a rural South African context. *Accounting Education*, 31(5), 567-595. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639284.2022.2029748>
- Velarde, J. M., Ghani, M. F., Adams, D. & Cheah, J. H. (2022). Towards a healthy school climate: The mediating effect of transformational leadership on cultural intelligence and organisational health. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 50(1), 163-184. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1741143220937311>

**Dr Selaelo Maifala** recently completed her PhD in Education Leadership at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Her experience includes teaching in South Africa and overseas and she is currently a lecturer in Education Leadership and Management at North West University, South Africa. Her interests include school effectiveness, rural education and instructional leadership.  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0058-0116>  
Email: [missmaifala@gmail.com](mailto:missmaifala@gmail.com)

**Please cite as:** Maifala, S. (2024). Creating a conducive teaching and learning climate at a rural school in South Africa: The management team's role. *Issues in Educational Research*, 34(3), 1089-1105. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier34/maifala.pdf>