

Exploring the influence of collaborative leadership on the effectiveness of school improvement initiatives in Eswatini high schools

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of collaborative leadership in driving the success of school improvement plans (SIPs) in Eswatini high schools. It examines how shared decision-making, teamwork, and collective responsibility among school leaders and stakeholders contribute to achieving sustainable educational outcomes. The study is framed within Gronn's (2000) Distributed Leadership Theory, which emphasizes leadership as a shared and interactive process rather than a hierarchical role. This theory is particularly relevant as it provides a lens to understand how leadership responsibilities are distributed among principals, teachers, and other stakeholders, fostering a more inclusive and effective approach to school improvement. The study employs a qualitative approach, analyzing data collected from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. The sample included five principals, five deputy principals, ten teachers, five parents, and two educational officers, purposefully selected to provide varied insights. Key findings reveal that collaborative leadership fosters a culture of accountability, shared vision, innovation, and professional trust among school communities. The study found that schools practicing strong collaboration among leaders, teachers, and parents experienced more effective implementation of SIPs and improved student outcomes. The study's main outcome highlights that collaboration strengthens collective ownership of school goals, enhances communication, and leads to more sustainable school improvement efforts. The study recommends that educational policymakers integrate collaborative leadership principles into training and evaluation frameworks. It further challenges school leaders to institutionalize collaborative mechanisms such as leadership teams, participatory decision-making structures, and regular feedback loops to sustain improvements.

Keywords: *school improvement plans, collaboration, collaborative leadership, principals*

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1. Introduction

School improvement involves intentionally enhancing practices and strengthening the capacity to improve student outcomes (Hajisoteriou et al., 2018). School Improvement Plans (SIPs) are critical tools that schools, particularly underperforming schools, use to improve their quality of education (Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016). Although SIPs have been adopted and used extensively worldwide, they have had varying outcomes. Research shows that in countries where they have been used successfully, they are the cornerstone of developing and supporting educational systems and reforms. However, Mincu (2015) and Gorard et al. (2020) argue that it is one thing to have a SIP and another to adopt a quality SIP, as literature shows that several schools with SIPs have failed to improve their outcomes. While school improvement is a critical goal for all schools, they must prioritize areas needing enhancement and apply quality, evidence-based, and data-informed processes to make sustainable decisions. Research indicates that leadership practices significantly affect the development and implementation of SIPs (OECD, 2016).

In the context of Eswatini, educational challenges are marked by persistent inequalities between urban and rural schools, limited infrastructure, and inconsistent student performance. According to the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2022), the national pass rate for high schools fluctuated between 70% and 75% over the past five years, with notable regional disparities. Furthermore, a 2021 Education Sector Analysis highlighted that many schools lack systematic strategies for school improvement and that SIP implementation often faces barriers such as resource shortages, inadequate stakeholder engagement, and leadership gaps. Given these unique challenges, collaborative leadership becomes particularly relevant in Eswatini as it offers a mechanism to mobilize diverse stakeholders, share limited resources effectively, and build collective accountability for student achievement. Collaborative leadership has emerged as a promising approach to address these issues by fostering inclusivity and shared responsibility among school communities.

This paper explores how collaborative leadership influences the success of SIPs in Eswatini high schools. Specifically, the study aims to examine the impact of collaborative leadership practices on the successful implementation of SIPs in Eswatini high schools, explore the perceptions of principals, deputy principals, teachers, and parents regarding the role of collaboration in achieving school improvement goals and identify the challenges and enablers of collaborative leadership in the school improvement process within the Eswatini context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study was underpinned by the Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT) by Gronn (2000), which views leadership as a dynamic process that must involve people at all levels of the organization. This theory emerged as an alternative to theories that focus on the behavior and traits of leadership at the expense of what they can or have achieved in their organizations. The DLT was particularly relevant for this study as it embraces four key principles schools must adopt and implement for success. Shared leadership, collaborative decision-making, trust and empowerment, and an appreciation of new initiatives from multiple viewpoints ensure that crucial decisions that impact school success are not individual but made collectively. In addition, the involvement of stakeholders allows them to show their creativity and innovation as they feel motivated and valued for the school to succeed. The model breeds trust and an inclusive, positive environment where all school members want to see and experience school improvement and success.

2.2. Defining and Understanding Collaborative Leadership

Ang'ana and Chiroma (2021) define collaborative leadership as a management approach to foster a positive environment where people work together to achieve common goals and vision. In a school context, this would involve principals working alongside deputies, teachers, staff, parents, students, and other stakeholders to benefit the school. Trust and recognition of individual and collective capabilities emerge from shared aspirations. Similarly, Ang'ana and Kilika (2022) assert that collaborative leadership creates an environment conducive to engagement, creativity, and innovation, propelling the organization toward success. This approach involves shared decision-making, distribution of responsibilities, and collective effort to achieve organizational goals.

While the literature highlights the benefits of collaborative leadership, some studies present contrasting findings. For instance, research by Chirongoma et al. (2019) suggests that in certain contexts, such leadership can lead to decision-making paralysis, especially when consensus is difficult to reach. This presents a significant challenge in schools where quick decisions are needed, particularly in crises or when responding to policy changes. Despite these challenges, several studies indicate collaborative leadership fosters a sense of ownership among stakeholders and demands commitment, enhancing organizational success.

2.3. The Role of Leadership in School Improvement Plans

Leadership plays a pivotal role in the success of SIPs. Several studies underscore the influence of leadership type and quality on the outcomes of SIPs (Yeigh et al., 2019). Effective leaders provide vision and resources and create an environment that supports implementing new initiatives. Principals are crucial in this process, as the glue between the school and its stakeholders. They are responsible for creating and fostering a shared vision characterized by trust, which unites teachers, students, and parents toward common goals (Bui et al., 2023). However, leadership in the context of SIPs is not always straightforward. Some studies, for example, Babu and Masutha (2021) indicate that autocratic leadership still prevails in many schools, which contradicts the principles of collaborative leadership. This top-down approach can hinder stakeholder buy-in and the implementation of SIPs, as it limits input from key participants like teachers and parents. Moreover, while collaborative leadership improves engagement and accountability, research by Lambert et al. (2020) shows that such collaboration can be superficial in schools where there is insufficient training or institutional support for leaders to manage these processes effectively.

2.4. Challenges and Opportunities in Eswatini High Schools

In Eswatini, several high schools face significant challenges such as limited resources, teacher shortages, and a cultural dynamic that influences leadership practices (Dlamini & Jedishkem, 2023). These challenges have led to decreased quality of teaching and learning, as well as poor student outcomes. For instance, the country grapples with gaps in digital access, particularly in rural schools, where the lack of electricity and computers hinders the implementation of ICT programs (Motsa, 2023). This disparity in access further widens the achievement gap between students in rural and urban areas, limiting opportunities for success in national examinations. While some scholars like Motsa (2023) and Makondo et al. (2023) highlight these barriers, other researchers have pointed out that Eswatini's context also provides unique opportunities for collaborative leadership to make a difference. Madlela (2022) argues that the government's policy on inclusive education through the Ministry of Education and Training (2018) offers a potential avenue for change, despite the criticisms regarding the lack of structures and support. A report by Okeke and Mazibuko (2014) suggests that fostering collaboration among all educational stakeholders, including the community, government, and school leaders, is crucial for the success of inclusive education.

While these opportunities exist, gaps in research on how collaborative leadership can address the specific challenges in Eswatini's educational system remain. More empirical studies are needed to explore the effectiveness of collaborative leadership in overcoming challenges like resource constraints and low teacher morale. Furthermore, limited research exists on the actual impact of collaborative leadership on the quality of learning outcomes in Eswatini, particularly in rural schools.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the Study

A qualitative approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of collaborative leadership's impact on SIPs. The researcher chose this approach as it is situated within the interpretive paradigm, a design that empowers the researcher to consider multiple perspectives and versions of truth based on participants' interpersonal views (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, which allowed participants to describe their lived experiences, perceptions, and practices in their own words, helped the researcher gain an in-depth understanding. These methods enabled the researcher to probe for clarification, explore emerging themes, and capture the nuances of social interactions within school environments. The qualitative approach was suitable for this study because collaborative leadership and SIPs involve complex social dynamics, perceptions, and contextual influences that are best explored through rich, descriptive data rather than numerical analysis.

3.2. Site and Sampling Methods

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich, detailed information about collaborative leadership and SIPs (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The target population consisted of principals, deputy principals, teachers, parents, and educational officers involved in school improvement initiatives in Eswatini high schools.

The sample included five principals, five deputy principals, five teachers, three parents, and two educational officers, purposefully selected based on their direct involvement and knowledge relevant to the study objectives (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Principals and deputy principals are key decision-makers in SIPs. Teachers participate in SIP development and

implementation through their daily practices. Parents were selected from school governing bodies and parent-teacher associations that support school activities, while educational officials from the regional or national offices oversee and support school improvement efforts. Purposive sampling was also used to select five high schools across Eswatini, ensuring variation in school performance levels (high, medium, low) and geographic locations (urban and rural settings). The sample size was determined using Creswell's (2014) guidance. According to Creswell, qualitative research emphasizes selecting a small number of cases that provide in-depth understanding rather than seeking large samples; typically, 5 to 25 participants are sufficient when using interviews to gather detailed, meaningful insights. Thus, the sample size and composition aligned with qualitative research principles, allowing deep exploration of collaborative leadership in school improvement.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

The researcher conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with principals, deputy principals, teachers, parents, and educational office representatives to gather diverse perspectives. Semi-structured interviews allowed the use of prepared guiding questions while offering flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was held in a private, confidential setting. The open-ended questions were adapted to participants' roles, facilitating the collection of rich, comprehensive data (Ruslin et al., 2022). Focus group discussions were also held with groups of 6 to 8 parents to explore collaborative dynamics with schools. A total of two focus group discussions were conducted, encouraging participant interaction and enabling the researcher to identify shared and contrasting experiences. Focus groups encouraged participant interaction, enabling the researcher to identify shared and contrasting experiences. Both data collection methods provided deeper insights than surveys and ensured the study remained sensitive to Eswatini's unique cultural and policy context.

3.4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Thematic analysis was employed to organize and interpret the data collected in this study. The researcher utilized interpretive thematic analysis (ITA), which allowed for the deconstruction of extensive data into meaningful concepts that emphasized patterns related to leadership practices, stakeholder engagement, and SIP outcomes (Valtakoski, 2019). A

rigorous coding process was implemented, beginning with the initial open coding of data transcripts. Each data segment was labeled based on its relevance to the research questions and emerging themes. This process involved categorizing the data under broad themes such as leadership dynamics, collaborative practices, and school improvement strategies.

The themes were refined through an iterative process, where data was continuously compared. The researcher reviewed the data for inconsistencies and, where necessary, consulted with experts and peers for a second opinion. This peer debriefing process helped ensure the validity of the interpretations made. The researcher also performed a cross-checking process to ensure consistency and reliability by independently coding a subset of the data and comparing results. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved, with adjustments made to the thematic structure as needed.

Furthermore, inter-coder reliability was established by having a second researcher independently code some transcripts. The degree of agreement between the coders was calculated, and disagreements were resolved through discussion to refine the themes and categories. This process ensured that the final thematic map accurately reflected the data and clearly interpreted the findings (Naeem et al., 2023).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The University of KwaZulu-Natal Research Ethics Committee approved the study before the researcher contacted or involved any potential participants. This was followed by crucial permission from the Ministry of Education and Training of Eswatini, the gatekeeper of schools in the Mbabane District, where the study was conducted. The researcher visited schools to obtain permission from principals and speak with deputy principals and teachers as participants to get their informed consent. The rights of the participants were explained to them, and their privacy was a top priority throughout the research process. The research was ethically conducted, and the rights and privacy of the participants were fully respected (Denscombe, 2021).

4. Findings and Discussion

Five key findings emerged from the study. These were enhanced stakeholder engagement, improved implementation of SIPs in schools, challenges in collaborative leadership, collaboration has implications for policy and practice, and SIPs positively impacting

school performance. In discussing the findings, excerpts from interviews with principals (P), deputy principals (DP), teachers (T), parents (P), and education officers (EO) were used.

4.1. Enhanced Stakeholder Engagement

The data revealed unanimous agreement among principals (P), deputy principals (DP), teachers (T), parents (P), and education officers (EO) on the importance of stakeholder engagement in school improvement. However, variations emerged based on the level of stakeholder involvement in the school. Schools with higher levels of engagement perceived better student outcomes than those with lower levels. Collaborative leadership practices such as inclusive decision-making and regular consultations fostered high levels of stakeholder participation. Teachers and parents felt valued and motivated to contribute to school improvement efforts.

T1, T2, T3, P1, and P2 agreed,

When consulted and invited to meetings to improve the school, we feel valued and motivated to do our best. As school stakeholders, we have a duty of care to provide the best education to our students. Our involvement shows trust from the school and helps us feel that school decisions are our decisions that we must support to improve the school.

This is in line with Escobar (2019), who asserts that school improvement requires the collective effort of all stakeholders, each contributing time, resources, and commitment to the school's development. Similarly, Abalorio (2022) and Rohini and Pentang (2023) support the notion that stakeholders such as parents and educational officials play an integral role in monitoring and supporting school activities.

In contrast, DP2, DP5, T4, and T5 noted the challenges of limited stakeholder involvement. *Sometimes our budgets are limited and unable to cover the provision of all the resources we require for the school to run smoothly. We cannot rely on our parents, as not all of them are forthcoming. The shortage of instructional resources impacts the quality of teaching and learning and overall school outcomes.* This aligns with Doss et al. (2022), who found that schools with poor stakeholder involvement and limited resources face challenges implementing SIPs effectively.

4.2. Improved Implementation of School Improvement Plans (SIPs)

The data indicated that schools with robust collaborative leadership structures demonstrated better implementation of SIPs. Strong collaborative structures allow schools to engage in joint planning strategies, foster transparency, and distribute accountability, ensuring alignment with the school's goals.

P1, P2, DP1, DP2, P1, and parent P2 confirmed their active participation in goal development and implementation. They explained,

Our school has regular meetings to plan or evaluate school activities. The meetings are usually chaired by the principal, who heads the school planning committee. We also have the deputy and parental representatives, who are part of the School Development Committee. The presence of a structured committee helps the school run smoothly.

Numerous studies emphasize the importance of planning in school improvement (Hajisoteriou et al., 2018; Carvalho et al., 2021a). Effective SIPs are built on a shared vision, a clear understanding of the school's challenges, and the collaborative input of all stakeholders. Greany and Brown (2017) further argue that schools with structured planning are better positioned to overcome implementation challenges and improve their outcomes. However, DP4, DP5, T4, P4, and P5 identified challenges related to centralized leadership, which hindered effective SIP implementation.

Our schools suffer from centralized leadership, with the principal making all the big decisions that affect everyone and the school's outcomes. When the principal is absent, there is a big leadership vacuum. Decisions are delayed, demotivating students and creating a feeling of despondency and mistrust in the school.

This finding aligns with research by Corbett and Redding (2017), who argued that successful SIPs stem from collective, reflective processes that consider the school's needs and context.

4.3. Challenges in Collaborative Leadership

Despite collaborative leadership's benefits, the data highlighted several obstacles, including resistance to change, time constraints, and power dynamics. In some schools, hierarchical structures and cultural norms hindered the full participation of stakeholders.

P4, DP4, DP5, T4, and T5 acknowledged that their schools struggled with planning and implementing quality SIPs due to a lack of collaboration and teamwork.

The absence of a sound structure and definitive roles in the school hinders any form of meaningful development we may envisage. In Eswatini, a culturally rich country, culture precedes school leadership in some schools' decision-making. Community leadership guides and influences school decisions, impacting school improvement.

This finding resonates with Khumalo (2018), who identified that high-performing schools in Eswatini exhibit positive school cultures, while low-performing schools struggle with role conflict and resistance to change. Kaufman et al. (2019) also noted that internal and external factors influence school improvement, with supportive environments fostering engagement and positive outcomes.

4.4. Positive Impact on School Performance

Schools with strong collaborative leadership practices reported improved student performance, teacher morale, and resource utilization. These outcomes were attributed to the shared vision and collective efforts promoted by collaborative practices.

P1, DP1, P2, DP2, T2, and T3 all agreed that

When we collaborate, we increase our chances of achieving our school goals. Teachers, staff, parents, and students all work together. They are motivated and strive to see the school succeed. Our school structures define the roles of different members, making it easy for them to contribute their ideas to school success.

This aligns with Lin and Mohammad (2025), who emphasized the importance of collaboration for effective problem-solving and decision-making in schools. Liu and Hallinger

(2018) further argue that collaboration fosters trust, transparency, and respect, all critical factors for improving school outcomes.

Teachers also expressed that collaboration helped reduce skill mismatches when allocating responsibilities. *“Teachers must be competent enough to achieve educational goals and improve the school. Principals must overcome challenges inexperienced teachers and staff members face by enrolling them in training programs.”* Muijs (2015) supports this, arguing that continuous professional development empowers teachers, enhances their skills, and contributes to sustained school improvement.

4.5. Implications for Policy and Practice

The data suggests that educational policymakers should prioritize collaborative leadership in training and evaluation frameworks. School leaders should be encouraged to develop comprehensive approaches to leadership that foster a positive organizational culture and promote future school improvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

EO1, EO2, P1, and P2 emphasized that schools must create sustainable policies to guide their activities. They noted,

We work closely with principals and school leaders to evaluate their policies and offer suggestions for improvement. We check to see if their policies are inclusive and have best practices that promote school improvement.

Sarong (2024) and Armstrong et al. (2021) argue that schools that foster collaboration can innovate and adapt to changes in the educational system. They must support structures that enable teachers to keep up with rapid changes and embrace new challenges.

To institutionalize collaboration, schools should establish leadership teams and feedback loops to sustain collaborative practices (De Jong et al., 2022). These efforts can help schools create policies that align with the school’s global mission, promote professional growth, and foster community networks (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019).

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that collaborative leadership plays a pivotal role in the success of SIPs in Eswatini High Schools. It addresses many challenges inherent in the education sector

by fostering inclusivity, accountability, and shared responsibility. However, its effectiveness depends on overcoming cultural and systemic barriers. Collaboration is a tedious process in which all stakeholders must be patient and invest their time and resources to realize school improvement. It must also be used as the starting point for all strategic plans the school intends to develop and implement to solve the challenges hindering its improvement. The genuine involvement of all stakeholders is the panacea to creating a positive environment that highlights trust, collegiality, open communication, and motivation, and does not stifle the creativity and innovation of the staff.

Furthermore, collaborative leadership aligns with Gronn's Distributed Leadership Theory by emphasizing the collective responsibility for school improvement and recognizing the interdependence of stakeholders in achieving shared goals. The study also highlights the need for continuous professional development and supportive policies to enhance collaborative leadership practices. Despite these insights, limitations such as the small sample size and the study's cross-sectional nature should be considered when interpreting the findings. Future research could explore longitudinal impacts, examining how collaboration evolves and the role of technology in facilitating collaboration.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that the Government of Eswatini, through the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), invest more resources into strengthening the monitoring and evaluation framework for schools. This could include establishing a dedicated department to work closely with school leaders, providing clear policies for ongoing education quality monitoring, and ensuring that school leaders implement educational policies as operational guidelines to maintain high professional standards. In addition, regular school visits by education officers should be conducted to assess classroom practices, engage with school leaders, and reinforce the importance of compliance with educational standards.

Furthermore, tailored professional development programs should be introduced for school leaders, particularly focusing on enhancing their skills in collaborative leadership and school improvement management. These programs could include workshops on communication, team-building, and fostering an inclusive school culture. MOET should also consider formalizing collaborative leadership practices by creating policies encouraging regular engagement between stakeholders, such as teachers, students, and parents. Schools should be incentivized to form cross-functional teams that work together on school

improvement initiatives. Finally, future research should explore the role of technology in facilitating collaboration in schools, examining digital platforms for communication and data-sharing. Longitudinal studies and cross-cultural research could provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of collaborative leadership and offer best practices for different educational contexts.

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