



Leadership strategies of high school principals in managing unionized teachers in Manzini Region, Eswatini

¹Naboth Mudavanhu Phebeni & ²Muziwethu Simelane

Abstract

Educational leadership in unionized settings is complex, requiring principals to employ adaptable strategies to navigate this environment effectively. This study explored the specific leadership strategies used by high school principals in managing unionised teachers in the Manzini region of Eswatini. It draws on Bass's (1985) transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes the importance of inspiration, motivation, and personalized support as essential qualities that principals should possess. This theoretical lens guided the examination of how principals motivate and influence teachers while addressing union-related concerns. The study sample consisted of 10 principals, 10 teachers, and five officials from the Eswatini National Association of Teachers (ENAT). The findings of this study offer a beacon of hope, revealing that principals who embrace transformational practices, such as shared decision-making, open communication, and individualized support, can significantly reduce labour-related conflicts and enhance teacher commitment. Moreover, the collaborative engagement with union representatives has the potential to align union activities with the school's goals, fostering a more harmonious working environment. Given the complex nature of educational leadership in unionized settings, the study strongly recommends that principals receive targeted training in conflict resolution, negotiation, and collaborative leadership. These strategies are not only beneficial but also crucial for creating a productive school environment and effectively resolving conflicts while maintaining alignment between union advocacy and school priorities.

Keywords: *educational leadership, collaboration, transformational leadership, leadership strategies, school, union teachers*

Article History:

Received: July 30, 2025

Accepted: September 30, 2025

Revised: September 27, 2025

Published online: November 30, 2025

Suggested Citation:

Phebeni, N.M. & Simelane, M. (2025). Leadership strategies of high school principals in managing unionized teachers in Manzini Region, Eswatini. *International Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies*, 6(4), 68-87. <https://doi.org/10.53378/ijemds.353276>

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1. Introduction

Educational leadership is more than just guiding schools to achieve their objectives; it is about creating a positive learning environment where teaching and learning thrive. Principals, as the chief instructional leaders, are at the forefront of this mission (Lee & Shin, 2024). Their effective leadership and management not only improve the quality of education but also significantly boost confidence among school stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents (Sideridis & Alghamdi, 2024).

In the Manzini region's high schools, principals must juggle the dual roles of instructional leadership and managing relationships with teachers who are members of the Eswatini National Association of Teachers (ENAT). Mokofe (2021) notes that teacher unions protect teachers' rights and mediate collective bargaining over pay, labor policies, and workplace conditions. Logue (2018) argues that unions advocate for fair labor practices and guard against unfair dismissal. ENAT is a prominent union advocating for teachers' rights in Eswatini; while it strengthens protections, it can at times challenge school leadership and influence school policies, instructional priorities, and staff morale (Msila, 2022; Mokofe, 2021).

Principals, therefore, face the ongoing challenge of balancing their professional responsibilities with those of the teachers' union. This requires intentional strategies such as open communication, shared decision-making, and conflict-resolution practices that preserve institutional harmony while sustaining instructional quality.

This study examines how high school principals in the Manzini region navigate these complexities and responsibilities. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What leadership strategies do principals use to manage ENAT-affiliated teachers?
2. What challenges do principals encounter in balancing union activities and school goals?
3. How can principals foster collaboration with unionized teachers to enhance school performance?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Bass's (1985) Transformational Leadership Theory, which posits that effective leaders inspire and motivate followers to exceed their self-interests for the

benefit of the organization. Transformational leaders exhibit four core behaviours: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Kariuki, 2021). In education, this approach is particularly relevant for principals in unionized environments where tensions between advocacy and accountability can be high. Transformational leadership plays a crucial role in building trust, promoting collaboration, and increasing teacher commitment, thereby fostering a positive school environment.

Recent research consistently shows that transformational practices improve relationships between principals and unionised teachers. For example, Langat et al. (2019) demonstrate that transformational leadership fosters professional trust, reduces conflict, and encourages open dialogue. This emphasis on conflict reduction provides a suitable framework for examining how principals in Manzini can manage union relationships while sustaining school effectiveness, instilling a sense of reassurance and confidence in the process.

2.2. The Role of Teacher Unions in Education

Teacher unions, such as ENAT, advocate for teachers' rights and professional development (Jha et al., 2020), including negotiating for better pay, well-being, and working conditions (Han, 2020). Recent IJEMDS studies have demonstrated links between teacher well-being and instructional effectiveness (Del Pilar, 2023), confirming that differentiated professional development can address learning gaps (Aguhayon et al., 2023). While unions are credited with improving teacher retention and morale, their methods have sometimes been criticized for creating adversarial climates.

Han and García (2023) and Peebles (2022) note that although unions have improved teachers' salaries through collective bargaining, they are sometimes perceived as disruptive to educational reforms and face challenges in adapting to change. Symeonidis and Stromquist (2020) further highlight that distrust between union leaders and members can fracture their role and cause teachers to disengage. In some countries, such as Chile, this erosion of trust has weakened unions, prompting teachers to seek alternative structures to represent their interests (Parcerisa & Verger, 2025; Sisto et al., 2022). In contrast, unions in countries like Spain maintain stronger public support and social capital, though this does not extend to all teachers. Research findings also reveal mixed perceptions of unions' impact on teacher morale. While some studies overlook their role as morale mediators, Han and García (2023) and Han and Keefe (2023) found that unions play a significant role in reducing stress and burnout,

improving working conditions, and strengthening social networks that support teachers and communities (Edmeade & Buzinde, 2022). This suggests that unions can both support and strain school systems, depending on how their relationship with school leaders is managed.

2.3. Challenges of Managing Unionized Teachers

Teacher unions can pose challenges for principals who must balance teachers' interests with institutional priorities. Logue (2018) and Jha et al. (2020) all report that union demands for higher pay and better working conditions can conflict with school goals and budgets, while strikes and protests disrupt reforms and create tension. Similarly, Symeonidis and Stromquist (2020) and Mokofe (2021) note that goal misalignment, where leaders focus on learning outcomes and unions on rights protection, can cause friction and delay decision-making. It is safe to conclude that managerial capacity at the school leadership level correlates with organisational outcomes (Devanadera & Ching, 2023; Noriey, 2023). Without adequate training in emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and strategic thinking, principals struggle to manage these tensions (Zhu et al., 2022). Frequent communication breakdowns, distrust, and industrial action often damage relationships between principals and unions (Sumbane et al., 2023). In highly unionised settings like Eswatini, unions' influence on reform implementation is significant, often leading to delays and reduced institutional efficiency. Principals have limited autonomy to change schedules, workload, or performance systems without union consent (Peebles, 2022), leaving them feeling powerless.

2.4. Opportunities for Collaboration

Despite the challenges, well-managed collaboration between principals and unions can lead to improved schools. Han and Keefe (2023) demonstrate that involving unions in decision-making enhances teacher morale, fosters greater commitment, and aligns professional development with school objectives. Collaboration enables principals to leverage unions' social networks to mobilize resources, engage communities, and address local challenges (Edmeade & Buzinde, 2022). In Eswatini, such partnerships could help address gaps in curriculum delivery and inclusive education needs through union-supported workshops.

Han and Keefe (2023) also found that schools with active union input in staff welfare programmes report lower burnout and absenteeism, while Zhu et al (2022) note that shared leadership committees (union leaders and principals) increase transparency and align union

aims with student achievement. This evidence shows that, when trust and shared purpose exist, unions can become strategic partners in school improvement.

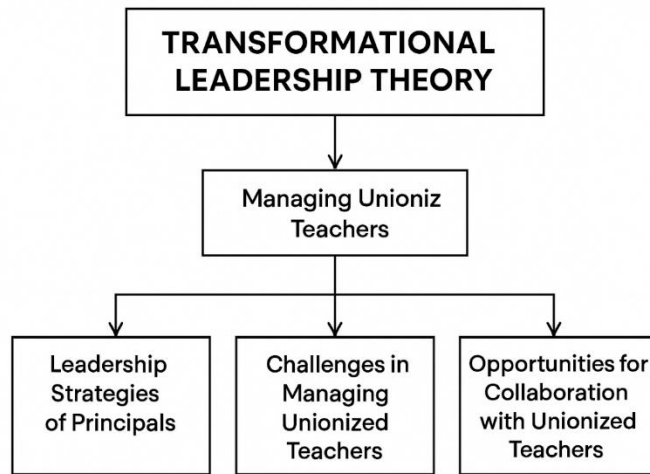
3. Methodology

3.1 Design of the Study

This study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to collect data from high school principals, teachers, and ENAT officials in the Manzini region. The choice of a qualitative approach was not arbitrary, but a deliberate decision to delve deep into individual differences and how they influence the construction of knowledge on managing unionized teachers (Lanka et al., 2021). This approach was viewed as instrumental, as it can gather and provide rich, nuanced data on the study phenomenon (Ugwu & Eze, 2023), offering a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

The study is based on Bass's (1985) Transformational Leadership Theory, which emphasizes the importance of inspiration, motivation, and personalized support as essential qualities that principals managing unionized teachers should possess. A qualitative approach is appropriate, as it is effective for exploring strategies to manage unionized teachers. Research has shown this to be a complex educational phenomenon, not easily understood and influenced by the perspectives of unions, teachers, and principals (Peel, 2020). The theory also plays a central role in explaining how principals influence and motivate teachers when addressing their concerns.

Transformational leadership theory was not chosen over transactional leadership arbitrarily; it was selected for its proven effectiveness. Transactional leadership, with its emphasis on control over relationship building (Avolio & Bass, 2004), was deemed less effective. Distributed leadership, while promoting shared responsibility, does not sufficiently address the motivational and inspirational elements needed to navigate the complex power dynamics in unionized school settings. In contrast, transformational leadership prioritizes building trust, fostering collaboration, and aligning individual and organizational goals, making it the most suitable and effective for this study. To clarify how the theory guides the study, we conceptualized a framework diagram, shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1*Conceptual framework for transformational leadership**Note:* Conceptualised by N. Phebeni and M. Simelane (2025)

The framework illustrates how the four dimensions of transformational leadership (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) inform the identification of principals' leadership strategies, the challenges they face, and the collaborative practices that emerge, providing a crucial link between the theory and the study.

3.2 Site and Sampling Methods

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 10 high school principals with extensive experience in managing unionized teachers. This method also identified 10 teachers and 5 officials from the ENAT Manzini office. Purposive sampling is particularly suitable for a study examining the leadership strategies high school principals use to manage unionized teachers. It empowers the researcher to intentionally select participants who possess rich, firsthand experience and in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. In qualitative research, purposive sampling is a robust tool for identifying information-rich cases that offer profound insights into complex issues, such as labor relations and leadership dynamics in unionized educational settings (Palinkas et al., 2022). Recent studies validate that purposive sampling enriches the relevance and depth of qualitative data by enabling the

selection of participants based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives (Etikan & Bala, 2017).

To ensure an adequate sample size, data collection was conducted meticulously until data saturation was achieved. Saturation was determined when no new themes, codes, or insights emerged from successive interviews, and participants' responses began to repetitively confirm previously collected data (Guest et al., 2020). In this study, saturation was reached after interviewing the eighth principal, the eighth teacher, and 4th ENAT official, as subsequent interviews yielded no new information. However, the researcher completed the planned sample of 10 principals, 10 teachers, and 5 ENAT officials to ensure data richness and to validate thematic consistency.

In this context, selecting principals with extensive experience ensures that the study captures nuanced leadership practices and real-world challenges, while confirming that the sample size was sufficiently robust to reflect the complex dynamics of leadership in unionised school environments.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 60 minutes, allowing for in-depth exploration of leadership strategies, challenges, and opportunities for collaboration in managing unionized teachers. This method was particularly relevant, as it enabled the researcher to establish rapport, observe nonverbal cues, and probe deeper into participants' lived experiences, elements critical to understanding the complexities of school leadership in unionized contexts. According to Denzin et al. (2023), face-to-face interviews remain a cornerstone of qualitative research because they elicit rich, nuanced data through direct human interaction. Furthermore, recent research by Banda and Ncube (2024) highlights the practicality of in-person interviews in capturing the context-specific realities of educational leaders, particularly in environments where trust and open dialogue are crucial.

An interview protocol was developed to align questions with the three research objectives. This protocol, while structured, was also designed to be flexible, allowing participants to introduce new perspectives. For example, questions on leadership strategies asked participants to describe practices they used to engage unionised teachers, while questions on challenges probed for experiences of conflict or negotiation with ENAT. Opportunities for

collaboration were explored through questions about shared decision-making and professional development initiatives. This structured yet flexible approach helped ensure that all objectives were systematically addressed while allowing participants to introduce new perspectives (Bernard & Adams, 2023).

To bolster data credibility and ensure participants' comfort, the interviews were conducted in familiar school settings. This setting, coupled with the interview protocol aligned with the study's objectives, provided a conducive environment for open and honest discussions. Additionally, audio recordings and reflective field notes were used to enhance the accuracy and depth of the collected data. After data collection, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and a thematic analysis was conducted. Initial codes were generated from significant statements, which were then grouped into categories and compared across participants to identify patterns. Themes were developed through an iterative process of merging and refining codes, ensuring that each theme was grounded in the data and aligned with the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Nowell et al., 2017). Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary themes with a sample of participants to verify accuracy and interpretive credibility.

3.4 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify, analyze, and interpret recurring patterns and themes emerging from the interview and observational data. This method was appropriate for capturing the nuanced leadership strategies, challenges, and relational dynamics involved in managing unionized teachers. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize that thematic analysis offers flexibility and depth in qualitative research, making it particularly effective for unpacking complex educational phenomena. The data analysis process involved familiarization with the transcripts, coding, theme development, and iterative refinement. This iterative refinement was crucial in ensuring that the themes accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences, thereby demonstrating the thoroughness of the research. Semi-structured interviews, complemented by two rounds of classroom and staff meeting observations per participant (totaling eight observations), enriched the analysis by enabling data triangulation, a strategy that enhances credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative studies (Nowell et al., 2017). These observations also provided contextual insight into leadership behaviors and interactions that are not always evident through interviews alone.

By integrating both interview and observational data, the study ensured a comprehensive, interpretively rigorous understanding of how high school principals navigate leadership in unionized environments.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed to ensure the study's integrity and credibility, as well as to protect participants' rights and dignity. Before data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the Eswatini University Research Ethics Committee, and formal permission was granted by the Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training, which serves as the official gatekeeper for access to public schools. Informed consent was also obtained from all participating principals, deputy principals, and teachers, who were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the option to participate voluntarily and the freedom to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, all data were stored securely, and identifiers were removed from transcripts and reports. Academic integrity throughout the research process was a key aspect of the study's ethical framework, ensuring honesty and transparency. According to Saunders et al. (2023), ethical rigor in qualitative educational research is essential for maintaining trustworthiness and protecting participants from harm or misrepresentation. Similarly, Aluwihare-Samaranayake (2012) emphasizes the importance of obtaining both institutional and individual consent as a foundational aspect of ethical fieldwork in school environments. By adhering to these ethical protocols, the study upheld principles of respect, responsibility, and academic integrity throughout the research process.

4. Findings and Discussions

Two key findings emerged from the study on leadership strategies to help manage unionised teachers, along with three significant challenges faced by principals. The leadership strategies suggested include transformational leadership practices and collaborative problem-solving approaches. The challenges principals face include conflicting priorities, resistance to change, and ineffective time management. Creating more opportunities for collaboration through professional development and a shared approach to vision development were suggested as approaches that principals could adopt to mitigate the challenges they experienced. The researcher used excerpts from interviews with principals (**P**), teachers (**T**),

and ENAT officials (**E**) to illustrate the findings. This integrated presentation of multiple stakeholder voices strengthens the trustworthiness of the findings and addresses the previous critique about limited perspectives.

4.1. Leadership Strategies

Transformational Leadership Practices. The findings indicate that several principals in the study frequently employed transformational leadership strategies, focusing on building trust, motivating staff, and aligning union goals with broader school objectives. **P1, P3, P5, P6, P8, and P10** confirmed how they use transformational leadership in managing the activities and well-being of their teachers:

We employ this approach because it is a key strategy for fostering teacher involvement in decision-making, particularly in policy formulation and school improvement initiatives.

Teachers and ENAT officials corroborated this perception. **T2** commented that
...when principals listen to and motivate us, we feel more valued and less combative.

E1 noted that principals who show empathy tend to gain more cooperation during negotiations.

This approach not only encouraged a sense of ownership among unionized staff but also reduced resistance to change. This finding aligns with recent research by Phebeni and Mpofu (2025), who argue that transformational leadership in educational settings fosters positive organizational culture by promoting shared vision and participatory governance. The emphasis on shared vision in this context inspires us with the potential for unified goals in overcoming challenges. Similarly, Leithwood et al. (2023) highlight that when school leaders practice inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation, unionized teachers are more likely to collaborate on reforms and instructional goals.

*In some instances, the feedback we receive has compelled us to adopt pragmatic approaches to accomplish our goals. There are environmental factors that affect teachers' behaviour, compelling us to mix our approaches (**P6**). However, the collaborative nature of these approaches reassures us of the potential for collective problem-solving in addressing these challenges.*

However, some contrasting perspectives caution against over-reliance on transformational leadership in unionized environments. As noted by Chirisa (2024), the emotional appeal and visionary aspect of transformational leadership may be insufficient when dealing with rigid union demands or when trust is historically fragile. In such cases, leaders may need to complement transformational approaches with transactional elements, which involve a more direct exchange of rewards for performance, to ensure compliance and accountability. This suggests that effective leadership in unionised schools may require a blended strategy, a gap this study addresses.

Collaborative problem-solving. Principals from most schools championed collaboration as a powerful tool to overcome the various challenges they face when managing unionised teachers. **P2, P3, P4, P8, P9, and P10** all concurred that they employed collaboration as a management strategy, underscoring its potential benefits.

Collaboration is another strategy we use... primarily through regular engagement with representatives of the Eswatini National Association of Teachers (ENAT).

The findings underscore the pivotal role of scheduled dialogue platforms, joint grievance-redress mechanisms, and shared conflict-resolution protocols in managing disputes and fostering workplace harmony. These strategies, in line with Sebidi (2021), demonstrate that structured communication between school leaders and teacher unions is a reliable means of mitigating antagonism and fostering mutual understanding.

Teachers validated this, **T4** stated,

When we meet jointly with principals and ENAT officials, it helps clear misunderstandings early. However, ENAT officials cautioned that collaboration is only effective when there is a foundation of trust; without it, it becomes tokenistic E3.

However, some principals raised reservations. **P1, P5, and P7** said:

We struggle to manage unionised teachers... the disconnection between the union and the school has fuelled miscommunication.

The effectiveness of collaborative problem-solving varied across schools. Research findings by Kapur (2019) suggest that principals who practice inclusive leadership enhance

collaboration with teacher unions and improve staff morale. This aligns with Phebeni and Mpofu (2025), who suggest that successful collaboration depends heavily on the relational capital between parties.

4.2. Challenges Faced by Principals

Conflicting priorities. A significant challenge reported by principals was managing conflicting priorities, particularly balancing union demands for improved remuneration and benefits with the financial constraints of school budgets. These conflicting priorities often manifest as financial demands, leading to budget constraints. **P2, P3, P4, and P5** said:

Unionized teachers... lobby for salary increases and better working conditions, which sometimes clash with limited resources.

Teachers also acknowledged this tension, recognizing the valid concerns on both sides of the issue. **T5** said,

We sometimes push for things that are not in the school budget because members pressure us. At the same time, E2 noted that when principals show us the actual budget figures, we can negotiate more realistically.

This aligns with Myende et al. (2020), who argue that financial disputes between school management and teacher unions often erode trust among stakeholders. In contrast, their findings suggest that including unions in budget planning can reduce adversarial positions. These assertions underscore the critical need for financial transparency mechanisms in principal-union interactions, underscoring the urgency of this issue and the need for immediate attention.

Resistance to change. Principals also faced significant resistance from unionized teachers when introducing new instructional strategies. **P1, P7, and P8** explained:

Teachers often cite union-stipulated roles... as reasons to reject innovations. T3 added that we sometimes resist because changes are announced without consideration, and E4 stated that if we are involved early, we can help shape changes rather than block them.

This aligns with Msila (2022), who found that unions may inadvertently become barriers to pedagogical reform when changes are seen as threats. Chigona et al. (2024) argue that such resistance can be mitigated when change initiatives are co-developed with union representatives, underscoring the importance of early and inclusive consultation, a strategy that, if utilized, can empower school leaders to address union resistance proactively. Similarly, Ogina (2021) concluded that principals in South Africa adapt their leadership strategies based on teacher performance levels, thereby balancing accountability with support.

Time management. Time management emerged as another challenge, as principals struggled to balance their administrative responsibilities with the demands of ongoing union engagements. **P2, P3, P4, and P8** noted:

Negotiation meetings... can be time-consuming, often detracting from instructional leadership. T1 confirmed that when principals miss class visits due to meetings, we feel less supported, while E5 suggested setting fixed union-principal meeting slots to avoid interrupting teaching time. E5 added that their proposal offers a potential solution, providing reassurance and instilling confidence in the ability to manage time effectively.

This finding is consistent with Symeonidis and Stromquist (2020), who highlight that in unionized contexts, leaders often experience role strain. They suggest that distributed leadership, in which leadership responsibilities are shared among a group, can alleviate time pressures. For instance, assigning specific tasks to assistant principals or department heads could help distribute the workload. Additionally, this indicates that building a distributed leadership structure could alleviate time strain while enhancing teacher involvement.

4.3. Opportunities for Collaboration

Professional development. Principals, as key figures, have identified professional development as a crucial area for fostering collaboration and growth. **P1, P3, P4, P5, and P6**, in their roles, have stated:

We need to host jointly organized workshops to strengthen mutual trust and understanding. As noted by T6, when ENAT endorses a workshop, more teachers are likely to attend. E1 added that we can bridge labor and pedagogy by planning training programs together.

Research findings in Eswatini by Tshabalala and Faremi (2024) confirm that principals directly influence student achievement when they link teacher development to learning outcomes. Additionally, studies by Wulaningrum et al. (2025) support this view, although they caution that if not co-designed, such reforms may be perceived as top-down. These views demonstrate how professional development can serve as a vehicle for both capacity building and trust repair, aligning with the research gap on relational breakdowns.

Shared vision development. Another promising area is developing a shared vision through inclusive goal-setting. **P1, P7, and P9** have expressed:

We need more approaches that enhance staff morale and performance by promoting ownership and accountability. T2 agreed that when we help set goals, we support them more. While E3 warned, the vision must include labour rights, or it will be rejected.

This finding aligns with those of Myende et al. (2020). However, Msila (2022) emphasizes the importance of structured dialogue when union interests conflict with managerial goals, providing reassurance and confidence in the process.

Overall, these findings indicate that principals primarily rely on transformational and collaborative strategies. However, their effectiveness is moderated by challenges such as conflicting priorities, resistance to change, and time constraints, as well as the voices of teachers and ENAT officials, who play a key role. The findings reveal that trust, transparency, and joint decision-making are crucial conditions for success. This area has been previously underexplored in the literature and addresses a key research gap in the study.

5. Conclusion

This study's findings highlight the crucial role of adaptive leadership in managing unionized teachers in high schools in the Manzini Region of Eswatini. Principals who employed transformational and collaborative leadership strategies were more effective in navigating the complex dynamics between union obligations and institutional priorities. Specifically, practices such as inclusive decision-making, regular dialogue with SNAT representatives, and joint professional development initiatives emerged as powerful tools in

fostering alignment and reducing resistance. These findings are not just informative, but also crucial for understanding and improving union-school relations.

However, the study also revealed persistent challenges, including conflicting priorities such as meeting academic standards and addressing teachers' concerns, resistance to instructional reforms, and time constraints, which often strained leadership effectiveness. Overall, the findings affirm that when principals lead with openness, build trust, and maintain consistent communication, unionized environments can become platforms for innovation, shared responsibility, and school improvement.

These insights have broader implications for policy and practice in Eswatini's education system. The Ministry of Education and Training could use these findings to design leadership training programs that incorporate conflict resolution, collective bargaining, and relational leadership skills as core modules. Moreover, the findings suggest that union policy frameworks could be reviewed to integrate mechanisms for joint strategic planning between school leaders and ENAT representatives, thus shifting the relationship from adversarial to collaborative. Nonetheless, the study has limitations, including its small sample size of principals, teachers, and ENAT officials from a single region (Manzini), which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other contexts.

Future research could undertake comparative studies across multiple regions of Eswatini to explore whether similar leadership dynamics exist elsewhere. Additionally, studies that deliberately include more union leaders and teachers' perspectives would provide a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of union-leadership relationships. If implemented, the findings could inform policy reforms to enhance labour relations in Eswatini's education system. These reforms have the potential to transform the system, fostering school cultures built on trust, cooperation, and shared accountability. In the long term, improved collaboration between unions and principals can enhance teacher morale, improve instructional quality, and ultimately boost student outcomes.

Considering the findings, several practical recommendations are proposed to strengthen leadership capacity in unionized educational settings:

Principals should receive targeted training in conflict resolution, collective bargaining, and negotiation to navigate union-related tensions and enhance collaborative governance. The Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training could integrate these skills into pre-service and

in-service principal training programmes, using simulated negotiation scenarios and mentorship schemes to build practical capacity.

Schools should establish structured platforms for dialogue between management and union representatives, such as monthly forums or joint leadership committees, to ensure continuous and transparent communication. Such platforms will foster proactive engagement and reduce adversarial relationships. These platforms could also be formalised with the Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training's school governance policy framework, ensuring their continuity even when school leadership or union representatives change. The Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training, along with ENAT, should jointly review existing collective bargaining frameworks to include provisions for shared decision-making in school improvement plans and teacher development programs. This would reduce conflicts and promote co-ownership of reforms.

Ultimately, future research should expand its scope of inquiry to include the perspectives of ENAT members themselves. More specifically, future studies could conduct comparative case studies across other regions of Eswatini, explore union leaders' experiences negotiating with school principals, and investigate the impact of union-principal collaboration on student achievement metrics. By implementing these recommendations, the Eswatini education system could move toward a more cooperative and accountable model of school leadership, where union policy engagement is seen as a driver rather than a barrier to school improvement. This would cultivate healthier school cultures and support sustainable improvements in student outcomes.

Disclosure statement

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the University of Eswatini's ethical guidelines. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relevant clearance by the University of Eswatini and the Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training.

AI Declaration

The author declares no use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. However, Quillbot was used to detect AI, and Grammarly was used to check grammar and sentence structure.

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