

# Exploring perceptions of secondary schools' management teams on the effectiveness of quality management system: A transformational leadership lens

<sup>1</sup>Simanga Phillip Lukhele & <sup>2</sup>LDM Lebeloane

## Abstract

The study explored the perceptions of secondary schools' management teams (SMTs) on the effectiveness of quality management system (QMS). It was premised on the lens of Burns' (1978) Transformational Leadership (TL) theory, which is ascribed for visionary leaders. Sixteen (16) participants (principals, deputy principals and departmental heads) were purposefully selected to participate in the study. A qualitative semi-structured telephone interview was primarily used to collect data. Braun and Clarke's six steps of thematic data analysis was applied to arrange themes and sub-themes. The findings of the study reveal that the participants understood the role players responsible for the effectiveness of QMS in secondary schools. Despite the preceding narrative, there were discrepancies on the effectiveness of QMS. Basically, this positions the effectiveness of QMS as being ineffective in the selected secondary schools. Even though participants were eloquent in providing interventions to strengthen the effectiveness of the system, the study further recommends that policy makers in the Department of Basic Education should consider infusing the TL theory for future streamlining and rebranding of QMS. However, it is worth mentioning that the study's limitation was that the sample size of sixteen participants was small to represent the findings of all secondary schools in the district. Secondly, the use of the telephone interview posed network challenges which led to consistent communication break downs. These limitations pose a need for further research, especially delving in an increased sample size and other data collection instruments, to strengthen the methodological rationale.

**Keywords:** *educational management, integrated quality management system, quality education, performance measurement*

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## About the authors:

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author. Department of Educational Leadership and Management, University of South Africa, South Africa. Email: [17269741@mylife.unisa.ac.za](mailto:17269741@mylife.unisa.ac.za)

<sup>2</sup>Department of Science and Technology Education, University of South Africa, South Africa. Email: [lebelldm@unisa.ac.za](mailto:lebelldm@unisa.ac.za)



## 1. Introduction

Section 4(l) of the National Education Policy Act 27 of 1996 mandates schools to enhance quality education through the performance and training of educators and education managers (South Africa, 1996). To sustain quality performance, Section 16 of the Employment of Educators Act 78 of 1998 further requires that both educators and school managers be evaluated based on their work performance and their capacity to carry out their duties efficiently (South Africa, 1998). In this regard, the quality performance of educators in schools depends largely on the effectiveness of the Quality Management System (QMS). Consequently, school management teams (SMTs) are entrusted with safeguarding quality management in all public schools in South Africa.

The Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) outlines, among other matters, the broad scope of the QMS. The council was established in accordance with several related legislative frameworks, including the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995, the South African Schools Act 86 of 1996, and the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998. It constitutes a body representing both the State (employer) and employees to whom the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1996 applies (ELRC, 2020). The primary purpose of the agreement within the ELRC was to provide a standardized framework for employee performance evaluation for educators. Within this framework, the SMT, comprising the principal, deputy principal, and heads of department, has the overall responsibility for managing the planning and implementation of QMS processes in schools. The system is intended to evaluate educators' performance, monitor institutional performance, promote accountability, provide support for continuous professional growth, and identify the support and development needs of both educators and schools (Mamabolo et al., 2022). The capacity and leadership of the principal are therefore critical to the successful implementation of the QMS teacher appraisal system in South Africa (Shongwe & Mutambara, 2023).

However, since January 2021, when SMTs were required to adopt QMS processes in South African schools (ELRC, 2020), the implementation and effectiveness of the system in secondary schools have appeared relatively slow. Limited improvements have been observed in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, and education service delivery processes following the introduction of QMS (Sambumbu, 2023). Although QMS is intended to motivate performance, concerns regarding quality remain, and inefficiencies in management have been identified (Africano et al., 2019). In response to these concerns, this study explores the

perceptions of secondary school SMTs regarding the effectiveness of QMS. The role of SMTs in enhancing school performance and quality, however, remains unclear. While some studies have examined policy implementation, limited research has directly linked the effectiveness of QMS with the role of SMTs in South African secondary schools. This suggests the presence of a research gap that requires further investigation, particularly as the apparent ineffectiveness of QMS may undermine its intended purpose. Through the findings of this study, gaps in the effectiveness of QMS will be identified. The results are expected to contribute significantly to leadership discourse, improve the effectiveness of QMS, and inform future policy directions within both South African and global contexts. Thus, the study sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. Who are the role players responsible for the effectiveness of the quality management system in secondary schools?
2. To what extent is the quality management system effective in secondary schools?
3. Which interventions are required to strengthen the effectiveness of the quality management system in secondary schools?

## **2. Literature review**

### ***2.1. Role Players Influencing the Effectiveness of the Quality Management System in Secondary Schools***

A study conducted by Yusuf et al. (2019) in Samarinda, Indonesia, highlights the role of secondary school principals in providing positive support to improve the performance of the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS). The study further indicates that senior educators, junior educators, and students' parents are also involved in the implementation of IQMS. In contrast, schools in Jordan implement Total Quality Management (TQM) practices, where school managers and teachers pay particular attention to quality management approaches that directly influence the academic performance of secondary schools in Amman (Sweis et al., 2020).

In Nigeria, school head teachers who also serve as administrators are entrusted with managerial responsibilities for executing the goals of the QMS in schools in Ondo State (Babatunde & Victor, 2018). Similarly, in Kwara State, education quality management is considered to be optimally implemented through the leadership of school principals, who

promote moral discipline, effective administration, and proper curriculum implementation (Kadir, 2019). In Anambra State, the responsibility for ensuring quality education in secondary schools also rests with school principals and other members of top management, who are expected to carry out effective administrative duties (Osegbue & Ohamobi, 2025).

Within the South African context, the responsibility for ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of QMS in secondary schools in Soweto rests with School Management Teams (SMTs) (Kganyago, 2018). These teams conduct evaluation activities for educators with the aim of improving the overall quality performance of schools in the Gauteng province. The responsibility to strengthen quality education also extends to principals, educators, and other SMT members, who are expected to continuously improve their professional skills and competencies (Botha, 2019). This expectation places significant responsibility on SMTs to effectively manage the quality of education delivered by educators, thereby enabling teachers to enhance their professional confidence, subject knowledge, teaching skills, and classroom management.

## ***2.2. The Extent to Which the Quality Management System Is Effective in Secondary Schools***

Evidence from secondary schools in the Basque region of Spain indicates that the positive outcomes of QMS were realized only after a considerable period (Díez et al., 2018). Teaching staff were initially slow to recognize that the presence of QMS could enhance their professional competitiveness in the workplace. In addition, some schools in the country were excluded from the implementation of the system due to procedural reasons. When quality systems and institutional structures intended to support and motivate teachers are ineffective, educators may lose focus on their professional responsibilities and commitment (Mahmood et al., 2020). Consequently, within Basque secondary schools, reward structures and teacher support have received comparatively less emphasis than other elements of the QMS (Díez et al., 2018).

In Angola, only 20% of the 50 surveyed schools were found to have effectively implemented QMS, although schools that adopted the system experienced improvements in teaching quality, student satisfaction, and teacher competencies (Africano et al., 2019). Despite government investment in physical infrastructure to support school operations, the quality management system related to teacher development and performance remains insufficient and

ineffective (Paulo, 2021). Furthermore, the effectiveness of quality education in Luanda continues to be constrained by limited classroom materials, inadequate teaching resources, and insufficient teacher training, reflecting broader quality challenges within Angola's education system (António & Kuebo, 2024). Similar challenges are observed in management education in India, where issues such as a shortage of qualified professors, outdated curricula, limited real-world experience, and inadequate facilities persist (Rohini & Pentang, 2023).

Within the South African context, the implementation of QMS in the Eastern Cape has encountered several challenges, although some principals have attempted to participate actively in the implementation process by mobilizing teaching resources, encouraging the use of technology in teaching, and promoting effective quality education (Mutongoza et al., 2021). Nevertheless, even though principals formed part of the team structures responsible for implementing QMS in the Mthatha districts, limited leadership in driving the process resulted in schools experiencing difficulties in effectively managing QMS procedures (Tachie & Mancotywa, 2021).

### ***2.3. Interventions to Strengthen the Effectiveness of Quality Management System in Secondary Schools***

The successful implementation of Total Quality Management Systems (TQMS) in Pakistan has been shown to depend on five key elements: commitment from top management, continuous improvement, training and education, employee focus, and employee involvement (Mahmood et al., 2020). In comparison, Swedish secondary schools adopt a strategic framework for quality management that emphasizes professional development initiatives for school leaders (Håkansson & Adolfsson, 2021). Through this approach, school leaders implement QMS more effectively using training modules focused on common direction, leadership, learning, and quality improvement grounded in data and evidence.

Evidence from Kenya also highlights the importance of effective communication between top management and employees in implementing TQM in secondary schools in Makeni County (Kavutai, 2018). Effective quality implementation in these schools has been demonstrated through senior management developing strategic action plans, empowering employees, and providing greater discretion and autonomy, thereby enabling schools to benefit from the knowledge and skills of their staff. In Nigeria, the quality assurance unit of the Ministry of Education in Lagos State carries the responsibility of conducting regular

inspections of teachers to assess their effectiveness and maintain education quality standards (Ademola et al., 2021).

In South Africa, however, many secondary schools in the Mpumalanga province have faced challenges in adopting effective strategies for the implementation of QMS. In some cases, educators have perceived the system as a fault-finding administrative exercise rather than a developmental tool. Similar perceptions have been reported among principals and deputy principals, who have viewed QMS as a biased and non-critical process that fails to achieve its intended objectives (Steyn, 2019). Furthermore, the system has occasionally generated conflict among colleagues, requiring school managers to facilitate conflict resolution processes. To address these challenges, continuous retraining of educators has been recommended as a key strategy for improving the effectiveness of QMS implementation (Simelane & Mutambara, 2022).

#### ***2.4. Theoretical framework***

The study is premised on Burns' (1978) Transformational Leadership (TL) Theory. This theory characterizes organizational leaders as visionary, committed, charismatic, empathetic, capable of influencing employee engagement, and oriented toward performance (Poturaki et al., 2020). Beyond possessing charisma and strategic capability in achieving organizational goals, TL also emphasizes leaders who seek to influence changes in the values, emotions, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and needs of their followers (Hambali & Idris, 2020). In this regard, the TL theory encourages leaders to actively promote change within both employees and the organization while remaining mindful of achieving institutional goals.

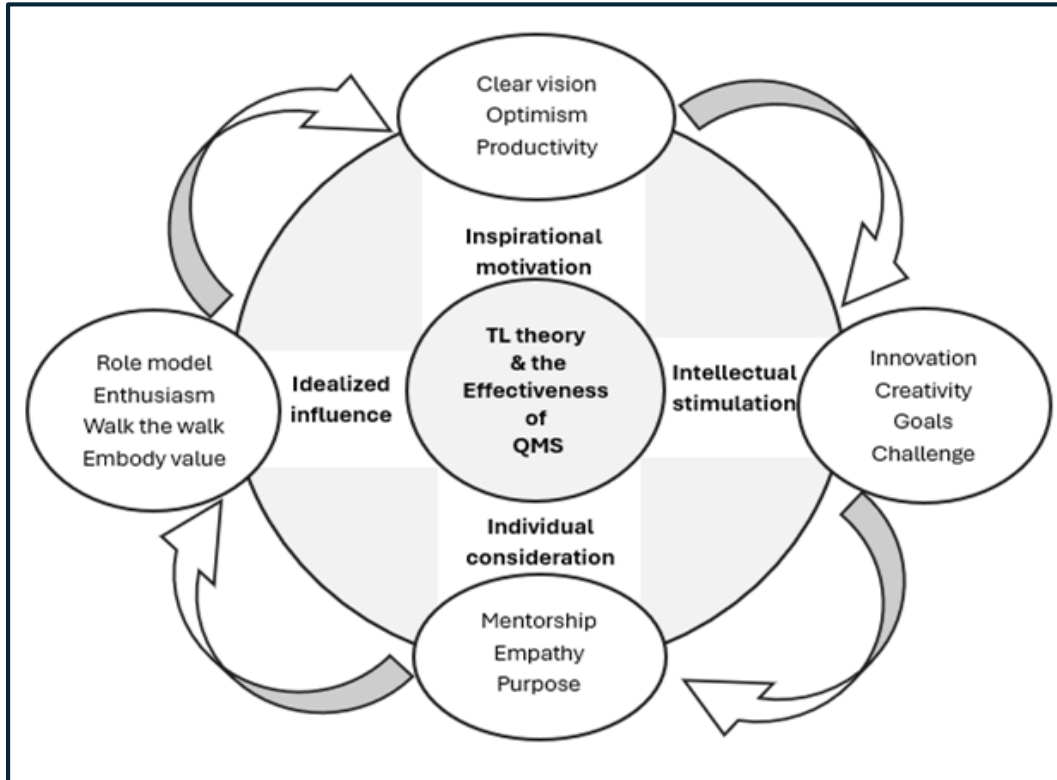
Central to the theory are the '4Is' of TL, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration, which form the fundamental components that informed this study. These components are directly linked to the main research aim of exploring the perceptions of secondary school management teams regarding the effectiveness of the QMS in the uMkhanyakude district.

The components of the TL theory are illustrated in Figure 1. The idealized influence characterizes leaders as role models who are enthusiastic, lead by example, and embody the values of leadership. Achieving effective quality management systems requires SMTs to influence followers and clearly define organizational goals for them (Tanjung et al., 2020). In this regard, SMTs, as charismatic and visionary leaders (Ahmed, 2022), are expected to

persuade educators to recognize that accountability forms part of the positive future and development of the school.

**Figure 1**

*Components of Burns' (1978) Transformational Leadership Theory (TL)*



*Source:* Adapted from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/what-is-transformational-leadership.html>

The second component of the TL theory is inspirational motivation. Transformational leaders who inspire others are characterized by a clear vision, optimism, and high levels of productivity in their work. When SMTs effectively integrate inspirational motivation into their leadership practices, followers (educators) are more likely to develop confidence in their ability to achieve optimal goals (Bakker et al., 2023).

The third component, intellectual stimulation, emphasizes leaders who are innovative, creative, goal-oriented, and capable of solving problems while guiding their schools effectively. Within this component, employees are encouraged to explore new approaches to problem-solving. Their creative ideas are not dismissed simply because they differ from those of their leaders; instead, they are supported and empowered to further develop their abilities and perspectives.

The fourth component of the TL theory is individual consideration. Leaders who demonstrate individual consideration value mentorship, practice empathy, and exhibit a purposeful approach to leadership (Bakker et al., 2023). Transformational leaders treat each follower as a unique individual, which increases the likelihood of understanding their specific needs. Such leaders are also known to protect the well-being of individuals in the workplace and ensure that they are treated fairly for their actions (Brown et al., 2019). As a result, followers develop trust in their leaders and often regard them as role models (Singh, 2019).

It is therefore argued that schools that effectively implement QMS are characterized by sustained relationships between leaders and followers, creating a conducive environment for achieving positive outcomes. Empowering educators through QMS has been associated with significant improvements in school performance (Kamau, 2020). Similarly, TL has been shown to bring fundamental changes in the work environment by addressing the developmental and achievement needs of followers (Mbindvo, 2021). Consequently, the TL theory can serve as a strategic framework to guide SMTs in effectively implementing the quality management system. By aligning their practices with the components of TL, SMTs have the potential to enhance the purpose and effectiveness of QMS in schools.

### **3. Methods**

#### ***3.1. Participants of the Study***

Appropriate participants were invited to ensure that the qualitative study achieved its intended aim. The study sought to explore the perceptions of secondary school SMTs regarding the effectiveness of QMS in the uMkhanyakude district. Participants in research represent a complete set of individuals or items under investigation (Hossan et al., 2023). In this study, the population from which sampling was conducted consisted of members of SMTs drawn from the 168 secondary schools in the district. Specifically, secondary school principals, deputy principals, and heads of department formed the group of individuals targeted for participation in the study. These individuals are often regarded as key actors responsible for managing educators and leading school operations (Lukhele & Lebeloane, 2024).

A selection criterion was applied to ensure the reliability and credibility of the study's findings. Participants were required to be SMT members in secondary schools and to have a minimum of three years of experience in a management position. This criterion was considered important for contributing meaningful insights aligned with the main aim of the study.

Conversely, individuals who were not in management positions were excluded from the selection process, as they might not have been able to provide sufficient information regarding the effectiveness of QMS in schools. Table 1 presents the socio-biographical data of the sampled participants.

**Table 1**

*Socio-biographical data of participants*

Code	Gender	Age	Home Language	Qualification level	Years of experience in management position	Position held in management
SSP1	M	40	IsiZulu	PGCE	5	Principal
SSDH1	M	34	IsiZulu	BEd	4	DH
SSDH2	M	42	IsiZulu	BEd	4	DH
SSP2	M	44	siSwati	PGCE	3	Principal
SSDH3	F	45	IsiZulu	BEd Hons	4	DH
SSDP1	M	33	IsiZulu	BEd	3	DP
SSDH4	F	30	IsiZulu	BEd	3	DH
SSDH5	F	50	IsiZulu	BEd Hons	7	DH
SSP3	M	53	IsiZulu	ACE	9	Principal
SSDP2	F	52	IsiZulu	BEd	14	DP
SSDH6	F	42	IsiZulu	PGCE	5	DH
SSDH7	F	44	IsiZulu	PGCE	9	DH
SSDP3	M	46	IsiZulu	BEd	6	DP
SSDP4	M	46	IsiZulu	PGCE	8	DP
SSP4	F	54	IsiZulu	ACE	12	Principal
SSDH8	M	39	IsiZulu	BEd	4	DH

**Legends:** SSP1 to SSP4 (Secondary school principal 1 to 4) ; SDP1 to SSDP4 (Secondary school deputy principal 1 to 4); SSDH1 to SSDH8 (Secondary school departmental head 1 to 8); M (Male); F (Female); ACE (Advanced Certificate in Education); B.Ed (Bachelor of Education); B.Ed Hons (Bachelor of Education Honours); PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education); DH (Departmental Head); DP (Deputy principal)

### **3.2. Research Site and Sample**

The study was conducted in the uMkhanyakude district, which is located in the northern region of KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. A purposive non-probability sampling method was employed to explore the perceptions of secondary school management teams regarding the effectiveness of the QMS in the district. This sampling approach was considered appropriate for qualitative inquiry because it is less complex, cost-effective, and feasible to implement (Iliyasu & Etikan, 2021).

The district comprises four Circuit Management Clusters (CMCs), and four SMT members from each CMC constituted the sample. Participants included SMT members who

had a minimum of three years of experience in a management position. To explore SMT members' perceptions of the effectiveness of QMS, sixteen (16) secondary schools were selected from the four CMCs within the district. Consequently, the sample represented approximately 10% of the total population of 168 secondary schools in the district. Although the sample size may appear relatively small to represent the entire population of the study area, a smaller sample drawn from a research context where individuals share similar characteristics can still allow for the generalization of findings (Lukhele et al., 2025). Furthermore, the study deliberately focused on a small group of SMT members who possessed specific insights relevant to the research aim.

### ***3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process***

The study employed both primary and secondary data collection methods to ensure the credibility of the findings. Consequently, methodological triangulation was incorporated into the data collection process. Secondary data sources analyzed to support the primary data collection instrument included government policy documents, scholarly articles, books, and other publications related to QMS.

The primary data collection tool was a telephone semi-structured interview, with each interview lasting approximately 25–30 minutes. Telephone interviews were considered a suitable qualitative method because they allow flexibility and interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Although the interview questions were asked in English, participants were asked for clarification when necessary to ensure credibility, and they were allowed to express themselves comfortably in their preferred language. Participants' responses were recorded using an audio recording application and later transcribed. This process helped ensure the validity of the responses during the analysis and interpretation stages.

### ***3.4. Data Analysis***

The thematic method of data analysis was identified as appropriate for this study because it aligns well with qualitative research approaches. Applying the steps of thematic data analysis enabled the researchers to identify, organize, and report themes related to SMTs' experiences regarding the effectiveness of QMS in secondary schools. Thematic analysis serves as an essential approach for researchers seeking to explore and understand the rich and

complex experiences of their participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The procedure for data analysis followed several systematic steps.

*Step 1: Familiarisation with the data.* In this stage, the researchers became familiar with the collected data. Through this process, researchers begin to identify the types of themes that may emerge from the data (Dawadi, 2020). As familiarity with the data deepened (Finlay, 2021), the interview transcripts were read and re-read while notes were taken to identify potential themes. This careful review was undertaken to ensure alignment with the research objectives. During this stage, researchers also began to sensitize themselves to key concepts and consider possible themes that might emerge from the data (Jowsey et al., 2021).

*Step 2: Generation of initial codes.* In this stage, the researchers generated initial codes by organizing the data systematically. Codes and relevant data extracts were arranged in a logical manner to prepare the data for analysis (Finlay, 2021). As the transcripts were re-examined, codes were assigned by identifying key phrases and related words within the data.

*Step 3: Searching for themes.* In this step, themes were identified by grouping related codes into broader categories of meaning. Data containing similar ideas were reviewed and combined into a single theme or sub-theme to ensure coherence and clarity (Mmusi-Phetoe et al., 2025). At this stage, codes with related meanings were merged to develop overarching themes and sub-themes (Byrne, 2022).

*Step 4: Reviewing potential themes.* During this stage, the identified themes were carefully reviewed to determine whether they adequately reflected the data. Additional related themes were also explored where necessary (Jowsey et al., 2021). The review process involved refining the themes by collapsing, splitting, or discarding those that were irrelevant to the research objectives (Finlay, 2021).

*Step 5: Defining and naming themes.* In this step, the researchers defined and named the themes. Each theme was refined and clearly articulated to present a meaningful interpretation of the data. This involved crafting a concise analysis of each theme to develop a coherent narrative. At this stage, researchers also determined which data extracts would be used to support the findings in the analysis (Byrne, 2022).

*Step 6: Writing the report.* Finally, the researchers compiled the report in a coherent and logical manner, organizing the themes according to their relevance to the research objectives. This stage represents the final step in thematic analysis, where the relevant themes

are presented and the overall narrative of the findings is refined and clearly communicated (Humble & Mozelius, 2022).

### 3.5. Research ethics

Ethical clearance was obtained from the UNISA College of Education Research Committee before the researchers engaged with the participants. This process ensured compliance with ethical standards governing research involving human participants. An ethical clearance certificate (Reference no. 8223) was granted, serving as formal approval for the collection of data from the participants.

Consent forms were also provided to the SMT members. These forms clearly stated that participation in the study was voluntary and that participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or cost. To maintain confidentiality and adhere to ethical procedures, the real names of the participants were not disclosed. Instead, participant codes were used for the purposes of analysis and reporting.

## 4. Results

This section presents the results of the study. The themes linked to the study's objectives are presented through a synthesis of the participants' responses. Following a synopsis of the findings under each theme, the discussion section draws on the lens of TL theory to develop an argument underpinning the perceptions of secondary SMTs regarding the effectiveness of the QMS in the uMkhanyakude district.

**Table 2**

*Summary of themes, participants' key quotes and the relevancy of the TL theory*

Code	Sub-theme	Participants' key quote/ frequency of responses	Relevant component of the TL theory
<b>Theme 1: Role players on the effectiveness of QMS at uMkhanyakude secondary schools</b>			
SSDH4	<i>The principal and the SMT</i>	"...the principal, deputy principal and departmental heads..."	Idealized influence
SSDH2		"...is the principal and the SMT..."	
SSDP1	<i>The SMT and educators</i>	"...is the SMT. But also the teachers..."	Idealized influence
SSDH3		"...members of the SMT, your principal, your deputy principal and uhm...the DHs. I must also add the PL1 educators..."	
SSP2		"I, the principal, my DH work in an effective way with my teachers..."	
SSDH6	<i>The SMT and circuit managers</i>	"Only the SMT and the circuit manager..."	Idealized influence
SSDH8		"The principal, the DHs and the circuit manager..."	

Code	Sub-theme	Participants' key quote/ frequency of responses	Relevant component of the TL theory
SSDH5		"I think the SMT and the circuit manager"	
SSP1	<i>The district officials, SMT and educators</i>	"...it is the responsibility of the principal...the deputy principal, the departmental heads, post level 1 educators...the DCES..."	Idealized influence
SSDP2		"...but the SMT, the educators, the district and the resource person..."	
SSP3		"...it lets educators to realise how competent they are and whether they are able to fairly account on their defined duties".	
<b>Theme 2: The extent to which QMS is effective at uMkhanyakude secondary schools</b>			
SSP2	<i>QMS being 'effective'</i>	"I can boldly say QMS is effective in my school..."	Idealized influence
SSDP3		"I can say yes it is effective..."	Inspirational motivation
SSDH7		"QMS in my school is uhhh...effective..."	Intellectual stimulation Individual consideration
SSDH2	<i>QMS being 'ineffective'</i>	"It is not effective...we just fill forms for compliance..."	Idealized influence
SSDH3		"we were not trained for QMS...that is why it is not effective"	Inspirational motivation Intellectual stimulation
SSDH8		"According to my knowledge, QMS is not taking place in my school..."	Individual consideration
SSP4	<i>QMS being 'inconsistent'</i>	"...sometimes we do it, but most of the time we do not"	Idealized influence Inspirational motivation
SSDP2		"...so you find that we sometimes appraise part of the staff or not at all."	Intellectual stimulation Individual consideration
<b>Theme 3: Interventions to strengthen the effectiveness of QMS at uMkhanyakude secondary schools</b>			
SSDH1	<i>Proper and timeous planning</i>	"...the school should have a management plan that talks to QMS..."	Intellectual stimulation
SSP2		"QMS can be intensified by a well-prepared year plan which must also involve some dates..."	
SSDH3	<i>Regular training of SMTs and educators</i>	"There is a need for a workshop that will train all of us..."	Intellectual stimulation
SSP4		"I believe that when the SMT is well trained regularly..."	
SSDP3		"...even other colleagues should be trained..."	
SSP1	<i>Independent appraisers</i>	"...the department may consider assigning appraisal process to people outside the school..."	Intellectual stimulation
SSDH5		"...QMS can be strengthened by having independent evaluators".	
SSP3	<i>Provision of school resources</i>	"If schools can be provided with proper infrastructure such as classrooms, computers, and photocopying machines..."	Intellectual stimulation
SSDP4		"Provide us with resources, you will see performance..."	
SSDP1	<i>Revising and strengthening the educator-learner ratio</i>	"...the department of education can revise the number of learners that a teacher has to teach..."	Intellectual stimulation

### ***Theme1: Role players on the effectiveness of QMS at uMkhanyakude secondary schools***

Participants were asked to identify the role players responsible for ensuring the effectiveness of QMS in their schools. Although all participants acknowledged that QMS cannot operate independently, they provided varied responses regarding the individuals

responsible for its effectiveness. During thematic data analysis, responses that conveyed similar ideas were grouped and combined to form sub-themes (Byrne, 2022). The sub-themes that emerged are presented.

***The principal and the SMT.*** Three participants indicated that the key role players responsible for the effectiveness of QMS include the principal, who oversees all QMS processes, as well as other members of the SMT, including deputy principals and heads of department. As one participant (SSP4) explained:

*“Well, according to my knowledge and understanding, the principal is the key role player for the effectiveness of ehh...ehh this quality management system. Yes, the SMT as in my case there are two departmental heads, they are also part of the process of QMS.”*

***The SMT and educators.*** Several participants expressed the view that the effectiveness of QMS in secondary schools largely depends on the roles played by both SMT members and educators themselves. They explained that although the primary purpose of QMS is to improve the competence level of educators, teachers also engage in self-evaluation as part of the process. At the same time, SMT members take responsibility for assessing the proficiency of Post Level 1 (PL1) educators. As one participant (SSDP1) stated:

*“I think people who are responsible for the effective implementation of QMS is the SMT. But also the teachers must also appraise themselves because they are also the role players.”*

SSDH1 had to say:

*“I do the whole work. The other DH usually says she knows nothing about QMS then I am obliged to try. You must remember that I also know little about it but I try to learn.”*

The departmental head (SSDH1) was asked whether the principal participates in the process. He added:

*“Not at all, actually he is acting for the principalship. Even when he was the DH, he would also say QMS is difficult and need more time.”*

***The SMT and circuit managers.*** Participants also mentioned that SMT members and circuit managers are the role players in the effectiveness of QMS in their respective schools.

However, unlike the rest of the participants, they excluded educators from role players that ensure the effectiveness of QMS. For example, SSDH6 stated:

*“Only the SMT and the circuit manager play their role to ensure that QMS happens in our school.”*

Similarly, another departmental head (SSDH8) had to allude:

*“The principal, the DHs and the circuit manager are responsible for the entire process of QMS. I must admit that QMS is not adequately taking place in my school but the principal and the DHs do it just for compliance and then submit to the circuit manager to sign the forms.”*

The DH was probed whether educators were not part of QMS. He replied:

*“No, they are just sign the forms that are sometimes filled by the admin clerk who knows nothing about QMS.”*

***The district officials, SMT, and educators.*** Two participants indicated that district officials, SMT members, and educators collectively share responsibility for the effectiveness of QMS. One of these participants also identified the grievance committee as an additional role player in the process. SSP1 stated:

*“As far as I know and understanding the process of QMS, it is the responsibility of the principal as a person who always account, to ensure that the process takes place without fail...”*

SSDP2 had to say:

*“You know the inconsistency of the way in which QMS is done makes it difficult for me to say who are really the role players. Sometimes a PLI educator is delegated by the principal to facilitate the full process and in a certain year you will see the SMT doing it correctly. Like this year, in the first term I cannot remember who did it but in the second year it was the SMT who properly facilitated it. Last year in the fourth term it was that PLI educator because other teachers were busy marking, especially those in Grade 12.”*

### ***Theme 2: The extent to which QMS is effective in uMkhanyakude secondary schools***

This theme emerged from the research objective which sought to examine the extent to which QMS is effective in secondary schools. To align the participants' responses with the research objective, the sub-themes that emerged during thematic data analysis were grouped

into three categories: QMS being ‘effective,’ ‘ineffective,’ and ‘inconsistent.’ The findings revealed that out of the sixteen (16) schools represented, four participants (25%) indicated that QMS was effective in their schools. Eight participants (50%) perceived QMS as ineffective, while four participants (25%) reported that its effectiveness was inconsistent. These findings suggest that only about 25% of the schools ensured the effective implementation of QMS, indicating notable challenges regarding its effectiveness in the uMkhanyakude district.

***QMS being ‘effective’.*** Some participants perceived QMS as an important mechanism for identifying and tracking the developmental needs of educators within the school. The ELRC (2020) affirms that QMS serves as a key mechanism for identifying the professional development needs of educators. Consequently, the following participants indicated that QMS was effective in their schools. A principal (SSP2) had to say:

*“I can boldly say QMS is effective in my school. We comply with the department to ensure that it is effective. My teachers understand that QMS is an instrument that has a purpose to track our overall needs in the school.”*

Another principal (SSP1) expressed a similar view to that of SSP2. He indicated that QMS was effective in his school, noting that the principal plays a crucial role in ensuring the system’s effectiveness. This view aligns with the ELRC (2020), which states that the principal holds the overall responsibility for ensuring that QMS is implemented uniformly and effectively within the school. SSP1 expressed:

*“Yes it is effective. As the principal I need to account everything about the process of QMS and I know that it is my role to ensure that it is effective in my school.”*

However, some participants acknowledged that although QMS processes appear to take place in their schools, they are not always implemented according to the prescribed guidelines. One of the requirements for implementing QMS is that the principal must sign all appraisal forms after confirming that all processes, together with the necessary supporting evidence, have been properly completed (ELRC, 2020).

***QMS being ‘ineffective’.*** Approximately eight participants (50%) indicated that QMS was ineffective in their schools. This larger proportion suggests that there are notable challenges affecting the effectiveness of QMS in the district. According to the ELRC (2020), educator appraisals are required to be conducted twice a year, during the mid-year and annual

appraisal periods. In addition, educators should receive effective mentoring and coaching from the SMT, with support from subject advisors and other external experts (ELRC, 2020). However, participants' responses suggest that some schools do not fully comply with the processes prescribed by QMS. Participants also provided various explanations for why QMS was considered ineffective in their schools. One departmental head (SSDH2) commented:

*“It is not effective. I think we do not have enough training because everyone in the SMT is not clear about it. We just fill the forms for compliance.”*

SSDH3 and SSDP1 shared similar views with SSDH2. They indicated that, in many cases, they simply comply with the required time frames without thoroughly carrying out all the expected processes. When further probed about their understanding of the requirements, they acknowledged that they had not received QMS training at either the school or district level. According to the ELRC (2020), the principal is responsible for initiating advocacy, training, and planning during a full staff meeting to ensure that educators clearly understand the implementation of QMS.

***QMS being ‘inconsistent’.*** Some participants indicated that the effectiveness of QMS was inconsistent in their schools. Factors such as time constraints, negative attitudes, and a lack of relevant skills were identified as contributing to this inconsistency. In response to such challenges, the ELRC (2020) states that the principal has the authority to designate any SMT member who is knowledgeable about the subject or phase to conduct the appraisal process if the designated supervisor is unable to do so. The inconsistency of QMS implementation was reflected in the following sentiments expressed by the participants.

A principal (SSP4) proclaimed:

*“Actually we try but there is a major discrepancy for it to be effective. Sometimes we do it, but most of the time we do not.”*

The principal (SSP4) was asked what could be the factors contributing to the system having some major discrepancies. He added:

*“There is always limited time to do it appropriately. We believe that we shall spend most of the time teaching the learners. You know, there is always a pressure for the results in Grade 12 so that is why we end up creating time during the weekends and holidays...”*

In the same vein with SSP4, a deputy principal (SSDP4) had to say:

*“As I indicated that there are two DHs, myself and the principal in the school, you find that we only do it in the second term because of time. But the principal is always busy so I can say sometimes it is effective and ineffective in other times.”*

### ***Theme 3: Interventions to strengthen the effectiveness of QMS at uMkhanyakude secondary schools***

The third objective of the study was to propose interventions that could strengthen the effectiveness of QMS in secondary schools. The ELRC (2020) stipulates that the SMT is responsible for ensuring that the structures established under the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development (ISPFTED) function effectively. Similarly, the circuit manager is tasked with ensuring that QMS is properly implemented in schools and that principals receive the necessary support. However, the observed discrepancies in the effectiveness of QMS provided sufficient evidence that the system requires strengthening. Participants therefore suggested several strategies that could help enhance the effectiveness of QMS in secondary schools.

***Proper and timeous planning.*** Some participants proposed that the effectiveness of QMS could be improved through proper and timely planning. SSDH1 stated:

*“I think the school should have a management plan that talks to QMS because sometimes it is done in a rush and we end up not following the right way of doing it.”*

A principal (SSP2) who supported the proposal to have a management plan had to say:

*“QMS can be intensified by a well-prepared year plan which must also involve some dates as to when can we do it. We will know exactly when is the period to implement it. Even though we do not stick to the dates in my school due to time constraints but we try...”*

***Regular training of SMTs and educators.*** Several participants suggested that regular training for key role players is necessary to strengthen the effectiveness of QMS. This recommendation aligns with earlier responses from some SMT members who indicated that QMS was ineffective in their schools due to a lack of adequate training. In this regard, the ELRC (2020) explains that the principal should facilitate advocacy, training, and planning

during a full staff meeting to ensure that educators understand the processes and requirements of QMS. The following statements reflect the participants' views regarding the need for regular training of SMT members.

SSDH3 articulated:

*“There is a need for a workshop that will train all of us. Actually we cannot criticise the system itself, there must be someone who understands QMS very well to train us.”*

SSDH6 and SSDH4 expressed views similar to those of SSDH3. They indicated that the principal, as the overseer of QMS processes, should organize workshops and invite qualified personnel to train all members of the staff.

The need for training of SMT members and educators is also supported by several scholars. This suggests that without adequately capacitating teachers through workshops or seminars, the effectiveness of QMS may remain limited. Lessons can also be drawn from Portugal, where school principals are grouped and continuously upskilled through regular training programmes aimed at improving their quality leadership skills (Cunha et al., 2020). Similarly, refresher courses that equip educators with quality-related skills have been identified as key initiatives for strengthening the implementation of QMS (Mensah et al., 2020).

***Independent appraisers.*** Another intervention proposed by the participants was the inclusion of independent appraisers. They suggested that individuals from outside the school could provide a more objective and accurate reflection of the appraisal process. As SSP1 stated:

*“Well, I think that the department may consider assigning the appraisal process to people outside the school. For example, a principal from a neighbouring school could be obliged to understand QMS and that he/she must be clear when coming to conduct QMS in a different school. So this will benefit both schools to participate and make the processes run smoothly without any biasness.”*

***Provision of school resources.*** Some of the guiding principles of QMS recognize that schools operate under different contexts, levels of performance, and varying challenges (ELRC, 2020). Despite these differences, schools are still expected to maintain quality performance. The participants' suggestions highlighted that the adequate provision of resources in schools could significantly enhance performance levels. In addition, challenges

arising from the implementation of QMS could be addressed more effectively when sufficient resources are available. SSP3 expressed:

*“If schools can be provided with proper infrastructure such as classrooms, computers, and photocopying machines, I think teachers can be happy to work in that environment. In my school for instance, there is a challenge of printing material that teachers need in the classroom, so you need to consider that factor when appraising them.”*

Apart from curriculum resources, SSDP4 also emphasized the need for adequate sports facilities to motivate educators and support the effectiveness of QMS. As noted in the preceding section, QMS should not be limited solely to lesson observations. In this regard, the ELRC (2020) affirms that educators’ participation in extra-mural and co-curricular activities should also be considered during the appraisal process.

Revising and strengthening the educator–learner ratio. A deputy principal (SSDP1) suggested that revising the educator–learner ratio could help strengthen the effectiveness of QMS. He expressed concern about overcrowded classrooms, noting that congestion creates challenges for educators when delivering lessons. His view is reflected in the following excerpt:

*“Another thing that challenges the effectiveness of QMS is the way our classes are congested. Sometimes you cannot move in between desks yet we have to ensure that each and every learner is reached for assistance. So I think if the department of education can revise the number of learners that a teacher has to teach can help to see the benefits of QMS.”*

## **5. Discussion**

### ***5.1. The relationship between the TL theory and role players on the effectiveness of QMS at uMkhanyakude secondary schools***

The findings from this theme highlight the relevance of TL theory in advancing the line of argument. As the study adopted a phenomenological approach (Muzari et al., 2022), the focus within this theme was to interpret and analyse participants’ assertions in relation to idealized influence, one of the core components of TL theory. The varied responses from participants regarding the role players responsible for the effectiveness of QMS suggest that

some participants possess limited or inadequate knowledge of how the system operates. For instance, the excerpt below from SSDH4 illustrates this point:

*“...To be honest with you, I do not even know much about it, I have only three years of experience since I was appointed as a DH. I also need to be trained but my colleagues including the deputy principal does not participate on it and the principal does nothing about it...”*

The concept of idealized influence within TL theory emphasizes that the capacity of the SMT is crucial in influencing employees to perform effectively and realize their full potential in achieving the organization’s mission and vision (Shongwe & Mutambara, 2023). Although the majority of participants clearly acknowledged the role of SMTs in empowering educators regarding QMS, the responses of some participants require closer examination. As noted by Sliwka et al. (2024), differing levels of understanding among leadership members can influence the effectiveness of organizational processes.

In this regard, the hesitation expressed by a few participants raises concern, particularly because they were also members of SMTs who are expected to guide and influence educators toward achieving the school’s mission and vision. Given that SMT members are expected to possess adequate knowledge of their responsibilities in ensuring the effectiveness of QMS (Cao & Le, 2024), the inconsistencies observed in some participants’ responses to the research question suggest limitations that may weaken confidence in the application of TL within this context.

### ***5.2. The relationship between the TL theory and the extent to which QMS is effective at uMkhanyakude secondary schools***

Similar to the first theme, this section also highlights the relevance of the TL theory. Although a few participants demonstrated characteristics associated with TL by ensuring that QMS implementation was carried out with commitment, the majority acknowledged that QMS was either inconsistent or largely ineffective. This observation suggests that the principles of TL theory are not sufficiently integrated into the implementation of QMS in these schools.

Schools that embrace idealized influence create opportunities for SMTs to be perceived as role models by their educators (Mamabolo et al., 2022). However, in some instances, certain SMT members, particularly principals who serve as the key drivers of quality management

(Lukhele & Lebeloane, 2024), were reported as not actively participating in QMS processes. This situation potentially compromises their role-model status, as transformational leaders are expected to empower their followers and enhance school performance through effective QMS implementation (Kamau, 2020). Furthermore, idealized influence not only positions leaders as role models but also enables them to guide and empower educators in understanding and pursuing the school's vision and mission (Setiyaningtyas & Hartutik, 2022).

The component of inspirational motivation within TL theory also appears to reveal certain limitations in relation to the effectiveness of QMS in secondary schools. SMTs who are committed to improving quality education are expected to go beyond monitoring classroom instruction by promoting capacity building, encouraging staff commitment, and motivating educators to perform effectively (Almonawer et al., 2023). However, the response from one participant (SSDP3) raise concerns about whether educators can be sufficiently motivated when some SMT members themselves appear reluctant to engage fully with the QMS process.

*'...But the challenge here is that the other deputy principal does the work of the principal because he is not always at school. So the DP signs on behalf of the principal and then submit to the circuit manager.'*

The reluctance demonstrated by some SMT members toward the effectiveness of QMS may hinder the attainment of school goals. When SMTs appropriately incorporate the inspirational motivation component of TL theory, followers are more likely to develop confidence in their ability to achieve optimal goals (Bakker et al., 2023). However, the absence of such motivation may weaken commitment to QMS processes and ultimately affect school performance.

The third element of TL theory, intellectual stimulation, emphasizes strategic thinking and problem-solving. This component highlights that positive attitudes and behaviors are cultivated through TL by promoting meaning-making, independent critical thinking, and the scaffolding of knowledge to enhance quality education (Mbindyo et al., 2021). However, the findings regarding the effectiveness of QMS revealed that some SMT members have developed negative attitudes toward the system. Such attitudes may contribute to the perception of QMS as ineffective in certain schools.

Although some participants viewed QMS as an additional burden for SMT members, it can be argued that these members may not have fully explored the potential benefits of the

system or developed sufficient understanding of its purpose. As suggested by Mbindyo et al. (2021), transformational leaders are expected to create meaning and facilitate knowledge development among educators. Without this effort, there is a risk that educators' capabilities will not be sufficiently stimulated to encourage critical thinking and independent responses to challenges affecting schools.

Finally, the component of individual consideration within TL theory is also relevant when examining the effectiveness of QMS in the selected schools. Individual consideration requires SMTs to listen to educators' needs and concerns while recognizing their individual abilities (Savitri & Sudarsyah, 2021). When educators receive guidance, coaching, and regular communication from their leaders, they are more likely to feel included in the process of organizational transformation. Based on this perspective, an argument can be drawn from the following assertion by a deputy principal (SSDP2).

*“We do have a problem of not effecting it very well. It is because of the negative attitude of teachers. They have no willingness when the SMT prepare to visit them. They believe that QMS is meant to expose their weaknesses to the learners and is just burden to their existing duty load. So you find that we sometimes appraise part of the staff or not at all.”*

The assertion raises concerns regarding whether sufficient guidance, coaching, and regular communication about QMS were provided in the schools. Given that educators differ in their strengths and capabilities (Reza, 2019), SMTs are expected to act as active listeners to ensure that concerns within the school are effectively addressed (Mbindyo et al., 2019). Recognizing educators' individuality, promoting teamwork, and encouraging their participation in decision-making processes are also essential for achieving higher levels of school performance (Almonawer et al., 2023). Therefore, the reluctance of some educators toward QMS may be exacerbated by factors such as limited commitment and inadequate communication from SMT members regarding the implementation of the system.

### ***5.3. The relationship between the TL theory and the interventions to strengthen the effectiveness of QMS at uMkhanyakude secondary schools***

The third and final objective sought to propose interventions that could strengthen the effectiveness of QMS in secondary schools. The discrepancies identified in the previous theme regarding the effectiveness of QMS provided sufficient evidence that more effective strategies

need to be fully adopted in secondary schools. Although the study concludes with comprehensive recommendations, the proposals made by the participants, together with the study's recommendations, are expected to collectively guide relevant stakeholders who aim to address challenges affecting the effectiveness of QMS or those considering future research in this area.

Given that the interventions proposed by the participants correspond with the guidelines for implementing QMS outlined by the ELRC (2020), they can be considered partially aligned with the principles of TL. By proposing practical measures to strengthen the effectiveness of QMS, the participants demonstrated elements of intellectual stimulation, one of the core components of TL theory. Transformational leaders are expected to engage in innovative thinking and explore new approaches to addressing organizational challenges related to QMS (Poturak et al., 2020). Furthermore, SMTs who demonstrate intellectual stimulation are expected to exhibit constructive, creative, integrative, exemplary, disciplined, and pragmatic approaches to implementing QMS (Ismaya et al., 2023).

## **6. Conclusion**

The study explored the perceptions of secondary school Management Teams (SMTs) regarding the effectiveness of the Quality Management System (QMS) through the lens of Transformational Leadership (TL) theory. Although participants recognized that the principal is a key role player, alongside other stakeholders, and demonstrated awareness of interventions that could strengthen the system, the core issue addressed by the main research question remains contested. In particular, the effectiveness of QMS continues to raise concerns within schools.

The study incorporated the TL theory as the foundation of its theoretical framework. The key components of the theory were integrated into the analysis of the findings to develop a coherent line of argument. The results revealed notable discrepancies in the integration of TL components within the implementation of QMS in secondary schools. The reluctance and limited participation of some SMT members weakened the application of inspirational motivation and idealized influence, thereby undermining the effectiveness of QMS. In addition, negative attitudes among some SMT members raised concerns about the extent to which intellectual stimulation is encouraged among educators, potentially limiting strategic thinking and problem-solving. Furthermore, educators' reluctance to engage fully with QMS

appeared to be linked to limited commitment from some SMT members, which affected the practice of individual consideration. These discrepancies highlight the need for targeted interventions that align transformational leadership practices with the objectives of QMS, ensuring that SMTs lead by example and cultivate a culture of quality improvement in schools.

Based on the recommendations proposed by the participants, it is suggested that policymakers within the Department of Basic Education consider integrating the principles of TL theory in future efforts to streamline and strengthen the implementation of QMS. This could be achieved by fostering a collaborative culture among SMT members to effectively drive QMS processes. In addition, educators should be encouraged and motivated to actively participate in QMS through leadership approaches grounded in transformational leadership. Transformational leadership has been shown to support visionary leadership, strengthen employee commitment, and promote a strong orientation toward performance within educational institutions.

However, the study also acknowledges certain limitations. The sample size of sixteen (16) participants was relatively small to represent all secondary schools within the district. The selection of this sample size was influenced by practical considerations such as time constraints and cost limitations. In addition, the use of telephone interviews presented network-related challenges, which occasionally resulted in communication interruptions during the interviews. As a result, some participants were unable to provide complete responses. These limitations highlight the need for future research that involves larger sample sizes and incorporates additional data collection methods to further strengthen the methodological rigor and breadth of findings.

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