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Transformational School Leadership in Low Socioeconomic South African High Schools: Implications for Learner Academic Achievement

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Abstract. Learner academic achievement in low socioeconomic high schools remains a persistent challenge in South Africa, despite extensive policy reforms aimed at addressing educational inequality. Within this context, school leadership has emerged as a critical in-school factor influencing teaching and learning outcomes. This study explores how transformational leadership is enacted in low socioeconomic high schools and how such leadership practices relate to learner academic achievement. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the study adopted a qualitative exploratory multiple-case study design. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and field notes with two purposively selected high school principals in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, guided by the core constructs of transformational leadership: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. The findings indicate that transformational leadership contributes to improved learner academic achievement by fostering learning-focused school cultures, strengthening teacher commitment, promoting instructional improvement, and supporting professional development. While structural socioeconomic constraints persist, the study demonstrates that transformational leadership provides a coherent framework through which principals can mediate contextual challenges and create conditions conducive to academic success. The study contributes to educational leadership scholarship by offering contextually grounded qualitative insights into transformational leadership practices in disadvantaged high school settings.

Keywords: Transformational leadership; learner academic achievement; low socioeconomic schools; secondary school leadership; qualitative case study; South Africa

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1. Introduction

Persistent inequalities in learner academic achievement remain a defining feature of the South African secondary school system, particularly in schools located in low socioeconomic communities. Despite extensive educational reforms introduced after *apartheid*, many disadvantaged schools still experience poor learner outcomes, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and limited parental support (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2023; Spaull & Kotze, 2019). These structural inequalities continue to reproduce uneven educational opportunities and place many learners at a disadvantage long before they enter the classroom (Van der Berg et al., 2022).

While socioeconomic conditions significantly influence academic performance, emerging scholarship increasingly argues that school-level factors also matter in shaping learner success. Among these factors, school leadership has attracted considerable attention because of its influence on school climate, teacher motivation, instructional quality, and organizational culture (Hallinger & Heck, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020; Sibuyi et al., 2024). In a disadvantaged school contexts where material resources are often limited (Berkovich & Hassan, 2023; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025; Nyathi, 2025; Theoharis, 2024), leadership becomes even more critical because principals are frequently required to mediate institutional challenges while simultaneously sustaining teaching and learning.

However, leadership in low socioeconomic schools cannot simply be understood in managerial or administrative terms. Principals working in these contexts are often expected to inspire teachers, restore hope in underperforming schools, maintain instructional focus under difficult conditions, and create environments where learners can still succeed despite poverty-related barriers. This raises important questions about the type of leadership practices that may contribute to improved learners' academic achievement in disadvantaged schools.

Within educational leadership scholarship, transformational leadership has emerged as one of the most influential approaches for understanding how school leaders motivate and mobilize teachers towards shared academic goals. Rooted in the work of Burns (1978) and later extended by Bass and Riggio (2006), transformational leadership emphasizes idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Unlike transactional leadership approaches that focus primary on supervision and compliance, transformational leadership seeks to build commitment, shared vision, professional growth, and collective responsibility for learner success (Li & Liu, 2020; Sliwka et al., 2024).

The relevance of transformational leadership in disadvantaged school settings lies in its emphasis on human relationships, professional commitment, and organizational transformation. Studies suggest that transformational school leaders can strengthen teacher morale, improve instructional practices, and foster learning-centred school cultures even under conditions of socioeconomic

constraint (Li & Liu, 2020; Naidoo, 2021; Van Wyk, 2023). In schools where academic underperformance has become normalized, transformational leadership may help challenge deficit thinking and create renewed academic purpose among teachers and learners.

Although existing studies establish a positive relationship between transformational leadership and learner achievement, much of the available literature relies heavily on quantitative approaches that measure leadership effects through statistical relationships and large-scale surveys. While such studies are valuable, they often overlook the everyday realities through which leadership is enacted in disadvantaged schools. There remains limited qualitative understanding of how principals in low socioeconomic South African high schools interpret and practise transformational leadership within contexts shaped by poverty, inequality, and resource limitations.

Furthermore, many studies discussing transformational leadership and learner achievement focus broadly on school effectiveness without sufficiently explaining how leadership practices directly shape instructional cultures and academic improvement in under-resourced secondary schools. The voices and lived experiences of principals themselves remain underexplored, particularly within the South African context. This study therefore seeks to address these gaps by exploring how principals in low socioeconomic high schools enact transformational leadership practices and how these practices relate to learner achievement. By focusing on the experiences of principals working in disadvantaged communities in KwaZulu-Natal, the study contributes contextually grounded insight into the practical relevance of transformational leadership within resource-constrained educational environments.

2. Theoretical Transformational Leadership

This study is theoretically underpinned by transformational leadership theory, originally developed by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass and Riggio (2006). The theory explains how leaders influence followers by creating a shared vision, motivating commitment, encouraging innovation, and responding to individual developmental needs. Within educational settings, transformational leadership has been widely used to explain how school principals shape teacher practices, school culture, and learner outcomes.

Transformational leadership theory is particularly relevant to this study because it provides a framework for understanding how principals in disadvantaged school contexts influence teaching and learning beyond administrative management. The theory assumes that leadership effectiveness is not simply determined by authority or policy enforcement, but by the leader's ability to inspire collective commitment toward shared goals. In schools facing socioeconomic challenges, such leadership becomes important because principals often work under conditions where teachers and learners experience low morale, limited resources, and reduced academic expectations.

The theory identifies four core dimensions of transformational leadership: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and

individualised consideration. Idealised influence refers to the leader's ability to model ethical behaviour and build trust. Inspirational motivation involves articulating a compelling vision that encourages collective commitment. Intellectual stimulation encourages critical reflection and innovation in teaching practices, while individualised consideration focuses on mentoring and supporting the specific needs of teachers and learners. These dimensions provide an appropriate analytical lens for examining how school principals in low socioeconomic contexts attempt to improve learner academic achievement. In this study, transformational leadership theory is not treated as a universal leadership solution, but as a contextually relevant framework for understanding how principals respond to educational inequality and institutional disadvantage.

Transformational leadership is widely recognised as a leadership approach that enables school leaders to inspire, motivate, and mobilise teachers and learners towards shared academic goals (Catalano et al., 2024; Zadok et al., 2024). Within educational settings, transformational leadership extends beyond administrative efficiency to focus on shaping school culture, strengthening instructional practices, and fostering professional commitment (Leithwood & Sun, 2018). Principals who adopt this leadership style articulate a compelling vision for learning, encourage innovation in teaching, and provide individualised support to staff, thereby creating conditions conducive to improved learner academic achievement (Huguet, 2017).

Leithwood et al. (2020) argue that transformational leadership is particularly relevant in challenging school contexts because it builds collective efficacy and shared responsibility for learner success. Rather than relying solely on formal authority, transformational leaders influence performance by motivating teachers to align their instructional practices with school-wide academic priorities (Farley, 2024). This leadership approach is therefore increasingly viewed as a critical mechanism for improving academic outcomes in under-resourced schools.

2.1 Transformational Leadership and Learner Academic Achievement

A growing body of international and South African research demonstrates a relationship between transformational leadership and learner academic achievement. Studies consistently show that principals who promote collaboration, shared vision, professional support, and instructional improvement contribute indirectly to improving learner outcomes through their influence on teachers and school culture (Hallinger & Heck, 2021; Leithwood & Sun, 2018).

Importantly, transformational leadership does not improve learner achievement in a direct or mechanical way. Rather, its influence is mediated through teacher motivation, professional commitment, instructional quality, and organizational climate. Li and Liu (2020), for example, found that transformational leadership strengthens teacher self-efficacy and instructional commitment, which subsequently influence learner performance. Similarly, Sliwka et al. (2024) contend that transformational school leaders create conditions that encourage innovative teaching practices and sustained academic focus.

In disadvantaged schools, these leadership practices become especially significant because teachers often work under emotionally and professionally demanding conditions. Where poverty, overcrowding, and resource shortages shape daily school realities, principals who can motivate staff, establish academic purpose, and maintain instructional coherence may help stabilize school functioning and improve learner engagement (Kemethofer et al., 2025; Sliwka et al., 2024)). However, despite these findings, the literature often presents transformational leadership in abstract or idealized ways without sufficiently examining how such leadership is practically enacted in under-resourced school contexts. There remains a tendency to treat transformational leadership as universally applicable while paying limited attention to how socioeconomic realities shape leadership practices.

2.2 Transformational Leadership in Low Socioeconomic School Contexts

Schools located in low socioeconomic communities face persistent challenges that constrain learner academic achievement. These include poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and limited parental support (Ahiaku et al., 2025; Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025; Obaizamomwan, 2023; Spaull & Kotze, 2019). In such contexts, leadership plays a pivotal role in mediating the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage. Research indicates that transformational leadership is particularly effective in these settings because it strengthens organisational resilience and instructional coherence (Naidoo, 2021).

In such contexts, principals are required to perform roles that extend beyond administrative management. They must navigate emotional, social, and instructional demands while sustaining organizational stability and academic focus. Research suggests that transformational leadership may be particularly relevant in these settings because it focuses on motivation, collective efficacy, professional trust, and shared purpose (Naidoo, 2021). South African studies further indicate that transformational principals in disadvantaged schools often prioritise instructional leadership, teacher development, and learner support despite structural constraints (Van Wyk, 2023). By articulating a clear academic vision and mobilising teachers around shared goals, these leaders create learning-focused environments that enable improved learner performance.

Importantly, transformational leadership does not eliminate inequality but provides strategic leadership practices that enhance academic achievement within constrained contexts. Nevertheless, existing literature still provides limited insight into how principals actually experience and enact transformational leadership within disadvantaged secondary school environments. Much of the current research remains heavily quantitative and outcome-driven, with insufficient attention to the lived realities, tensions, and practical leadership strategies operating within low socioeconomic schools.

2.3 Research Gap

Although transformational leadership has been widely studied in relation to school effectiveness and learner achievement, several important gaps remain within the literature. First, much of the existing research relies on quantitative methodologies that measure leadership effects through surveys and statistical modelling. While these studies demonstrate broad relationships between leadership and academic outcomes, they provide limited understanding of how transformational leadership is enacted in everyday school practice, particularly within disadvantaged educational settings. Second, there is limited qualitative research focusing specifically on low socioeconomic South African high schools.

Existing studies often discuss leadership generally without examining how principals navigate contextual challenges such as poverty, low academic expectations, teacher underdevelopment, and resource scarcity while attempting to improve learner academic achievement. Third, the experiences and voices of principals themselves remain underrepresented in the literature. There is insufficient understanding of how school leaders interpret transformational leadership principles, how they apply them in practice, and how they perceive their influence on teaching and learning within under-resourced schools.

This study addresses these gaps by providing a qualitative exploration of transformational leadership practices in two low socioeconomic high schools in KwaZulu-Natal. By focusing on principals' lived experiences and leadership practices, the study contributes contextually grounded insight into how transformational leadership operates within disadvantaged South African school environments and how it relates to learner academic achievement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Paradigm and Approach

This study is located within an interpretivist research paradigm, which seeks to understand social phenomena through the meanings that individuals assign to their lived experiences. The interpretivist stance is appropriate for this study because the focus is on how school principals understand, interpret, and enact transformational leadership within low socioeconomic high school contexts.

Rather than measuring leadership outcomes quantitatively, the study aims to generate rich, contextualised insights into leadership practices and their perceived influence on learner academic achievement. A qualitative research approach was therefore adopted. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of principals' leadership practices, beliefs, and decision-making processes within their natural school settings. Qualitative inquiry was considered most suitable because transformational leadership is enacted through complex social interactions that cannot be meaningfully captured through numerical indicators alone.

3.2 Research Strategy: Exploratory Multiple-Case Study

An exploratory multiple-case study design was employed. The case study strategy was selected because it allows for an intensive, holistic examination of a phenomenon within its real-life context. In this study, each school principal constituted a single case, bounded by the school context in which leadership was

practised. The exploratory nature of the design was appropriate given the limited qualitative research focusing specifically on how transformational leadership is enacted in low socioeconomic South African high schools. Using two cases allowed for analytical comparison while retaining depth of inquiry. The intention was not to generalise findings statistically, but to generate contextually grounded insights that could inform leadership practice and future research in similar settings.

3.3 Research Context

The study was conducted in two public high schools located in low socioeconomic communities within the King Cetshwayo District of Kwa-Zulu Natal province in South Africa. Both schools serve learners from economically disadvantaged households and face persistent challenges related to poverty, limited resources, and infrastructural constraints. Despite these conditions, the schools demonstrated sustained improvement in learner academic achievement, as reflected in their National Senior Certificate results over the preceding three years.

3.4 Sampling Strategy and Sample Size Justification

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide information-rich accounts relevant to the research purpose identifying and selecting participants who meet predetermined criterion of importance. The inclusion criteria for participation were as follows: (a) the participant had to be a school principal, (b) the school had to be located in a low socioeconomic community, (c) the principal had to have served in the position for a minimum of five years, and (d) the school had to demonstrate consistent improvement in learner academic achievement.

Two principals met these criteria and were selected for the study. While the sample size may appear small, it is appropriate for an in-depth qualitative case study where the emphasis is on depth rather than breadth. The selection of two cases enabled detailed exploration of leadership practices while allowing for cross-case comparison. The study does not claim representativeness; rather, it seeks analytical insight into how transformational leadership is enacted in specific disadvantaged contexts. Biographical information indicated that both principals were experienced educators with extensive teaching and leadership backgrounds. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using multiple qualitative methods to ensure depth and credibility. The primary data collection method was semi-structured in-depth interviews with each principal. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency across cases while allowing flexibility to probe emerging issues related to transformational leadership practices and learner academic achievement. The decision to use semi-structured interview schedule was influenced by the work of Cullinan (2024), who highlights the adaptability of semi-structured interviews, allowing researchers to probe further into unexpected themes. Additionally, Portigal (2023) notes that interviews are effective in uncovering nuanced insights about attitudes and opinions. In addition to interviews, non-participant observations were conducted within the school

environment to capture leadership interactions, school routines, and contextual dynamics. Field notes were recorded throughout the data collection process to document observations, reflections, and contextual details that enriched interpretation of the interview data. The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation, thereby strengthening the robustness of the findings.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis process aimed at identifying recurring meanings, leadership practices, and contextual patterns related to transformational leadership and learner academic achievement. The analysis was iterative and began during the data collection process, particularly through the researcher's engagement with interviews, school observations, and field reflections. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve participants' voices. The interview transcripts, observational notes, and field notes were then organized and uploaded into qualitative data analysis software to support systematic coding and theme development. The inclusion of multiple forms of qualitative data enabled a richer and more contextualized understanding of leadership practices within the participating schools.

The analysis began with open coding, where the interview transcripts were carefully read and reread alongside field notes and observation records to identify recurring ideas, behaviours, interactions, and leadership patterns. Particular attention was given to how principals interacted with teachers and learners, how academic expectations were communicated, and how school routines reflected leadership priorities. Field notes captured the researchers' reflections, contextual impressions, and informal interactions observed during school visits, while non-participant observations focused on leadership practices within meetings, classrooms, assemblies, and daily school activities.

Observational data played an important role in corroborating and extending interview responses. For example, principals' descriptions of maintaining visibility and academic accountability were supported through observations of their regular presence during morning assemblies, classroom visits, curriculum meetings, and after-school academic support sessions. Field notes also documented school atmosphere, teacher-learner interactions, punctuality, staff engagement, and the general instructional climate within the schools. These observations helped provide contextual depth to participants' accounts and strengthened the credibility of the findings through triangulation.

As coding progressed, similar codes were grouped into broader categories related to the four dimensions of transformational leadership, namely idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Through continuous comparison across interviews, observations, and field notes, the categories were refined into themes that reflected how transformational leadership practices were enacted within low socioeconomic school contexts and how these practices related to learner academic achievement.

The researchers maintained reflexive notes throughout the analytical process to reflect critically on personal interpretations, assumptions, and emerging meanings within the data. This reflexive engagement helped ensure that the findings remained grounded in participants' experiences and the observed school realities rather than the researchers' preconceived assumptions. Verbatim quotations, supported by observational evidence and field reflections, were used in presenting the findings to preserve authenticity and provide a rich account of the leadership practices observed during the study.

3.7 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through strategies that enhanced credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the research sites, triangulation of data sources, and member checking. Participants were given the opportunity to review interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations to confirm accuracy. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting all stages of the research process, including research design decisions, data collection procedures, and analytical steps.

This allows the study process to be transparent and replicable in similar contexts. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling and the systematic documentation of analytical decisions to minimise researcher bias. Findings were grounded in participants' accounts rather than the researchers' assumptions. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and leadership practices. This enables the assessment of the applicability of the findings to other low socioeconomic school contexts.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee and education authorities prior to data collection. Permission was secured from the provincial department of education, district officials, and school governing bodies. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was also obtained. Furthermore, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms (Kayla and Paul) and secure data storage. Finally, participants were debriefed after data collection and provided with a summary of the study findings.

4. Findings

In these findings four core constructs of transformational leadership are presented, namely idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. This analytical framing enables a clear alignment between participants' leadership practices and established transformational leadership theory, while demonstrating how these practices relate to learner academic achievement.

4.1 Modelling Ethical Commitment and Academic Focus

The fundamental call associated with learner academic achievement has to do with transformation of teaching and learning in classroom. The basic tenet for any fundamental change in teaching and learning is the connection between stakeholders. Although it is generally expected that stakeholders such as learners, teachers, principals and the community have a harmonized commitment to ensure effective teaching and learning, it has not been found to be the case in most low socioeconomic schools. However, the study found that there is ethical commitment on the part of leadership to harmonize the relationship among the stakeholders.

Both principals demonstrated idealised influence by modelling ethical leadership, accountability, and commitment to academic improvement despite difficult socioeconomic conditions. Their leadership practices reflected strong moral purpose, particularly in their prioritisation of learner academic achievement despite challenging socioeconomic conditions. Kayla described how her leadership approach centred on transparency, fairness, and consistency in decision-making. By openly sharing school challenges and expectations with teachers and community members, she established trust and legitimacy as a leader. She explained as follows:

> *"I lead by being transparent about where the school is and where we want to go. I share our challenges openly with teachers and the community, and I apply the same rules to everyone. That consistency helps build trust and encourages teachers to commit themselves fully to our academic goals."*

This modelling of integrity encouraged teachers to align their efforts with school-wide academic goals. Similarly, Paul emphasised leading by example through consistent presence in classrooms and academic meetings, reinforcing the importance of teaching and learning as the core business of the school.

> "*I believe that as a principal, I must lead by example. If I expect teachers to prioritise teaching and learning, I must be visible in classrooms and consistent in how decisions are made. When staff see that fairness and accountability apply to everyone, they begin to trust the leadership and commit themselves to improving learner performance."*

Observational evidence supported these accounts. During school visits, both principals were consistently visible within the school environment, particularly during morning assemblies, classroom transitions, and curriculum-related meetings. Field notes further indicated that both principals arrived at school earlier than most staff members and maintained a strong presence throughout the school day. In one school, the researchers observed Paul arriving before 6:30 a.m. and personally monitoring learner punctuality at the school gate. Teachers were also observed remaining after official school hours to provide additional academic support to learners preparing for examinations. These observations reflected a culture of accountability and collective academic commitment that extended beyond formal working hours.

The school environment in both cases appeared orderly and academically focused. Observation records documented punctual movement between classes, regular teacher attendance, and structured daily routines. These practices strengthened professional trust and created a shared commitment to improving learner academic achievement, reflecting a key dimension of idealized influence within transformational leadership.

4.2 Articulating a Shared Vision for Learner Academic Achievement

Inspirational motivation emerged as a central leadership practice in both schools. The principals articulated a clear and compelling vision focused explicitly on improving learner academic achievement. This vision was consistently communicated through staff meetings, academic planning sessions, and engagement with parents and learners.

Paul explained that setting high but attainable academic expectations helped shift teacher and learner mindsets from resignation to possibility. By framing academic success as a collective responsibility, he motivated staff to commit to additional instructional support and curriculum coverage strategies:

> "*One of my key roles is to help teachers and learners believe that high academic achievement is possible. When we set clear but achievable expectations and talk openly about them, it changes the mindset from 'this is how things have always been' to 'we can do better together.' I constantly emphasise that learner success is a shared responsibility, and that has encouraged teachers to go the extra mile with additional support and proper curriculum coverage*."

Kayla similarly highlighted the importance of communicating belief in learners' academic potential, particularly in a context where low expectations had previously undermined performance:

> *"I make a deliberate effort to communicate a strong belief in our learners' academic potential, especially because low expectations had become normal in this school. Through meetings, planning sessions, and conversations with learners and parents, I keep reinforcing the message that every learner can succeed. Once teachers started believing this vision as well, it positively influenced how they taught and supported learners."*

Observational data further reinforced these findings. During morning assemblies and staff interactions, both principals consistently communicated messages centred on academic discipline, learner success, and collective responsibility. Field notes recorded repeated references to examination preparation, curriculum completion, and learner achievement during meetings with teachers and learners. In one observed assembly, the principal publicly acknowledged improvements in learner performance while encouraging learners to remain focused on their academic goals. The atmosphere during these engagements reflected optimism, encouragement, and shared commitment towards academic improvement.

The researchers also observed teachers actively participating during curriculum planning sessions and engaging collaboratively in discussions related to learner progress and intervention strategies. These interactions reflected a collective sense of purpose aligned with the principals' vision for academic improvement. Through sustained motivational messaging, the principals fostered optimism, collective efficacy, and a shared sense of purpose, reinforcing a learning-focused school culture aligned with transformational leadership principles.

4.3 Challenging Instructional Practices to Improve Academic Outcomes

Intellectual stimulation was evident in the principals' deliberate efforts to challenge existing instructional practices and encourage reflective teaching. Both leaders questioned traditional approaches that had limited learner academic success and promoted pedagogical adjustments aligned with curriculum and assessment demands.

Kayla explained as follows:

> "*I had to challenge some of the teaching practices that had become routine but were not helping learners perform academically. We started having honest discussions about the language of instruction and whether our assessment tasks were truly preparing learners for national examinations. At first, some teachers were uncomfortable, but those conversations pushed them to reflect on their practice and to try different strategies that were more aligned with curriculum and assessment requirements.*"

Kayla described engaging teachers in critical discussions about the language of instruction and assessment requirements, encouraging them to adopt strategies that better prepared learners for national examinations. While initially met with resistance, these discussions stimulated professional reflection and instructional change.

Paul similarly emphasised curriculum planning, data-informed decision-making, and collaborative problem-solving as mechanisms to improve teaching quality:

> "*I encourage teachers to constantly question what they are doing in the classroom and why they are doing it. We use curriculum planning sessions and learner performance data to identify gaps and then work together to find better instructional approaches. Instead of blaming learners, we focus on improving our teaching practices through collaboration and problem-solving, which has helped raise the overall quality of instruction.*"

Observational evidence supported these accounts. During observed departmental and curriculum meetings, teachers engaged in discussions around learner performance trends, curriculum pacing, and examination preparation strategies. Field notes documented principals encouraging teachers to reflect critically on classroom practices and identify areas requiring improvement. The researcher observed instances where learner assessment results were used to guide conversations about teaching strategies and curriculum coverage.

In classroom observations, some teachers were seen implementing revision activities, learner participation techniques, and structured questioning approaches aimed at improving learner understanding and examination readiness. These observations reflected a school culture where instructional improvement was treated as a collective and ongoing process rather than an individual responsibility. By encouraging teachers to rethink instructional assumptions and experiment with improved practices, the principals fostered a culture of continuous academic improvement, a defining feature of intellectual stimulation in transformational leadership.

4.4 Supporting Teachers and Learners to Enhance Academic Achievement

Individualised consideration was reflected in the principals' attention to the personal and professional needs of teachers and learners. Both leaders demonstrated sensitivity to the challenges faced by staff working in disadvantaged contexts and provided targeted support aimed at improving instructional effectiveness and learner outcomes.

Paul explained as follows:

> "*I am very aware that some of my teachers are still developing professionally, especially those who are new to the profession. Instead of criticising them, I spend time mentoring them, observing their lessons, and encouraging them to enrol in further studies. When teachers feel supported and grow in confidence, it reflects directly in how learners perform academically.*"

Kayla similarly highlighted her open-door leadership approach:

> "*I operate with an open-door policy because I know that teachers and learners are dealing with both academic and personal challenges. Staff know they can come to me without fear of being judged, whether it's about instructional difficulties or emotional stress.*"

Field observations confirmed the accessibility of both principals within the school environment. Teachers were observed entering principals' offices freely to discuss academic and administrative concerns, while learners regularly approached principals for guidance and support. The researcher further observed informal interactions between principals and staff during break times, where discussions extended beyond administration to include learner welfare and classroom challenges.

Field notes also documented supportive interactions between principals and struggling learners during after-school academic sessions. In one instance, a principal was observed encouraging Grade 12 learners preparing for examinations and reminding them that improvement was possible despite their difficult backgrounds. Such interactions reflected emotional support alongside academic accountability.

These personalised forms of support strengthened teacher confidence, learner engagement, and academic persistence. By addressing individual needs while maintaining high academic expectations, the principals enacted individualised

consideration in ways that supported sustained improvements in learner academic achievement.

5. Discussion

This study examined how transformational leadership practices enacted by principals in low socioeconomic high schools contribute to learner academic achievement. While prior research has established a positive relationship between transformational leadership and learner outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 2021; Leithwood & Sun, 2018), less is known about how these leadership practices are enacted in structurally disadvantaged school contexts and how they operate under conditions of persistent socioeconomic constraint.

The findings provide contextually grounded insight into how the four core constructs of transformational leadership, namely idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration, interact to strengthen instructional coherence, professional commitment, and learner performance in under-resourced schools. Rather than treating transformational leadership as a generic leadership style, this study demonstrates how it is strategically adapted to mitigate contextual disadvantage.

A central contribution of this study is the reconceptualization of transformational leadership as a mediating mechanism within low socioeconomic environments. The findings indicate that leadership did not eliminate structural constraints such as poverty, limited infrastructure, or reduced parental support (Spaull & Kotze, 2019). Instead, transformational leadership practices functioned to stabilise organisational culture and maintain instructional focus despite these constraints. Idealised influence was enacted through visible ethical consistency and disciplined modelling of academic priorities. The principals' early arrival, sustained classroom presence, and transparent decision-making were not symbolic gestures but mechanisms for constructing professional trust and reinforcing instructional accountability.

This aligns with the contention of Leithwood et al. (2020), namely that leadership effects are mediated through collective efficacy and shared responsibility. However, this study extends that literature by showing how moral modelling becomes particularly consequential in contexts where institutional fragility and low expectations may otherwise undermine academic focus. Thus, transformational leadership in this context operated less as charismatic inspiration and more as moral and organisational anchoring. This distinction refines prevailing theoretical understandings by foregrounding contextual responsiveness as central and not peripheral to transformational enactment.

The findings further suggest that inspirational motivation operated as a mechanism for reconstructing academic identity within schools where low performance had become normalised. Both principals consistently articulated a vision centred on learner achievement and collective responsibility. Importantly, this vision was repeatedly reinforced through structured forums such as staff meetings, planning sessions, and community engagement, rather than episodic

motivational discourse. Existing literature links inspirational motivation to teacher self-efficacy and learner outcomes (Li & Liu, 2020). This study extends that insight by illustrating how sustained vision communication disrupts deficit narratives common in disadvantaged school contexts. In schools where socioeconomic conditions often shape expectations downward, the articulation of high but attainable standards functioned as a counter-narrative that reshaped teacher beliefs and instructional effort. The originality here lies in demonstrating that inspirational motivation is not merely affective encouragement but a disciplined, strategic reframing of what is academically possible. By embedding vision within everyday organisational routines, the principals translated aspirational discourse into collective instructional commitment.

Intellectual stimulation emerged as a pivotal mechanism linking leadership practice to classroom improvement. The principals deliberately challenged entrenched teaching routines, promoted collaborative curriculum planning, and used learner performance data to inform pedagogical adjustments. These practices resonate with evidence that leadership influences achievement primarily through instructional improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 2021). However, this study advances the literature by demonstrating how intellectual stimulation operates under resource scarcity.

Rather than encouraging innovation for its own sake, the principals focused on alignment between language of instruction, assessment practices, curriculum coverage, and national examination requirements. This form of disciplined instructional inquiry ensured that professional reflection remained tightly connected to measurable academic outcomes. In low socioeconomic contexts, where instructional time and resources are limited, such strategic alignment becomes critical. The findings therefore contribute theoretically by positioning intellectual stimulation as a context-sensitive mechanism for enhancing instructional coherence rather than simply fostering creativity or experimentation.

The study also strengthens understanding of individualised consideration by situating it within teacher capacity-building in disadvantaged environments. Mentoring underqualified teachers, encouraging further study, and maintaining open-door leadership were not ancillary relational practices; they were directly linked to improving instructional competence and learner performance. While previous studies demonstrate that transformational leadership enhances teacher self-efficacy (Li & Liu, 2020; Poekert et al., 2022), this study adds nuance by showing how personalised support functions as an equity strategy.

In contexts where teachers may lack formal preparation or professional confidence, individualised consideration mitigates structural inequality at the classroom level. By strengthening teacher capability, principals indirectly enhance learner opportunity to achieve. This suggests that transformational leadership contributes to equity not by redistributing resources, but by strategically developing professional capital within constrained environments. Such an

interpretation extends transformational leadership theory into conversations about educational inequality.

A further contribution of this study lies in demonstrating the interdependence of the four leadership constructs. Idealised influence established trust; inspirational motivation shaped collective purpose; intellectual stimulation improved instructional quality; and individualised consideration strengthened teacher capacity. The cumulative interaction of these practices produced organisational coherence centred on learner achievement. This supports Hallinger and Heck's (2021) model of leadership as an indirect, cumulative influence on school outcomes. However, the present study contributes empirically grounded evidence from low socioeconomic South African high schools, a context underrepresented in international leadership research. By providing detailed qualitative accounts of leadership enactment in such settings, the study broadens the geographical and socioeconomic scope of transformational leadership scholarship.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how principals in low socioeconomic high schools enact transformational leadership practices to support learner academic achievement. The findings demonstrate that transformational leadership contributes to improved teaching and learning by fostering ethical commitment, sustaining high academic expectations, promoting instructional reflection, and supporting teacher development within resource-constrained school contexts. Through practices associated with idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration, the principals created learning-focused school environments that encouraged collective responsibility for learner success.

Importantly, the study shows that transformational leadership does not eliminate the structural inequalities that continue to shape disadvantaged schools. Rather, it enables principals to mediate some of these challenges by strengthening school culture, improving instructional coherence, and maintaining academic focus despite socioeconomic constraints. The findings therefore position transformational leadership as a context-responsive leadership approach capable of supporting academic improvement in under-resourced educational environments.

The study further contributes to educational leadership scholarship by providing qualitative and contextually grounded insight into how transformational leadership is enacted in practice within South African low socioeconomic high schools. By foregrounding the lived experiences and everyday leadership practices of principals, the study moves beyond broad statistical associations and demonstrates how leadership operates within complex schooling realities. Overall, the study underscores the importance of leadership that is ethically grounded, instructional in orientation, and responsive to contextual challenges. Strengthening such leadership practices may contribute meaningfully to ongoing

efforts aimed at improving learner academic achievement in disadvantaged school communities.

7. Implications for Research and Practice

The findings of this study have several implications for educational leadership research and practice within low socioeconomic school contexts.

First, the study highlights the importance of transformational leadership practices in sustaining learner academic achievement in disadvantaged schools. The findings suggest that leadership practices such as maintaining visibility within the school, communicating high academic expectations, supporting teachers, and promoting collaborative instructional improvement may contribute positively to teaching and learning even under conditions of socioeconomic constraint. This implies that school improvement initiatives in disadvantaged contexts should pay greater attention to leadership development alongside material resource provision.

Second, the findings indicate that leadership preparation and professional development programmes should place stronger emphasis on instructional leadership, teacher mentoring, and context-responsive leadership practices. The principals in this study demonstrated that leadership in low socioeconomic schools extends beyond administrative management to include emotional support, relationship-building, and the creation of academically focused school cultures. Leadership training programmes may therefore benefit from preparing principals to respond effectively to the social and instructional realities of disadvantaged schooling environments.

Third, the study has implications for educational policy. While structural inequalities remain significant barriers to learner academic achievement, the findings suggest that effective leadership can help mediate some of these challenges by strengthening organisational culture and sustaining academic focus. Policymakers should therefore recognise leadership capacity-building as an important component of broader school improvement strategies in low socioeconomic communities.

The study also contributes to educational leadership research by demonstrating the value of qualitative approaches in understanding how transformational leadership is enacted in practice. Existing research on transformational leadership and learner achievement has largely relied on quantitative designs, often overlooking the lived experiences of principals working in disadvantaged school settings. This study therefore suggests the need for more context-sensitive qualitative and mixed-methods research that explores leadership practices within under-resourced educational environments.

Finally, future research could expand this study by including the perspectives of teachers, learners, parents, and district officials to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how transformational leadership influences learner academic achievement in low socioeconomic schools. Comparative and longitudinal studies

may also provide deeper insight into how leadership practices evolve over time across different disadvantaged school contexts.

8. Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was limited to two high schools within a single district in Limpopo province. Although the case study design enabled in-depth exploration of leadership practices, the small sample size and narrow geographical scope limit the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other contexts.

Second, the study focused exclusively on principals' perspectives and leadership practices. Although this focus was intentional and aligned with the research aim, it excludes the voices of teachers, learners, and parents, whose perspectives may have provided a more comprehensive understanding of how transformational leadership influences learner academic achievement. Third, the study relied primarily on qualitative data collected through interviews, observations, and field notes. While these methods enabled rich, contextualised understanding, the absence of quantitative achievement data limits the ability to establish direct causal links between leadership practices and learner academic performance.

Despite these limitations, the study provides analytically transferable insights into transformational leadership practices in low socioeconomic school contexts. Future research could build on these findings by incorporating larger samples, multiple stakeholder perspectives, and mixed methods designs to further strengthen understanding of the relationship between transformational leadership and learner academic achievement.

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