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## Leadership practices that support effective teaching and learning: Learning from the Eastern Cape rural schools

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### ABSTRACT

The study was conducted in four purposively selected secondary schools in O.R. Tambo District in the Eastern Cape. Selected schools had demonstrated exponential improvement in their exit classes in the past five years. Since rural based schools had attracted negative attention for poor academic achievement, we became interested in understanding what these schools, that received recognition for good performance, were doing right. In view of improved academic performance achieved, we sought to elicit insights about what had worked well for these schools. We adopted a qualitative case study approach, within an interpretive paradigm to generate data. We adopted Weber's Instructional Leadership model to analyse the findings from the participants. Utilising semi-structured interviews and documents' reviews, within a qualitative design, we generated data from principals, deputy principals and two departmental heads per school. Our analysis generated four themes that characterised their leadership practices. Some of the practices had some characteristics that are uniquely rural. We recommend that these unique leadership practices be explored further on a large-scale study for generalisability about how other School Management Team members can support effective teaching and learning in some adverse and turbulent rural contexts.

**Keywords:** *Leadership, Rurality, Traditional leadership, Successful leadership*

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### INTRODUCTION

In this paper we present the findings of a small-scale qualitative study about successful leadership practices used by School Management Team members in supporting effective teaching and learning in the context of rural secondary schools in the O.R. Tambo District in the Eastern Cape. Rural communities have fairly or unfairly, received negative publicity for poor academic achievement when it comes to the National Senior Certificate examination results. Even the education department in the province has, for many years occupied bottom places when the results are announced at the beginning of the new year. Scholars have highlighted some of the deprivations suffered by schools in rural areas, and these include long distances, travelled by learners, inadequate supply of water and sanitation, poor support from parents and dearth of other important facilities and equipment that support curriculum delivery (Mkhize &

Bhengu, 2018; Spaul, 2015; Bhengu & Mkhize, 2013; Maringe & Moletsane, 2015).

Two crucial points need to be raised at the outset. First, some pockets of excellence have been noted in the rural schools (Chikoko, 2018; Chikoko, 2019). Second, scholarship has highlighted the role that school leadership has played in turning around the fortunes of schools and produce high levels of academic performance of learners (Chikoko, 2018; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020; Bhengu, 2019; Marimandi, 2015; Mukeshimana, 2016). Therefore, this paper adds to the debates about the importance of leadership for supporting teaching and learning on one hand, and power of leadership in overcoming the barriers of the environment in the teaching and learning situation. While leadership has been credited for schools' success, not enough is known about how school how SMT

members overcome environmental challenges that rural schools endure and how they have turned them into one of the successful schools in this rural district. In presenting our story, we begin by outlining the background of the problem, and this is followed by the discussion of the two critical concepts of successful leadership practices and rurality and rural schools. This is followed by the presentation of a theoretical framework, the methods, the presentation of findings, and discussion. Conclusions and recommendations bring the paper to a close.

### BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

South Africa has had a bad reputation of poor learner academic achievement (Spaull, 2015), particularly among learners in schools located in rural areas (Bhengu & Mkhize, 2013). Literature has persistently revealed that poor learner academic achievement is directly associated with the environmental conditions in which schools are positioned (Maringe & Moletsane, 2015; Mkhize & Bhengu, 2018). These environmental conditions include those factors exerting negative effects on the accomplishment of schools' organisational goals. Consequently, such challenges are linked to learner enrolment decline and learner migration prevalent in rural schools (Aldana, 2016; Mafora, 2013). However, despite the challenges that rural schools endure, there are some pockets of excellence amongst them (Chikoko, 2018; Bhengu, 2019). This study aimed at understanding leadership practices of SMTs in these particular schools. The idea of collective leadership in the form of School Management Teams (SMTs) has become dominant in the South African context since the country became a democracy in 1994.

### RESEARCH QUESTION

How do the School Management Teams in the selected schools provide

leadership that supports effective teaching and learning in the context of rurality?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Our review section assumes a conceptual dimension by focusing on effective leadership practices and the conception of rurality and rural schools.

#### Effective leadership practices

It is important at this point to conceptualise leadership, especially effective leadership that impacts effective teaching and learning. In the context of schools, effective leadership is generally associated with a direct impact of teaching and learning in the classroom (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020). Successful or effective leadership practices are usually associated with various models of instructional leadership, due to their focus on promoting effective curriculum delivery. Many scholars such as Bloese and Naicker (2018), Cheung, Keung, Kwan and Cheung (2019), Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006) share a similar view that effective leadership practices refer to leadership activities such as setting the direction, developing people, managing teaching and learning, and redesigning the organisation.

In setting the direction, successful leaders tend to establish a determination for the organisation by setting clear goals and direction, that improve the functioning of the organisation system (Cheung, Keung, Kwan & Cheung, 2019; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). In managing teaching and learning, successful leaders supervise teaching and learning in various ways, including, walking around the school, and seeing to it that all classrooms are occupied. These leaders nurture and sustain a healthy relationship within their schools and in the external environment by devising means of working with the community (Maringe & Sing, 2019). In developing people, successful

leaders, develop staff and learners continuously (Ramdhany, 2018; Šed'ová, Sedláček, Švaříček, 2016).

### **Rurality and rural school**

The term rural and rurality has many definitions as there is no one conception about what constitutes it. Because of this, rurality is a multifaceted and complex concept to define. For instance, according to Hlalele (2014), rurality implies a lifestyle, a perspective and culture which rotate around land and animals. Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008) provide a broader conception of rurality which includes space, land, and socio-economic condition of the area. These scholars further state that rurality has to do with "... space, confinement, group, destitution, illness, disregard, backwardness, minimisation, elimination, conservatism, tribalism, prejudice, resettlement, defilement, entropy, and prohibition" (Balfour et al., 2008, p.101). It is not the intention to provide an exhaustive definition of rural, save to say that there are conceptions that have stood the test time. For instance, for many decades now, the notion of a rural area as characterised by low density population (Franks & Goswami, 2010), small absolute size, and relative isolation, where the major economic base is agricultural production and where the way of life of the people (Bealer, Willits, & Kuvlesky, 1965), persists (Christiaens, 2015).

In the context of this paper, we use the term rurality in a more simplistic way as referring to those areas under the authority of traditional leaders, as contemplated in the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act, No. 41 of 2003 (Republic of South Africa, 2003). This does not mean that these areas do not share features described by scholars we have cited above. In line with our definition, all schools that are located in the land, which is under the authority of traditional leaders, are regarded as rural schools for purposes of this paper.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

To frame the analysing of the data, we utilised Weber's (1996) Model of Instructional Leadership. Weber (1996) identified five domains of instructional leadership. The first is defining the school mission. The second domain is managing the curriculum and instruction, and the third is about promoting a positive learning climate. The fourth domain is observing and improving instruction, and the fifth and the last domain is assessing instructional programme. *Defining the school's mission* can be regarded as a dynamic of collaboration and cooperation amongst key stakeholders and constantly reflecting and thinking about how to create a mission of the school that is owned by all stakeholders. This is important for all stakeholders working within the framework of common purpose. *Managing the curriculum and instruction* is about principals' instructional practices, as well as the supervision of classroom activities. This is linked directly to understanding that for teachers to succeed, they require the requisite resources. Promoting a positive learning climate entails the principals and their deputies creating a climate for effective teaching and learning. This includes communicating clear instructional goals, and establishing high expectations for performance (Weber, 1996). Observing and improving instruction focuses on the principal creating a trusting and respectful relationship with staff in the school. Assessing the instructional programme is predicated on the notion of the principal as a leader, initiating and contributing to the planning, design and analysing and assessing the effectiveness of the curriculum (Weber, 1996). All these five domains combined, enable us to analyse the practices of the participating SMT members.

### **METHODS**

We adopted a qualitative case study approach, within an interpretive paradigm

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to enable us to get an in-depth, textual and holistic data from a naturalistic setting (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Creswell, 2009). This paradigm acknowledges that each research participant within the four schools may have a different interpretation of their world of work. Therefore, this would provide a nuanced and contextual perspective of the SMT members' successful leadership practices. Both purposive and convenience selection were used to identify those schools that had been successful in terms of Grade 12 final examination results (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). It was purposive in the sense that we were interested only in those schools that had shown remarkable improvement in the past five years. It was convenience in the sense that out of many schools within the district that met these criteria, only those that were easily accessible, in terms of distance were

chosen. Content analysis was used to analyse the data.

Throughout the research process, all ethical protocols were observed. For instance, participants understood their rights as these were explained before data generation commenced. Ethical clearance was sought and obtained from the University's Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The Department of Education in the Eastern Cape, as the main gatekeeper, granted us permission to conduct the study in its schools. Principles of non-maleficence, confidentiality and anonymity were observed. That is why Table 1 below shows fictitious names of the schools and the participants.

We developed *pseudonyms* as shown in Table 1 below to conceal the identity of schools and participants.

Name of the school	Lunga Secondary	Patoni Secondary	Siwo Secondary	Toliza Secondary	Total
<b>Principals</b>	Mr Langa	Mr Patyo	Mr Siwele	Mrs Tolo	4
<b>Deputy Principals</b>	Mr La	Mr Pato	Mr Siwole	Mr Toliwe	4
<b>DHs</b>	Mr Lala	Mrs Patonela	Mr Sisa	Miss Toleka	4
<b>DH</b>	Mr Lalyz	Mrs Patoniza	Mr Siwa	Mr Toliza	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>16</b>

Table 1. Fictitious names of schools and participants

### Lunga Secondary school

Lunga Secondary School is a No-Fee, Quintile 1, Section 21 school that was built in the middle of the 1980s by the community members. The school starts from Grade 10 up to Grade 12 and has an enrolment of 1300 learners. Staff establishment comprises 39 educators and 8 non-teaching staff. This category of workers includes 1 Administration clerk, 1 security guard, 1 cleaner and 5 cooks attached to school's nutrition programme.

### Patoni Secondary School

Patoni Secondary School is a No-Fee, Quintile 1, Section 21 school that was

built in 1930s by the community members. The school starts from Grade 10 up to Grade 12 and has an enrolment of 1065 learners. Staff establishment comprises 30 educators and 8 non-teaching staff. These consist of 1 administration clerk, 1 security guard, 2 cleaners, 4 women who assist in the school's nutrition programme. There is a river close by, and when in flood, learners are unable to cross it, thus rendering the school inaccessible.

### Siwo Secondary School

Siwo Secondary School is a No-Fee, Quintile 1, and Section 21 school that was built in 1970s by the members of the

community. It starts from Grade 10 up to Grade 12 and has an enrolment of 1060. Staffing comprises 35 educators and 9 non-teaching staff. These consist of 2 Administration Clerks, 1 security guard, 2 cleaners and 4 cooks attached to the nutrition programme.

### **Toliza Secondary School**

Toliza Secondary School is No-Fee, Quintile 1, and Section 21 school, which starts from Grade 10 to Grade 12, and it was built by the community. It has an enrolment of 1700 learners. Staff establishment comprises 40 educators and 11 non-teaching staff. This category of workers includes 2 Administration clerks, 2 security guards, 3 learners and 4 cooks working the school's nutrition programme.

### **FINDINGS**

Our content analysis generated four themes, and the first theme is bringing the school to the community and the community to the school. The second theme is about ensuring that the basics of teaching and learning are adhered to. Developing positive relationships towards the well-being of colleagues, parents and learners is the third theme. The fourth theme relates to demonstrating exemplary leadership through what we call walking the talk. These findings are discussed next.

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Bringing the school to the community and the community to the school**

School management team members were asked about how they have managed to bring success in their schools in terms of learner academic achievement. Their responses invariably suggested that they had successfully brought the schools to their community and vice versa. Realising how the community revered their traditional leaders, the SMT members, particularly the principals initiated a process of consultations with them, and also enticing traditional leaders to the schools.

The school principals visited traditional leaders after experiencing rural challenges in order to curb them. Previously, there was poor relationship between the schools and the community at large, and also with traditional leadership as a structure. By engaging with traditional leaders, numerous challenges such as burglary and theft of school property were addressed with the intervention of traditional leaders. Other challenges included parents who were usually reluctant to get involved in the school activities. Mr Langa had this to say:

*Leaders gave vivacity to the communities to work hand in hand with the participating schools. Therefore, the school-community partnership improved drastically. The communities where these participants were located, ended up positively deeply involved in school activities such as school donations, assisting the schools in sports activities, traditional dancing to mention a few.*

Some of the challenges previously experienced by the schools was a lack of parental involvement in the schools' affairs, as evidenced by their poor attendance at parents' meetings. The lack of parental involvement contributed to the schools experiencing a host of problems such as learner absenteeism, poor learner attendance in curricular and extra-classes. Such realities undermine effective curriculum delivery. However, through engagements with traditional leaders (Chiefs), there was a dramatic improvement in parental attendance in parents' meetings. This is highlighted by Mr Tolo, Principal of Toliza Secondary, when he said:

*In showing positive attitude and respect towards traditional leaders made the school to be able to promote parental involvement. As a result, learner academic performance improved drastically. Furthermore, challenges like burglary and theft were mitigated optimally.*

In a similar vein, burglary and theft of school property was resolved with the intervention of traditional leaders.

*The prevalence of crime which is theft and burglary was a daily occurrence. Cellular phones easily grabbed from learners when come from school; culprits used knives to intimidate the learners. This was curbed through the consultation with Chiefs and Lunga, Secondary (Mr Langa, Principal of Lunga Secondary).*

The other issue that posed a threat to the schools' functionality was the problem of learner discipline. Working alone, schools battled with this scourge. Parents too, as we have indicated, were aloof, and resolving learner discipline in the schools remained a menace. However, with the involvement of traditional leaders, most of the challenges facing the schools and parents were confronted. The next few excerpts from different schools, and different categories of participants, paint a clear picture about how, through the collaboration between the schools on one hand, and traditional leaders as community on the other, addressed the challenges:

*The involvement of traditional leaders in learner discipline minimised the acts of ill-discipline. This is highly featured in Patoni Secondary School. The involvement of Traditional Leaders in the school activities made learners to be discipline in school. As a result, the attendance of extra-classes improved drastically (Mr Pato, Deputy Principal from Patoni Secondary).*

The challenges expressed above were also experienced in other schools such as Toliza Secondary, and this is how the principals explains the situation:

*They were coming late to school. Learner absenteeism, bullying, drug abuse and fights among learners were daily occurrences in the four*

*participating schools. To curb this bad behaviour, the schools together with the representatives from Traditional Leadership enhanced school disciplinary committees. Therefore, the involvement of Traditional Leaders in the maintenance of learners' discipline in schools led to the alleviation of challenges such as learner absenteeism, bullying, drug abuse and fights (Tolo, Principal of Toliza Secondary).*

Mr Lala, a Deputy Principal of Lunga Secondary provided details about how they organised themselves and the community to ensure that the environment was crime-free, and thus conducive to effective teaching and learning. He said:

*Schools working together with traditional leaders formed committees that include members from parents, community members delegated by traditional leaders, community policing forums (CPFs) to go around to get the culprits when theft and burglary have been committed. When the culprits have been caught, they would be brought to the court of law.*

Views and experiences of the participants resonate with current scholarship in the area of school-community partnership. For instance, Myende (2018) and Ncwane (2019) contend that school-community is one of the means to address challenges that schools cannot address alone. In the same vein, there is evidence in South African rural communities that traditional leaders play a prominent role in managing learner discipline (Logan & Katenda, 2021; Mngomezulu, 2020). The benefits of active parental involvement in the schools' activities, particularly, in relation to enhancing learner academic achievement has been widely written about (see, Akter, 2020; Berkowitz, Astor, Pineda, DePedro, Weiss & Benbenishty, 2021; Tan, Lyu & Pen, 2020).

Another feature that characterises schooling and leading schools in rural communities such as the ones where this study was conducted, is the manner in which school leadership responds to the hardships confronting the learners. Socio-economic ills become a burden to the schools, and by addressing such, has had beneficial effects in terms of bringing the schools closer to the communities and communities to the schools. For instance, participating school did not distance themselves from the learners' struggle for survival. This is how Toleka, one of the two Departmental Heads from Toliza Secondary put it:

*Some of our learners are under the care of their grandparents. Some parents are employed in far cities. Others learners are orphans. This situation makes learners not to perform in a good way. In mitigating these family factors, the school initiated a caring committee that looked after those learners by providing them with psychological and emotional support. As a result, their school performance improved gradually.*

Most of the participants shared similar views in responding to family factors. This is how Mrs Tolo, the Principal of Toliza Secondary School put it:

*In mitigating that family factor, the caring committee was also involved in visiting the bereaved families in the community. That was the way of galvanising support from the parents and community at large. Consequently, that promoted working together among the parents and the community at large. Parents among themselves developed some groups that assisted each other. Groups with educated parents assisted illiterate parents. As a result, the community at large ended up assisting child headed families.*

*Therefore, that improved learner academic performance. As a school, we developed a motto that says, "My child is your child and your child is my child. Similarly, as school leaders, we involved sister departments such Department of Social Development, Department of Police, Department of Justice and Correctional Service to give assistance where necessary (Mrs Tolo, the Principal from Toliza Secondary School).*

Stories narrated by these participants suggest that being a school principal or a member of the SMT in such communities requires more compared to what other colleagues in different contexts do, and also more than the job description provides.

### **Ensuring the basics of teaching and learning**

Our data indicates that the SMTs were clear about their core function of ensuring that effective teaching and learning occurs. In the four schools they had clearly articulated, organisationally shared vision and were working tirelessly to ensure the basics of school functionality, that learners are in class and effective teaching and learning was taking place. The SMT members prioritised supervision of teaching and learning through close monitoring by checking if their work was in line with what is stated in their Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs). They also used period registers. One participant said:

*There are period registers in different classes. These period registers are given to class representatives. Each teacher signs this register to ensure that she/he has attended his/her periods. It further indicates how much time he/she spent in that particular class for that period. Furthermore, I and my Deputy Principal adhere to close monitoring where we do*

*random class visits to verify what was written on the paper by DHs were consistent to what they were doing practically in monitoring teaching and learning in class (Mrs Tolo, Principal of Toliza Secondary).*

Besides using period register and checking adherence to the ATP, SMTs also conducted class visits. This is one of the oldest techniques that was used decades ago. All four schools did this. What also emerged from the interviews is that class visits served multiples purposes such as observing teachers teaching and the reaction of learners, checking curriculum coverage and also assessing the extent to which what the DHs will have recorded in their monitoring tools was real. Mr Siwele, Principal of Siwo Secondary made these remarks in that regard:

*During class visits, I check both teacher and learner attendance by using attendance registers for both teachers and learners. In addition, I also check period registers to ensure that teachers do go to classes and attend to their periods.*

This view was also supported by Mrs Patoniza, one of the DHs from Patoni Secondary when he said:

*Both the principal and DP checked the following aspects from the files of the departmental heads and teachers' files: subject policy, ATP of each subject, list the people being supervised and their subjects, the programme of assessment, duty loads, feedback from the monitoring and evaluation processes comments and follow up if they have been attended, minutes of the subject meetings to check if relevant things were discussed in their meetings and the list of learners whose work was checked.*

The excerpts above suggest that teaching time was protected and that

curriculum coverage occurred. This aspect is generic, and is not a feature of rural schools, but all schools that are effective (Bhengu, 2019; Gwala, 2021; Ramatseba, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Uleanya, Khumalo, Momah & Ndlovu, 2019). Stressing the role of the principal in monitoring teaching and learning reflects the contention by Shava, Maradze and Ncube (2021) that principals are indispensable for developing and maintaining effective teaching and learning. Ensuring the basics of teaching and learning is closely associated with the second domain of Weber's Model of instructional leadership, which is about managing curriculum and instruction.

### **Developing positive relationships towards well-being of colleagues, parents and that of the learners**

The third category of leadership practices that the SMT engaged in was developing positive relationships towards the well-being of colleagues, and other stakeholders. Mr. Langa the Principal of Lunga Secondary captures the essence of the need for being accommodative, sympathetic, supportive and kind hearted. This was how he put it:

*As a principal you should be accommodative, sympathetic, supportive and kind hearted towards your subordinates, staff members, learners and the community at large as to galvanise their support. As the Principal, I try by all means to be approachable. That makes it easy for the people to air out their views.*

The notion of being sympathetic and kind-hearted was further expressed by Miss Toleka, a Departmental Head from Toliza Secondary who added that these had a positive impact on teaching and learning. This is how she put it:

*My school changed my behaviour of being greedy. Now I am sympathetic and kind-hearted. I*



*encourage that to my colleagues. The rural environment that we are in calls for us to balance teaching and learning and focus on building relationships. It is vital to see the school as your own, the parents as your own and the children as your own. In that way, you find joy to support the school. Teachers find joy to teach. As a result, learners feel comfortable and happy to learn.*

Echoing similar sentiments, Mr Sisa, the Departmental Head from Siwo Secondary, indicated the responsibilities of the caring committee. Among the responsibilities of this committee was to organise birth certificates for learners who happened not to have the birth certificates, to visit bereaved families within the community, to give psychological support to the depressed teachers and learners. That was how he put it:

*This caring committee plays a vital role in giving support on behalf of the school. It provides psychological support to all those who need psychological support. It also organises birth certificates to those learners who are not able to get them due to varied reasons. Furthermore, this committee visits bereaved families as to give emotional support. As a result, this has made the school to develop positive relations with parents, learners, stakeholders and community at large.*

Furthermore, data emphasised the importance of creating a supportive environment particularly in rural schools where poverty persisted. More so, the need to be accommodating, sympathetic, supportive and kind-hearted is emphasised. Also, in the data, the participants stressed the importance of creating a supportive environment particularly in the contexts of poverty and other socio-economic challenges. The theme discussed her speaks

directly to Weber's (1996) third domain of promoting a positive learning climate.

### **Exemplary leadership by Walking the talk**

Leading by example and showing the way helps in instilling confidence in the teaching staff. Data analysis indicates that the participants believed that if one is a leader s/he must show direction through own actions. That is why it was important that when new initiatives were introduced, school principals had to show the way by walking the talk. One example was when extra classes were introduced; principals also worked during that time. This is how Mrs Tolo, Principal of Toliza Secondary, put it:

*On my arrival, I introduced extra classes to improve learner academic performance. As a result, I was the first person to attend extra-classes in order to improve school performance. Therefore, all teachers follow the direction of attending extra-classes without being told. Therefore, if you are a leader you must show your people direction with your actions.*

SMTs walked the talk by becoming the first people to come to school to attend extra classes, which is a sign of good leadership as argued by scholars like By James, Conolly and Hawkins (2019), as well as Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, (2020). Echoing similar views, Mr Langa, Principal of Lunga Secondary went a step further to emphasise that leading by example, included the notion of multiple accountability and transparency. The principal did not just encourage SMT members to collaborate and account to all stakeholders, but ensured that he set up quarterly meetings with Chiefs to brief them about what was happening in the school and plans for the year. He believed that improvement in Grade 12 results was attributed to his exemplary leadership. He said:

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*My school achieve not less than 85% for a period of 6 years. Furthermore, I decided to account quarterly to traditional leaders in terms learner academic performance. To further enhance inclusion, and transparency, the school involved traditional representatives in both SGB and school management structure, as to make them acquainted with school governance and school management.*

Walking the talk went beyond words of encouragement and motivation to actually, consulting widely and providing direction about where the school is going. Directing the work of the educators and creating an environment of care and support, motivates staff for effectiveness (Akinola & Bhengu, 2019; Mhlanga, (2019). Walking the talk through exemplary leadership is consistent with the fourth domain of Weber's Model of instructional leadership "Observing and improving instruction".

### CONTRIBUTION OF THE PAPER TO KNOWLEDGE

The study reported in this paper provides insights about effective leadership in some rural contexts. Besides the focus on teaching and learning, this research suggests that the creation of a climate for

effective curriculum delivery requires clear understanding of rural communities and local leadership influence on such communities. This resonates with the findings of other studies (see for example, Mkhize & Bhengu, 2018; Chikoko, 2018; Maringe & Singh, 2019) that successful leadership should be seen in relation to the contextual and social conditions as well as values underpinning the schools. The literature (Bhengu & Mkhize, 2018; Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020) is unequivocal on the view that instructional leadership is at the core of effective leadership that results in improved learner outcomes. However, such leadership foregrounds traditional leadership which serves as the bond that holds together the school, the community and the vision. The literature supports working hand in hand with traditional leadership especially in rural areas (Bhuda, Marumo & Motswaledi, 2021; Logan & Katenda, 2021; Carlson & Seim, 2018; Mngomezulu, 2020). In short, where the school wants to go is influenced by the interplay between the kind of leadership that is adopted and its ability to bring together all these key stakeholders to own the schools, and thus confront all other factors that negatively affect effective schooling. Figure 1 below, summarises this factor, and graphically illustrates how SMTs in this study managed to keep the schools where they are.



Fig. 1: Characteristics of leadership that supports teaching and learning in some rural contexts

This figure indicates the integration of leadership adopted and key stakeholders; parents, community members and traditional leadership structures that hold rural stakeholders together for the good of all.

**CONCLUSION**

The discussion has focused more on how a supportive environment was established for improved curriculum delivery. The review of documents assisted in providing a comprehensive picture about

the schools, both in terms of the size, and biographical information, but also in terms of showing improved learner academic achievement. The profiles we have given in the first part of the findings were derived from the documents kept in the schools. The evidence of improvement in learner achievement was also obtained from the records. For instance, a summary of the Grade 12 result for the four schools ranged between 87.41% to 96% in 2020. Table 2 below shows a complete picture about these schools.

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Lunga	30	45	69.8	75.8	85.40	98.66	91.70	87.41
Patoni	15	45	68.7	70.6	80.40	95.55	90	85.50
Siwo	40	42	69.7	80.46	97.40	100	100	98.50
Toliza	99	100	100	98	100	97	100	96.50

Table 2: Grade 12 results for the past 8 years

The SMTs’ leadership practices in this study supported effective teaching and learning, and these were consistent with the second, the third and the fourth domains of Weber’s Model of Instructional Leadership. Secondly, these school leaders demonstrated acute awareness of their operational environment and used their understanding of rural life to the benefit of the schools and learners. Issues of learner indiscipline behaviours and burglary in the schools were addressed and thus, protected the equipment of the schools, and preserved the learning environment at a level that supported effective teaching and learning. An environment of care for those learners impacted by social ills falls outside the mandate of the schools; nevertheless, the kind of leadership adopted, assimilated these issues in their normal school lives.

This study focused on four rural secondary schools in the O. R. Tambo Coastal District in the Eastern Cape Province. We acknowledge that this is obviously a limited target population of the School Management Team members,

which does not represent all the rural secondary schools in the O.R. Tambo Coastal District wherein School Management Team members had managed to turnaround their schools’ performances despite rural contexts. Nonetheless, we argue that the study has generated new insights about how School Management Team members can manage to change the school’s fortunes despite the challenges posed by the internal and external environments. It has also explored the strategies used by the principals in adverse and turbulent conditions to turn around their schools’ performances from underperforming to successful ones. We recommend that these unique leadership practices be explored further on a large-scale study for generalisability about how other School Management Team members can support effective teaching and learning in some adverse and turbulent rural contexts. The importance of traditional leadership in rural contexts requires further consideration, both in terms of SMT members in this study and also in terms of further research in similar contexts.

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