



The Role of School Leadership in Fostering Teacher Motivation and Improving Learner Achievement in Schools in South Africa

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between teacher motivation and learner achievement in schools led transformationally, and how learners themselves experience the impact of school leadership on their academic achievement and overall school experience. The study draws on qualitative research in three public secondary schools in Soweto, South Africa, and recent South African and international literature, mainly from 2023 to 2025. It argues that transformational leadership improves learner achievement mainly by strengthening teacher motivation and classroom practice. Where teachers were motivated, learners reported greater effort, participation and confidence. Where teachers were demotivated, learners reported disengagement and, in some cases, a loss of direction about their own academic future. Learners also spoke directly about how visible, fair and involved their school leaders were, and linked this closely to how supported and confident they felt at school. The article situates these findings within the broader literature on transformational school leadership, and closes with practical recommendations for school leaders, principal training programmes and education officials seeking to strengthen the link between school leadership and learner achievement.

Keywords: Teacher Motivation; Learner Achievement; Transformational Leadership; Learner Voice; School Leadership; South African Schools

Introduction

It is often assumed that motivated teachers naturally produce better learner outcomes. This assumption is reasonable, but the relationship between teacher motivation and learner achievement is not always direct and requires closer examination. This is particularly important in Soweto, where schools face significant socio-economic pressures alongside broader teaching and learning challenges. This article draws on a qualitative study of three public secondary schools in Soweto to examine two related questions: how teacher motivation relates to learner achievement under transformational leadership, and how learners perceive the influence of school leadership on their academic achievement and overall school experience.

Transformational leadership theory suggests a chain of influence: a principal's leadership behaviour shapes how teachers feel and behave, and this, in turn, shapes what learners experience in the classroom (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This article focuses specifically on the second half of that chain. Motivated teachers tend to be more enthusiastic, better prepared and more willing to support learners academically. This pattern was evident in the present study. However, the findings also show that

learners do not simply benefit from motivated teachers. They also notice and respond to the presence, or absence, of effective leadership in their schools.

This article focuses specifically on Grade 12 learners because their perspective carries particular weight within the South African schooling system. The National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination that these learners sit at the end of the year functions as a high-stakes gateway to higher education and employment, which makes the final year of secondary schooling a period in which the effects of school leadership on learners' motivation and confidence are especially visible and consequential (Ardington, Wills & Kotze, 2021). Grade 12 learners have also had several years of exposure to their school's leadership culture by the time they are interviewed, giving them a more developed basis for comparison than younger learners might have. Focusing on this group therefore offers a vantage point from which the cumulative, rather than immediate, effects of school leadership on learners can be examined.

Theoretical Framework: Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory extends the theoretical basis of the companion article. It proposes that people are more motivated when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are met (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory applies to both teachers and learners. Both are more likely to engage fully in teaching and learning when they have a sense of choice, feel capable and experience a sense of belonging.

Combined with transformational leadership theory, self-determination theory helps explain why the effects of school leadership extend beyond teachers. Leaders can strengthen teachers' autonomy and competence by involving them in decisions and recognising their professional development. This encourages teachers to internalise motivational values rather than simply follow instructions (Nachshoni, 2024). Collaborative professional communities can also strengthen teachers' sense of competence and belonging (Lei, Hamid & Mansor, 2024). The findings suggest that these effects extend to learners. When teachers felt supported, they were better able to provide teaching that promoted learners' autonomy, competence and sense of belonging, which self-determination theory identifies as important for sustained motivation.

This theoretical lens is directly visible in the accounts reported later in this article. Learners at School A, whose teachers described feeling supported and motivated, spoke in turn of feeling appreciated and capable, and of a stronger sense of belonging at school, consistent with the satisfaction of competence and relatedness needs. Learners at Schools B and C, by contrast, described neglect and anxiety consistent with these needs going unmet. Emotionally supportive leadership has been shown to strengthen teacher persistence and wellbeing (Khan, 2025). The findings of this study suggest that this supportive climate extends into the classroom through teachers, where learners experience and respond to it directly.

This pattern is consistent with wider research on adolescent development, which shows that the fit between a school's social and academic environment and adolescents' developmental needs, for autonomy, competence and meaningful relationships, has a marked influence on their engagement and wellbeing (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Adolescence is a period in which learners become increasingly sensitive to whether the adults around them treat them with respect and fairness, which makes school-level leadership climate, and not only classroom-level teaching, directly relevant to how learners experience their final years of schooling. Where the broader school environment reflects the psychological needs identified by self-determination theory, adolescents are more likely to remain engaged with school during a developmental stage in which disengagement can otherwise increase. This developmental perspective helps explain why learners in this study responded not only to their own teachers, but also to the wider leadership climate created by their principals.

Methodology

DHs This article draws on the same qualitative study reported in the companion article, conducted at three public secondary schools in District 12, Soweto, referred to here as School A, School B and School C to protect participant confidentiality (Kaiser, 2009). The three schools were purposively selected as high-, average- and low-performing schools based on their 2023 Grade 12 (National Senior Certificate) results. This allowed the study to examine the relationship between teacher motivation and

learner achievement across different levels of school performance (Khan, 2025). A purposively selected sample of 45 participants took part: 15 teachers and 30 Grade 12 learners, with each school contributing 5 teachers and 10 learners chosen to represent a spread of academic performance and teaching experience (Albuni, Aslamiah & Rizalie, 2022). This article draws specifically on the accounts provided by learners, read alongside the accounts of their teachers, to examine how teacher motivation and learner achievement relate to one another, and how learners themselves experience school leadership.

The broader study from which this article draws used a qualitative case study design, well suited to examining a phenomenon such as school leadership in depth, within its real-world context and across more than one site for comparison (Yin, 2018). Purposive sampling was used throughout, since this technique deliberately selects participants likely to provide information-rich accounts relevant to the research questions, instead of aiming for statistical representativeness (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016; Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood, 2015).

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, combining a consistent set of questions with the flexibility for participants to discuss issues important to them. This approach is particularly useful when exploring sensitive or personally meaningful topics such as leadership and motivation (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Focus groups followed established practice for group-based qualitative research, including attention to group composition and facilitation style, to support open and comfortable discussion among participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Data were generated through semi-structured focus groups and, where preferred, individual interviews, with teachers and learners meeting separately to protect psychological safety and to reduce the effects of power differences between the two groups (Lei, Hamid & Mansor, 2024). Sessions lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Data were analysed thematically to identify both the explicit content and underlying meanings in participants' accounts (Li & Karanxha, 2024). Particular attention was given to how learners described their motivation, effort and sense of belonging at school.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through prolonged engagement and member checking. Participants reviewed their interview transcripts and clarified areas of disagreement, helping to strengthen the authenticity of the findings (Albuni, Aslamiah & Rizalie, 2022). A detailed audit trail documented each stage of data collection and coding, allowing others to follow and assess the research process (Gao, Khalid, Lianyu & Tadesse, 2024). Peer debriefing was also used, with an external reviewer examining the coding framework and themes to help reduce researcher bias (Deng et al., 2023). The study was conducted with attention to informed consent, voluntariness and confidentiality throughout. Participants were given a full explanation of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time, an approach that protects participants' autonomy and guards against any form of deception (Mbokazi & Mkhasibe, 2021). Sensitive information about individual teachers, learners and schools was handled carefully to protect participants and institutions from possible harm (Trigueros et al., 2020). Confidentiality also encouraged teachers and learners to participate more openly (Hariyasasti, 2025).

Thematic analysis involved repeated reading of the focus group and interview transcripts to identify recurring codes and underlying meanings (Li & Karanxha, 2024). This process also helped identify the emotions reflected in participants' accounts, rather than focusing only on their literal words (Lei, Hamid & Mansor, 2024). Initial codes were organised around the practices and experiences learners and teachers described, before being grouped into the broader themes reported in this article. Leadership of this kind has been found elsewhere to strengthen collective professional purpose among staff in ways that are ultimately felt by learners (Humam, Putra, Aziz & Asy'arie, 2024), a pattern this article's findings reinforce.

Ethical Considerations for Research Involving Minor Participants

Because most Grade 12 learners were minors at the time of data collection, additional ethical safeguards were built into the research design, consistent with established guidance on conducting research with children and young people (Israel & Hay, 2006). Written parental or guardian consent was obtained for all learner participants under the age of 18, in addition to each learner's own assent to take part, so that participation depended on the agreement of both the learner and a responsible adult.

Learners were also reminded, both before and during data collection, that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any point without any consequence for their standing

at school. Focus groups involving learners were facilitated with particular attention to power dynamics, including seating arrangements and question framing, to reduce the likelihood that learners would feel pressure to give socially desirable answers to an adult researcher. These measures were intended to protect participants' wellbeing while still allowing their own accounts of school leadership to be captured directly, rather than filtered solely through adult perspectives.

Teacher Motivation and Its Link to Learner Achievement

Effective teaching and school development depend heavily on teacher motivation, understood as the internal and external factors that encourage teachers to work hard, innovate, and invest in their learners (Nachshoni, 2024). Motivated teachers have been found to apply more varied pedagogical approaches, plan lessons more carefully, and engage learners more actively, all of which contribute to improved academic achievement (Ermita & Baysa, 2025). Within transformational leadership theory specifically, teacher motivation is understood to have an indirect but meaningful effect on learner performance, with teacher effectiveness acting as the channel through which leadership influences learner outcomes (Papadakis, Kanadlı, Kardas, Tülübaş, Karakose & Polat, 2024). Motivated teachers have also been found to help learners build self-efficacy and problem-solving skills, and to cultivate persistence, flexibility and resilience in their learners (Bardach & Klassen, 2021).

In School A, motivated teachers were described by learners as more enthusiastic about teaching, more willing to invest time in planning lessons, and more generous with academic support outside of formal class time. Learners in this school linked their teachers' enthusiasm directly to their own understanding, participation and performance across their subjects. This supports evidence that teacher leadership, exercised through this kind of constructive engagement, has a measurable positive impact on learners' academic achievement (Marfarrina, Omar, Zuo, Lee & Lee, 2023). In contrast, learners in Schools B and C reported lower engagement and less consistent academic performance. They linked this partly to teachers who appeared tired, discouraged or less willing to engage fully in lessons. This supports research linking lower staff commitment to weaker school performance (Madjid & Samsudin, 2021). Across the three schools, the findings suggest that teacher motivation is influenced by school leadership. Supportive and participatory leadership can strengthen teacher motivation, improve learners' classroom experiences and, over time, contribute to better academic performance.

Broader evidence supports these findings. A meta-analysis found a small but consistent positive relationship between teacher leadership in the classroom and learner achievement across different school contexts and subjects (Shen et al., 2020). Learner motivation also depends strongly on how teachers organise and communicate learning (Boström & Bostedt, 2020). This helps explain why learners at School A linked their increased effort to teachers' planning, patience and willingness to explain concepts in different ways. Teacher motivation reflects both internal motivation and external conditions that influence the effort and persistence teachers bring to their work (Han & Yin, 2016). The findings show that learners can clearly recognise these qualities in motivated teachers.

The literature also distinguishes between autonomous and controlled motivation. Autonomous motivation occurs when people value or enjoy an activity, while controlled motivation is driven mainly by external pressure or rewards. Autonomous motivation is generally associated with stronger engagement and performance (Vallerand, 2000). Teachers who reported strong support from their school leaders tended to frame their own motivation in autonomous terms, describing their effort as a personal and professional commitment rather than compliance with expectation. This matches research showing that supportive leadership shifts teachers toward this more autonomous, self-sustaining form of motivation over time.

Learners' Perceptions of School Leadership

Learners' own accounts offered some of the clearest evidence of how leadership is experienced, not simply observed. Learners at School A portrayed their school leaders as approachable, vision-driven and encouraging. They spoke of regular engagement, meetings focused on improvement, and consistent communication as practices that increased their own effort and self-discipline. This echoes findings that learners' self-efficacy beliefs are shaped significantly by the leadership behaviours modelled by their teachers and, by extension, their school's leadership more broadly (Menon & Lefteri, 2021). Learners also associated visible leadership practices, such as principals being present around the school and offering encouragement directly, with feeling more appreciated, which appeared to strengthen their self-worth and their belonging at school. This aligns with evidence that learners benefit when school

leadership is directed purposefully towards supporting teachers, since the effects of that support are ultimately felt by learners as well (Gunawan & Adha, 2021).

Learners at Schools B and C recounted a markedly different experience, characterised by an absence of visible leadership, inconsistent communication, and, in some cases, a negative emotional climate. These learners reported feeling neglected and unclear about what was expected of them academically, which they linked to reduced motivation and lower achievement. This supports research suggesting that the presence of strong leadership structures supports stable academic environments, while their absence undermines that stability (Mbokazi & Mkhasebe, 2021). Learners at School C in particular spoke of leadership that felt distant and directive instead of participatory, and connected this style of leadership to anxiety, disengagement and difficulty concentrating academically. Learners consistently linked supportive, fair and inclusive leadership with a stronger sense of safety, belonging and academic agency. Where such leadership was absent, they described their school experience as fragmented and sometimes emotionally difficult.

The findings also caution against judging school leadership only by examination results. A strong focus on test preparation does not necessarily lead to deeper learning (Zakharov & Carnoy, 2021). Learners at School A described achievement in broader terms, including feeling capable, included and motivated to persist. These experiences reflect definitions of academic achievement that include effort, understanding and persistence, rather than test scores alone (Steinmayr et al., 2014). Teacher leadership through everyday classroom relationships can also shape learners' school experiences (Warren, 2021). This was evident in learners' ability to identify specific leadership qualities in teachers and principals that influenced their motivation.

Local research highlights the importance of fair and consistent leadership in Soweto. Sithole (2020) found that discipline systems perceived as fair and consistently applied supported a calmer and more focused school environment, while inconsistent systems weakened learners' trust in school authority. This may help explain why learners at School C, who described leadership as distant and directive, also reported difficulty concentrating. Similarly, learners who participate meaningfully in school decisions tend to develop a stronger sense of ownership over their behaviour and learning (Williams, 2020). This pattern was reflected in School A learners' positive views of structures such as the prefect system.

International and Comparative Perspectives on the Motivation-Achievement Link

The pattern found across the three Soweto schools, in which teacher motivation and learner achievement rise and fall together under the influence of school leadership, echoes a wider body of recent international research. Comparative research across several international school systems found that transformational leadership was most strongly associated with improved learning where teachers had reasonable professional autonomy (Sliwka et al., 2024). Similar findings have emerged in South Africa. A study of two low-income KwaZulu-Natal high schools found that transformational leadership improved learner achievement by strengthening teacher commitment, instructional practice and professional development, despite continuing socio-economic constraints (Ahiaku & Lumadi, 2026). Open and transparent communication has also been shown to build organisational trust and staff commitment (Akter et al., 2024). More broadly, a systematic review found consistent links between transformational leadership, staff motivation and positive school culture across different national contexts (Heenan et al., 2023).

South African research also highlights the need for meaningful learner participation. Yu and Shay (2022) found that learner involvement in school governance could remain tokenistic, even in a progressive school, because adults continued to limit learners' responsibilities. This finding is relevant to School A. Although learners felt included and encouraged, school leaders should ensure that learners have a genuine voice in decisions that affect them rather than merely creating the appearance of participation.

Evidence from other developing and emerging economies further supports the relationship identified in this study. In China, transformational leadership strengthened teacher collaboration and improved learner outcomes (Lei, Hamid & Mansor, 2024). In Ethiopia, a clear leadership vision combined with effective instructional guidance supported school improvement and benefited learners (Gao et al., 2024). In South Africa, schools with stronger leadership also recovered more quickly from

pandemic-related learning losses (Ardington, Wills & Kotze, 2021). Historically disadvantaged institutions therefore need leadership that sustains motivation over time, particularly when resources and structural conditions are challenging (Ndebele et al., 2024). Together with the findings from Schools A, B and C, this evidence suggests that the relationship between school leadership, teacher motivation and learner achievement extends beyond the Soweto context.

Research on distributed forms of leadership offers a further point of comparison. Where school leaders share responsibility and decision-making more broadly, teacher trust in leadership and teacher motivation have both been found to increase (Bektas, Kilinc & Gumus, 2022), a pattern consistent with School A's more participatory culture. In under-resourced schools, principals who combine empathy with practical leadership can sustain teacher morale and indirectly support learner engagement despite difficult conditions (Angwaomaodoko, 2023). Leaders who prioritise staff wellbeing can also improve teacher retention, providing learners with greater continuity in their teaching (Jones, 2023). Similarly, leaders who demonstrate empathy and resilience can create psychological safety that encourages teachers to improve and experiment with their teaching (Gannon et al., 2024). The findings of this study suggest that learners experience these benefits through more engaging classroom practices.

International research further supports this relationship. In Turkey, transformational leadership was positively associated with teacher motivation, particularly when principals were viewed as consistent in their behaviour (Serin & Akkaya, 2020). Supportive and relational leadership has also been associated with stronger teacher performance than directive leadership (Parveen et al., 2022). Transformational leadership can further strengthen teacher agency by increasing teachers' confidence in their ability to make a difference (Polatcan, Arslan & Balci, 2023). Together with the present findings, this research suggests that school leadership can influence learner achievement through its effects on teacher motivation and self-efficacy, although the challenges facing Soweto schools give this relationship a specific local context.

Discussion of Findings

Overall, the findings suggest that teacher motivation and learner engagement are closely connected aspects of school culture rather than a simple cause-and-effect relationship. Learners at School A did not only benefit from motivated teachers. They also noticed and responded directly to the visibility and fairness of school leadership. Transformational leadership therefore appears to influence learners both indirectly through teachers and directly through learners' own experiences of leadership. This reflects wider research showing that leadership based on trust, communication and shared purpose benefits the whole school community (Deng et al., 2023; Li & Karanxha, 2024).

From a self-determination perspective, leaders who support teachers' autonomy, competence and relatedness may enable teachers to provide similar support to learners. The benefits of effective leadership can therefore extend from principals, through teachers, to learners.

The contrast between School A and Schools B and C also shows that transformational leadership is practised to different degrees, even within similar township schools. For learners, leadership visibility and fairness appeared particularly important. They repeatedly linked their motivation and sense of belonging to everyday experiences of being noticed, encouraged and supported by school leaders.

This study's findings also suggest that the benefits of transformational leadership are unevenly distributed within a school community, not only between schools. Within School A itself, some learners described the school's leadership in more enthusiastic terms than others, suggesting that even strong, consistent leadership is experienced somewhat differently depending on a learner's own relationship with particular teachers and staff members. This shows that leadership affects learners through their daily interactions with teachers and other staff. School leaders therefore cannot assume that a consistent leadership style will affect all learners in the same way.

These findings also speak to how transformational leadership shapes school culture more broadly, beyond any single practice or interaction. Research examining how principals' leadership abilities relate to school performance shows that the relationship works substantially through school culture: leadership's effects on learners build up through a school's everyday climate, not only through isolated leadership acts (Tonich, 2021). Leadership practices that may seem unrelated to learner achievement can also have an important effect. For example, principals who supported teachers in using new technology strengthened professional trust and innovation within their schools (Schmitz et al.,

2023). This suggests that the influence of leadership on school culture and learners develops through many everyday practices rather than a single intervention. Similarly, principals who strengthen teachers' confidence in their ability to grow and improve can promote a growth-oriented mindset that teachers carry into their interactions with learners (Reyes, 2025). This provides another possible link between school leadership, teacher motivation and learners' classroom experiences.

Implications for Learner Voice Research

These findings also contribute to a growing body of research that treats learners not simply as beneficiaries of school leadership, but as direct observers and interpreters of it. Much of the existing literature on transformational leadership in schools relies primarily on teacher or principal accounts, with learner perspectives included less often and in less depth. The findings reported here suggest that this is a significant gap, since learners were able to identify specific leadership practices, such as visibility, fairness and consistent communication, and to connect these practices clearly to their own motivation and sense of belonging. This suggests that learner voice should be treated as a primary data source in future research on school leadership, rather than as a secondary check on findings drawn mainly from adult participants.

Implications for Principal Preparation

For principal preparation programmes, these findings suggest that leadership development should extend beyond teacher-facing skills to include a more explicit focus on how principals are seen and experienced by learners. Aspiring and practising principals could benefit from training that treats visibility, fairness and direct engagement with learners as leadership competencies in their own right, rather than as a by-product of good staff management.

Structured opportunities for principals to hear directly from learners, for example through regular learner forums or feedback structures, could help principals calibrate their own sense of how their leadership is experienced on the ground. Given how clearly Grade 12 learners in this study were able to describe and evaluate their school leaders, principal preparation programmes should not assume that learners' views on leadership are too immature or indirect to be taken seriously.

Recommendations

The findings point to several practical recommendations. School leaders should prioritise visible, emotionally supportive engagement with both teachers and learners, since this was the practice most consistently tied to stronger motivation and belonging at School A. Structured, ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers should be made available consistently across schools, instead of concentrated in better-resourced settings, given the clear link this study found between teacher motivation and learner engagement.

Deliberate platforms for learner voice and participation should also be built into school leadership practice, given how closely learners' own motivation and belonging tracked the visibility and fairness of their leaders. At a system level, principal training and district-level support should give explicit attention to leadership's effect on learners, not only on staff, since learners here proved to be attentive, responsive observers of how their schools are led.

Where structures for learner voice are introduced, school leaders should also guard against these structures becoming symbolic instead of substantive, given evidence that even well-intentioned learner participation initiatives can remain tokenistic in practice (Yu & Shay, 2022). Genuine learner participation, in other words, needs to involve learners in decisions that carry real weight, not only in structures that appear inclusive without shifting decision-making power. Because transformational leadership influences learners both indirectly through teacher motivation and directly through learners' experiences of leadership, principal training should include learner-focused visibility and communication as important leadership skills.

School leaders should also strengthen relationships with parents and communities. Active parental and community involvement can contribute to improved learner achievement (Gordon & Seashore Louis, 2009). Evidence from other high-poverty schools also shows that improving struggling schools requires sustained and deliberate leadership rather than short-term interventions (Parrett & Budge, 2020). This has particular relevance for the support provided to Schools B and C.

School leaders should also recognise that learners have different needs, backgrounds and experiences. Transformational leadership should therefore be inclusive rather than assuming that the

same approach will benefit all learners equally. Research shows that transformational leadership, combined with appropriate instructional planning, can promote more individualised and equitable learner engagement (Lambrecht et al., 2022). The finding that some learners at School A felt more included than others further highlights the need for inclusion to form part of leadership development for South African principals.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine the relationship between teacher motivation and learner achievement in schools with transformational leadership, and how learners themselves perceive the impact of their school leaders. The findings from three Soweto secondary schools suggest that transformational leadership influences learner achievement indirectly by building teacher trust, motivation and a shared academic culture.

It also influences learners directly through their perceptions and experiences of how their schools are led. Where teacher motivation and visible, fair leadership were both present, as in School A, learners showed stronger engagement, confidence and academic performance. Where they were absent, as in Schools B and C, learners reported disengagement and, in some cases, a loss of academic direction. These findings suggest that strengthening school leadership can improve both teacher outcomes and learner achievement. However, leadership development should give as much attention to relational and emotional practices as it does to vision and strategy.

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