

WOMEN IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE: EXPLORING SOUTH AFRICAN FEMALE GOVERNORS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Trevor Zwane

zwanetrevor@yahoo.com
University of Johannesburg
Department of Education Leadership
and Management

Onoriode Collins POTOKRI

PotokriOC@ufs.ac.za
ORCID Number:0000-0002-0850-1761
University of the Free State, South Africa
Department of Education Management, Policy
and Comparative Education

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Since the advent of South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, numerous studies have examined the roles of school governing body (SGB) members. However, limited attention has been given to the experiences and perceptions of female governors within these structures. This study, employing a qualitative case study design, explores the perceptions and experiences of six purposively selected female stakeholders from two public schools. Data were generated through individual interviews and inductively analysed, resulting in the identification of key themes. Findings reveal that while the South African Schools Act is intended to strengthen school governance, female governors face challenges in understanding and applying its provisions. Using transformational leadership as a conceptual framework, the study shows that leadership ideals of inclusivity, collaboration, and shared vision are often constrained by patriarchal norms, with principals functioning as critical enablers or barriers to women's participation. By situating women-centered perspectives and collective practices within leadership theory, the study highlights the gendered limits of transformational leadership while extending it as a relational process that requires empowerment, trust, and contextual adaptation. Importantly, it demonstrates that transformational leadership in African schools must be locally grounded to address inequities, cultural hierarchies, and limited training.

Keywords: female governors, school governance, transformational leadership, women in leadership, parents in school governance

INTRODUCTION:

The South African Schools Act (1996) sought to decentralise school management and empower parents through the establishment of school governing bodies (SGBs) (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Key objectives included leveraging competitive advantages, enhancing school effectiveness, promoting collective decision-making, and fostering partnerships among all stakeholders (Setlhodi, 2020). Effective school leadership, characterised by transformational leadership (TL), is unlikely to occur unless empowering environments are established (Naidoo & Peterson, 2015). Although considerable attention has been devoted to TL, there remains a noticeable gap regarding the transformation and empowerment of female stakeholders in the context of school governance and improvement (Xulu, 2020; Bush & Glover, 2021; Mohapi & Chombo, 2021).

Rhode (2017) highlights the challenges in establishing effective collaboration between school principals and female stakeholders, which is critical for school transformation. The extent to which this collaboration contributes to school improvement remains uncertain. Schools demonstrating TL traits foster collaborative working environments and enhance the leadership role of principals (Pirelli, 2016). Partnerships between principals and female stakeholders, particularly women parents, are vital as these parties manage distinct aspects of school operations: professional management and school governance. Although the Schools Act of 1996 delineates these responsibilities, the distinction often hinders school success, as stakeholders especially parents who many struggle to differentiate between governance and management roles or/and parental roles (Dibete & Potokri, 2018).

Transformational leadership ensures stakeholders are aware of and empowered in their expected roles (Smith & Squires, 2016). TL facilitates school improvement by establishing partnerships, incorporating diverse perspectives in decision-making, fostering shared vision, and promoting collective commitment to positive school outcomes (Anderson, 2017). However, efforts to promote TL are constrained by challenges faced by female governors, including gender bias, limited access to resources, and patriarchal structures. Nguyen et al. (2021) emphasise the critical, nurturing role of female parents, even in cases where formal education is limited, highlighting their invaluable contribution to school governance.

Problem statement

The representation of females in SGBs, particularly in leadership positions with significant influence, remains disproportionately low (Aman et.al, 2018; Sinyosi, 2021). Despite growing recognition of the significance of diversity and gender equality in educational leadership, a persistent gender gap exists in the composition of SGBs (Msila, 2022). Consequently, females' involvement in SGBs is often disregarded resulting in an unfair distribution of roles. This gap impedes the complete realisation of TL, which plays a crucial role in addressing complex educational challenges and driving positive change in schools. It is therefore imperative to acknowledge the current need for addressing this issue, as it has the potential to positively transform schools. This study therefore sought to answer the research question: How does the experiences and perceptions of female governors in SGBs inform transformational leadership practices in school governance of public schools?

Literature review:

School Governing Bodies

School Governing Bodies (SGBs) play a pivotal role in strengthening the vision, mission, and objectives of schools (Segoe & Bisschoff, 2019). Parents, as key stakeholders, complement educators' efforts by supporting learning both at home and in school. SGBs can further leverage parents' expertise to enhance academic outcomes and, in cases where resources are scarce, establish temporary teaching posts until permanent appointments are made (Miller, 2022; Nghipandulwa, 2023).

In rural and township schools, limited access to career information hampers learners' future prospects (Mojapelo, 2020). SGBs can address this by organising career days and inviting professionals to guide and inspire learners. At the same time, they must ensure that schools remain safe and orderly, addressing issues such as absenteeism, substance abuse, violence, and gang activity (Maluleke, 2021; Mabunda, 2022). SGBs are also tasked with establishing counselling and support systems for vulnerable learners (Hoofman & Secord, 2021; Jalongo, 2021).

Effective governance further requires SGBs to reassess school culture and align it with institutional goals (Creese & Earley, 1999). Capacity building is central to this mandate: by organising seminars and workshops, SGBs foster collaboration among administrators, teachers, and learners, promote professional development, and ensure alignment with evolving curricular requirements such as the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Simuyaba & Potokri, 2022; Sebaeng, 2022). Staff appraisal and recognition systems also enhance teacher motivation and classroom effectiveness (Buys et al., 2020).

Collaboration is indispensable to school improvement. Principals, SGBs, SMTs, educators, and learners must unite toward shared goals (Labuschagne, 2021; Daries, 2023). Where such unity is absent, teaching and learning processes suffer (Thomson, 2020). By resolving grievances and managing conflict, SGBs and SMTs foster peaceful environments that enable learner success (Mncube & Ngema, 2023). Parents, as partners, contribute to decision-making, support both academics and extracurriculars, and strengthen school–community ties (Schmid & Garrels, 2021; Selolo, 2018).

Parental involvement has been consistently linked to improved learner achievement (Agarwal et al., 2021). Beyond academics, SGBs can encourage extracurricular activities such as sports, debates, and cultural events, which foster holistic development and essential life skills (Dumako, 2019). In sum, SGBs are instrumental in shaping school governance by ensuring safety, enhancing academic performance, supporting teachers, engaging parents, and fostering collaboration. Their effective functioning contributes not only to learner achievement but also to broader school improvement and community empowerment.

Female Stakeholders and Governance in Schools

Education systems worldwide increasingly recognise the significant contributions of women in shaping educational outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Theoharis, 2024). Historically, leadership positions in schools and society have been predominantly occupied by men, and women have often been relegated to stereotypical roles such as “kitchen duties” and childbearing (Potokri, 2011). Transformational leadership (TL), however, provides environments that support innovation, continuous improvement, and high levels of engagement, particularly in contexts where women assume leadership roles (Bass, 1999).

Female stakeholders navigate the complexities of modern school governance, where their capacity to engage, inspire, and contribute to decision-making is crucial (Teague, 2015). Women are more likely to support policies and practices that promote equity, inclusivity, and the well-being of learners. Their inclusion in governance enhances decision-making processes by bringing diverse perspectives and insights to the table (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). While women face challenges such as gender bias, work-family balance, and navigating male-dominated leadership structures (Tshipani, 2021), these challenges also present opportunities for growth, transformation, and mentorship, reinforcing their professional and societal roles (Sandberg, 2013).

Collaboration is a key factor in effective school governance (Sammons, 1995). In the context of school governance, collaboration involves active engagement and relationship-building among educators, learners, parents, and the broader community (Rubin, 2009). When stakeholders collaborate toward shared goals, schools become more inclusive, responsive, and adaptive to educational demands. Collaborative governance promotes shared responsibility, encourages well-rounded decision-making, and enhances the implementation of policies and initiatives (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Sarong, 2024).

Female stakeholders play a critical role in collaboration by providing unique perspectives that help schools address diverse learner needs (Chipulu, 2018). Collaborative models foster trust, open communication, and a positive school culture, enabling stakeholders to actively support the school’s vision and goals (Fullan, 2007). When applied to curriculum development, instructional strategies, and learner assessment, collaboration facilitates the exchange of expertise and resources, improving teaching practices and learner outcomes (Suskie, 2018). In sum, the inclusion and empowerment of female stakeholders in collaborative governance are essential for enhancing school effectiveness, promoting equity, and driving positive educational change.

Conceptual framework: Transformational leadership

This study is conceptually underpinned by transformational leadership (TL). It is first conceptualised by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bernard Bass (1985), emphasises leaders who inspire and motivate followers to transcend their personal interests for the betterment of their institutions, achieving exceptional outcomes in educational settings (Leithwood, 1992; Leithwood et al., 2004). Ken

Leithwood's work highlights the application of TL across diverse educational systems, promoting collective responsibility, shared vision, and stakeholder engagement. TL has been shown to positively influence employee engagement, job satisfaction, and performance, indicating its broad relevance in educational contexts (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

At its core, TL concerns a leader's capacity to motivate and inspire followers to enhance their performance (Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016). Steinmann et al. (2018) argue that transformational leaders achieve objectives by articulating a clear vision, cultivating followers' capabilities, and instilling a sense of purpose in their work. In school contexts, TL has been associated with improved academic performance and a more positive school environment (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). Research in culturally diverse contexts, shows that TL adapts to societal values, promoting collective vision, teamwork, and stakeholder commitment (Leithwood et al., 2004).

In Africa, TL is valued for its capacity to drive change, encourage ethical leadership, and motivate individuals in complex and challenging environments (Bass & Avolio, 1994). In schools, TL has been linked to learner success, community engagement, and the creation of supportive learning cultures (Naidoo & Mestry, 2019). Udin (2020) emphasises that transformational leaders empower learners through intrinsic motivation, fostering personal responsibility and enhancing both performance and school culture. Effective transformational leaders also build trust, collaborate with stakeholders, and uphold shared values, often centered around the principal as the key leadership figure. For example, a study in Turkey by Kılınç et al. (2024) demonstrated that teachers' trust in principals positively influenced their commitment and innovative practices, corroborating similar findings by Bellibaş et al. (2021).

TL emphasises long-term vision and sustainable success (Tomic, 2016). Transformational leaders implement practices that achieve enduring benefits for students and the broader school community. However, despite extensive global research on TL, Leithwood and Sun (2012) note a critical challenge: scholars must move beyond describing "what successful leaders do" to investigating "how they do it" and measuring the resulting impact.

The 21st century has brought significant changes to the educational sector, requiring schools to adapt their governance structures to address emerging challenges and capitalise on new opportunities (Gronn, 2003). Transformational leadership (TL) has become increasingly important in enhancing the effectiveness of school governance. Bush (2017) emphasises that TL is among the most enduring leadership models, focusing on how leaders influence staff and stakeholders to commit to school goals. Similarly, Bass and Riggio (2006) describe TL as both a leadership model and style that emphasises vision, inspiration, and the empowerment of stakeholders to actively participate in transforming environments that require significant change and adaptation.

The effectiveness of school governance is often evaluated by its impact on student outcomes, engagement, and overall well-being. Leithwood and Sun (2012) argue that transformational leaders should prioritise equity and inclusivity, ensuring that all learners, regardless of background, have access to high-quality education that meets global standards. TL has been shown to reduce disparities, advance social justice, and foster collaborative, inclusive school communities.

Teacher leadership, within the framework of TL, contributes to the formation of professional learning communities that support school activities and help schools adapt to evolving educational demands (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Tintoré, Cunha, Cabral, and Alves (2020), in a 17-year review of studies largely from Anglo-Saxon countries, highlighted the complexity of school leadership, including interactions with educational authorities, staff, students, families, and the wider community. TL supports teachers' ongoing professional development, enabling the effective implementation of innovative teaching strategies and responsiveness to contemporary educational needs.

Berkovich (2018) identifies three key conceptions of TL: (a) principals' transformational behaviours are prevalent in restructuring-oriented contexts, (b) transformational behaviours are generally more effective

than transactional ones, and (c) principals may exhibit either transformational or transactional leadership. Recognising these conceptions is critical for avoiding oversimplification and ensuring that research informs effective practice. Hardman (2011) similarly illustrates how principals' transformational behaviours influence school improvement outcomes.

By promoting collaboration and trust, TL motivates staff to work collectively toward shared goals, thereby enhancing learner engagement and outcomes. Furthermore, TL encourages evidence-based decision-making, enabling leaders to identify growth areas and implement targeted interventions to support both learner and school success (Afsar & Umrani, 2020). Overall, TL facilitates a transition from traditional management approaches to adaptive, inclusive leadership practices that are essential for addressing the complex challenges of contemporary education (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

Methodology

The study was conducted in Gauteng Province of South Africa, specifically in Soweto. The researchers used qualitative research approach and a multiple case study design which involve two schools. Case studies have advantages like thoroughly examining research problems and exploring real-life contexts (Wilson, 2013). The research problem was analysed using evidence from two sources – literature study/data and interview data. The interview data was from an In-depth interview. "Literatures are among the most imperishable possessions of humanity and knowledge of them is essentially necessary for research" (Potokri, 2014:355). According to Saharan et al. (2024) and Potokri (2022), literature is data. So, relevant literature pertaining to a study when systematically collected can serve as data for the study. These interviews, according to Xu et al. (2021), are a widely used qualitative research method that enables researchers to gain a detailed understanding of the life experiences, behaviours, and perspectives or perceptions of individuals within specific groups or spaces.

The study involved female governors (female principals and female parents). Members of SGBs are referred to as governors. This includes the principal and parents who are the participants of this study. Six (6) participants (2 female principals, 2 female parents, and 2 former female school governors) made up the sample size. This implies that one principal, one current female parent, and one former female parent from each school made up the composition of the total sample. From the onset, the researchers were keen on working only with female governors, hence, they searched for schools with female principals. In view of this, purposive sampling was used. Alam's (2021) work justified the researchers' decision to use purposeful sampling, which involves selecting a small group of participants who can provide valuable and constructive responses to the research question. Data collected through individual interviews were analysed using an inductive approach to identify themes and sub-themes. Data from the literature study being secondary data were duly or intensively reviewed and used to juxtapose the interview data. Ethical considerations included obtaining institutional clearance from the University of XXX and permission from the Gauteng Department of Education, and school principals. The researchers obtained consent and ensured privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality.

Findings

The researchers used codes or pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and safeguard the personal information of the participants. In this study, the researchers characterised principals of School A or B as PSCH-A/B, current female school governors of School A or B as CFSG-A/B, and former female school governors of School A or B as FFSG-A/B. The researchers initially presented the data set and organised it according to themes and sub-themes. The interpretation of data in this study was guided by the narratives or conversations that emerged from cases presented in two schools. The analysis process was informed by the reviewed literature and theoretical framework. The participants' verbatim responses were presented in italics and indented to aid interpretation. From the analysis of data, three themes emerged leading to the study's findings. These are: (1) gendered marginalisation and the negotiation of authority in school governing bodies; (2) competence gaps and training needs for female governors; (3) Female empowerment through transformational leadership strategies.

Theme 1: Gendered Marginalisation and the Negotiation of Authority in School Governing Bodies

Findings from both sampled schools reveal that female governors experience persistent marginalisation within School Governing Bodies (SGBs), shaped by patriarchal norms and male-dominated institutional structures. Women's contributions are often dismissed or challenged, limiting their influence on governance decisions. One principal reflected, *"I think to a great extent, they (women) are marginalised through patriarchy and are placed in institutions dominated by interested men, in most cases, in self-enrichment, using the school for self-enrichment, as opposed to the purpose of developing black child education"* [PSCH-A], while another participant noted, *"That is my experience because I have noticed that even in meetings when a man says something, everyone will listen, but if it is a woman, it is so easy for everyone, especially men, to challenge and say No! but you cannot raise this point, you know. So yes, those are my experiences"* [CFSG-A].

Similar patterns were reported in School B. A principal explained, *"But as time progressed, I realised that people change for what reason I do not know. People start to pull in two different directions. And as a result, women side-lined in whatever decision that is taken. Major decisions are taken by individuals, especially the members of the executive committee of the SGB. And as a result, I find my presence here that it creates nothing but stress for me as a woman. I felt that light. Sometimes the attitude that we are treated with is concerning, people show superiority (due to gender)"* [PSCH-B]. A female governor further emphasised the systemic nature of exclusion, *"My opinion, which I share about SGBs is that what women say is not considered and has no weight...People who are male want to overpower us, like if you just tell him, he will oppose you and he is not right to do this, but he will end up winning because he will tell you that he cannot be told by a woman, so most of the time it is like that"* [FFSG-B].

These experiences illustrate that SGBs are not neutral spaces but arenas where authority is actively negotiated along gender lines. One principal noted, *"...in governance, it is a different situation altogether, because the principals of schools will be male. The concept of governance, particularly from a male perspective, often revolves around the potential benefits derived from available resources"* [PSCH-A]. Women described how these dynamics frequently escalate into conflict: *"...it often results in a conflict...Due to the desire for individuals to express themselves, situations may become chaotic. The situation ultimately results in a struggle that limits women's movement"* [CFSG-A]. Cultural norms further reinforce exclusion, as another participant explained, *"...it arises from the chauvinistic nature of certain men...In African cultures, men often assume the role of the head of the family. Women proposing strategies for school improvement often find themselves marginalised"* [PSCH-B].

Collectively, these narratives demonstrate that women's participation is constrained not by competence or commitment but by systemic gender biases. Authority is often exercised through domination rather than the collaborative, trust-based influence promoted by transformational leadership. Creating inclusive, dialogical spaces is therefore critical to reposition women as co-leaders, fostering equitable participation and shared decision-making in school governance.

Theme 2: Competence Gaps and Training Needs for Female Governors

While structural marginalisation and entrenched power dynamics presented obstacles, participants across both schools strongly emphasised that competence and training are central challenges. One principal stressed the fundamental knowledge gap: *"In my view, the challenge lies in the lack of understanding regarding the concept of governance. One cannot simply remove me from my daily responsibilities of raising children and place me into a context that demands advanced cognitive engagement."* [PSCH-A]. This highlighted the complexity of governance roles, which require specialised knowledge of policy, finance, and accountability.

Participants explained that many female governors were unaware of the voluntary and service-oriented nature of SGB roles: *"Female parents... do not understand that there are no payments for serving in the SGB... it is self-sacrifice."* [FFSG-A]. Such misconceptions often risked demotivating women governors

and reducing anticipated participation. The lack of training and orientation was repeatedly identified as a significant barrier. One participant, PSCH-A noted: *"Our school SGB is not provided with that training or exposed to those policies, which is why we see all the conflicts and drama surrounding SGBs."* Participants further indicated that even when policy documents were available, their technical language made them inaccessible to women governors. As one principal (PSCH-A) explained: *"...take them through the policies in the language they understand... not in those large documents."*

From another perspective, participants highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic further widened training gaps: According to PSCH-B, *"the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a lack of one-on-one or face-to-face training for SGB members, leading to a significant gap in their understanding of the school improvement framework."* Inadequate educational backgrounds among some governors compounded these difficulties, restricting their comprehension of governance procedures: *"This indicates that their educational background is generally lacking. Many are not well-informed about certain methods and procedures, which leads them to deviate from the primary purpose of their presence at the school."* [PSCH-B]

Participants also recognised the limitations of current training models, such as brief inductions, and suggested more collaborative and continuous development: In the words of a Former Governor, School B *"The induction workshop is insufficient... they can learn from other schools, adopt their practices, and implement them to enhance school outcomes."*

From the above, it is evident that the voices of participants from both schools revealed a consistent call for language-sensitive, continuous, and contextually relevant training.

Theme 3: Empowerment as a necessity for women involvement in school governance

Across both schools, participants emphasised that women hold significant potential(s) for empowerment through their involvement in school governance. This potential was often linked to their established roles in society. As one participant (PSCH-A) reflected: *"just as most households in our country are managed by women, they recognise the power they have to change and influence education"*. Such insights highlight women's underestimated and under-utilised leadership capacities, which, if transferred into school governance, could foster substantial school improvement or effectiveness.

Collaboration and positive relationships emerged as central to the participants' empowerment. A participant explained that *"if the principal does not maintain a positive relationship with the SGB, this will not occur"* [CFSG-A]. Similarly, another participant, PSCH-A noted that *"teachers and all individuals, despite their differences, worked towards a common goal"*. This emphasis on solidarity was echoed in the second school, where a governor stressed, *"in the presence of males within the SGBs, it is essential to foster cooperation and collaboration while ceasing conflicts"* [FFSG-B]. So, collaboration is paramount.

Participants also suggested practical strategies for building trust and solidarity, such as creating informal spaces for interaction. One participant, FFSG-A emphasised, *"all stakeholders can come together and get to know each other in a fun way... this will ensure that cooperation is present, thereby improving the school"*. Beyond collaboration, capacity building and structured development were seen as critical. A participant, PSCH-B, from School B explained, *"...if, as women in the SGB, we can be developed, trained properly, and provided with a platform to demonstrate our contributions to daily operations or governance of the school it will be good and there will be... development, development, and further development of women"*.

Empowerment was also linked to inclusive and collective decision-making. As one participant observed, *"...everyone is taken into consideration... the decision that is made is the decision of a collective... the daily operations of the school are effective due to our unified direction and collective effort"* [CFSG-B].

As revealed from this theme is indication of participants voices strongly portraying that empowerment is both relational and procedural. It thus requires trust, collaboration, and solidarity, but also structured development and inclusive decision-making.

Discussions

Women's involvement in school governance has generated diverse outcomes, producing different perspectives among stakeholders (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Rubin, 2009; Msila, 2022). While women are increasingly present in school governing bodies (SGBs), their participation remains constrained by unequal power relations. As one participant in this study observed, women are "invited to the meetings but not really listened to when important issues are discussed," a reality consistent with Tshipani's (2021) observation that structural barriers persist despite advances.

Participants in this study were particularly assertive about these barriers, highlighting patriarchy, male dominance, and outright marginalisation. They explained that male governors often prioritise self-interest over learner-centered concerns, leaving women with limited influence. Competence and training gaps further compound the challenge. Several participants admitted that they struggled to grasp governance concepts, which made it difficult to contribute meaningfully. PSCH-A, a participant reflected that "one cannot simply remove women from their daily responsibilities of raising children and place them into a context that demands advanced cognitive engagement," suggesting that some women feel unprepared for the intellectual and strategic demands of governance. This combination of patriarchy and capacity gaps helps explain their marginalisation.

As revealed, participants also underscored the value women bring to governance, particularly in learner-focused decision-making. As one governor noted, "we always try to think about what is best for the children," echoing Anderson's (2017) findings that women advocate for inclusive policies. Similarly, Chipulu (2018) argued that women's perspectives often emphasise learner wellbeing and development. Still, as Potokri (2011) have found, women are frequently sidelined in deliberations about resources and school policies, with "the final say...left for men, and we just agree," as one participant puts it. This underscores the importance of inclusivity in SGBs. Participants emphasised that equal participation is essential to avoid unhealthy conflicts and foster productive collaboration. As participant (CSG-A) explained, governance dynamics can generate conflict, but inclusivity is the foundation for effective engagement. This finding resonates with Sinthumule and Tsanwani's (2017) call for inclusive decision-making in school governance.

The study also highlights the central role of the principal, often described by participants as either an enabler or a barrier to women's participation. Some principals encouraged training and inclusion, while others reinforced hierarchical structures that excluded women's voices. Participants vividly captured this dynamic by likening the principal to what we (researchers) equate to an "electricity transformer," which distributes or restricts power across the governance system. This metaphor aligns with Leithwood's (1992) and Leithwood et al.'s (2004) conception of transformational leadership, which requires principals to provide mentorship, training, and opportunities for growth.

Broader scholarship also stresses that transformational leadership can redress inequities by fostering shared vision and collective purpose (Pirelli, 2016; Ansell & Gash, 2008). Participants confirmed this view, noting that when women receive training and support, "they can contribute more to the school." This reflects Sandberg's (2013) call for equipping women with tools to lead effectively and Udin's (2020) emphasis on motivating all stakeholders.

In summary, the findings reveal that while women's contributions to school governance are increasingly recognised, their influence remains uneven. Entrenched patriarchy, competence gaps, and underrepresentation continue to limit their participation. Nevertheless, participants expressed a strong desire for inclusivity, equal participation, and collaborative leadership. Addressing these challenges requires transformational leadership that nurtures individual growth, promotes equity, and builds shared vision (Steinmann et al., 2018).

Contributions to Transformational Leadership

This study makes five contributions to the scholarship on transformational leadership by situating it within the perspectives and lived experiences of female governors in South African schools. First, the findings reveal the gendered limits of transformational leadership. Although transformational leadership accentuates inclusivity, collaboration, and shared vision, these ideals remain inhibited in practice by patriarchal norms and male-dominated governance cultures. To this end, the voices of women are often silenced or dismissed, showing that leadership cannot be fully transformative without deliberate attention to gender equity.

Second, the study extends transformational leadership beyond a leadership “style” to a relational and procedural process. Participants highlighted that empowerment requires trust, solidarity, and capacity-building structures. Thus, transformational leadership must be understood not only as inspirational influence but as a process that dismantles structural inequalities, builds competence, and nurtures inclusive participation.

Third, the study underscores the principal’s role as a gatekeeper of transformation. Principals emerged in the narratives as either enablers or barriers to women’s participation, functioning metaphorically as “transformers” who distribute or restrict power in school governance. This highlights the critical responsibility of principals to foster training, mentorship, and dialogical spaces that align with transformational leadership ideals.

Fourth, the study contributes to leadership theory by integrating women’s voices into governance scholarship. Female governors’ learner-centered perspectives and emphasis on collective effort reflect leadership practices that resonate with, and can enrich, transformational leadership theory. These voices foreground women not merely as passive participants but as co-leaders with unique insights into collaborative, child-focused governance.

Fifth, the findings contextualise transformational leadership within African school governance. They demonstrate that transformational leadership is not universal but must be adapted to settings marked by structural inequities, cultural hierarchies, and limited training. Empowerment, inclusivity, and shared vision are not automatic outcomes but require deliberate structures and practices that address these contextual realities.

Limitation and future research direction

The limitation of this study relates to the sample size. Although the study included only six participants, the researchers assert that this does not compromise the quality of the research, as qualitative studies often employ smaller, purposively selected samples to generate in-depth insights. The data collected were rich, detailed, and rigorously analysed, providing a thick description of participants’ experiences and perceptions. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, member checking was employed. Future researchers interested in similar inquiries are encouraged to expand the study beyond the current site in Soweto, South Africa. Conducting studies in other provinces or even in different countries could provide additional perspectives and enhance the generalisability and applicability of the findings.

CONCLUSION:

This study explored how the experiences and perceptions of female governors in South African school governing bodies (SGBs) inform transformational leadership practices in school governance. The findings reveal that participants’ involvement in SGBs is motivated by their concern for their children’s education and their desire to contribute to school improvement. Female governors emphasised the importance of collective effort among SGB members, highlighting their expectation that principals and SGB chairpersons inspire and motivate all members, regardless of gender or socioeconomic background. Such expectations align with transformational leadership principles, which emphasise collaboration, shared vision, and motivation toward common educational goals. Despite their willingness to participate in decision-making, female governors reported facing significant obstacles, including male dominance, gender bias, and

suppression within SGBs. Many felt relegated to low-impact roles, with influential positions such as chairperson and treasurer often reserved for men. This imbalance is compounded by limited training opportunities for female governors and a lack of clarity regarding their roles. Consequently, the transformational leadership ideals of inclusivity, empowerment, and shared vision are not fully realised. Nevertheless, female governors remain committed to their roles, demonstrating resilience and determination to contribute to school governance despite these challenges.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge and thank the study's participants for their participation.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

REFERENCES:

- Afsar, B., & Umrani, W. A. (2020). Transformational leadership and innovative work behaviour: The role of motivation to learn, task complexity and innovation climate. *European Journal of Innovation Management*, 23(3), 402-428.
- Aman, M. P., Yusof, A., Ismail, M., & Razali, A. B. M. (2018). Pipeline problem: Factors influencing the underrepresentation of women in the top leadership positions of sports organisations. *Malaysian Journal of Movement, Health & Exercise*, 7(2), 151-166.
- Anderson, M. (2017). Transformational leadership in education: A review of existing literature. *International Social Science Review*, 93(1), 1-13.
- Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative governance in theory and practice. *Journal of public administration research and theory*, 18(4), 543-571.
- Bass, B. M. (1999). Two decades of research and development in transformational leadership. *European journal of work and organizational psychology*, 8(1), 9-32.
- Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational leadership* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bass, B.M., & Avolio, B. J (1994). *Improving organisational effectiveness through transformational leadership*. Sage Publications.
- Berkovich, I. (2018). Will it sink or will it float: Putting three common conceptions about principals' transformational leadership to the test. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 46(6), 888-907. doi:10.1177/1741143217714253
- Bush, T. (2017). The enduring power of transformational leadership. *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, 45(4), 563-565. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217701827>
- Bush, T., & Glover, D. (2021). Research on school leadership in South Africa: A systematic review. *Systematic reviews of research in basic education in South Africa*, 115.
- Chipulu, B. (2018). *Stakeholders' perceptions on underrepresentation of women teachers in educational leadership positions in Ramotshere Moiloa* (Doctoral dissertation, North-West University (South Africa)).
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2015). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. Teachers College Press.
- Dibete, K. J., & Potokri, O. C. (2018). Policy compliance of SGB members on their financial management roles in selected no-fee schools in Limpopo province of South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 32(5), 799-812.
- Du Plessis, P., & Mestry, R. (2019). Teachers for rural schools—a challenge for South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, 39.
- Fullan, M. (2007). *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (4th ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Gronn, P. (2003). *The new work of educational leaders: Changing leadership practice in an era of school reform*. Sage.

- Hardman BK (2011) Teacher's Perception of Their Principal's Leadership Style and the Effects on Student Achievement in Improving and Non-Improving Schools. Doctoral Dissertation, University of South Florida, USA
- Judge, T., & Piccolo, R.F. (2004). Transformational and transactional leadership: A meta-analytic test of their relative validity. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89(5) 755-768.
- Korejan, M. M., & Shahbazi, H. (2016). An analysis of the transformational leadership theory. *Journal of fundamental and applied sciences*, 8(3), 452-461.
- Leithwood K, Harris A, Hopkins D (2020) Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management* 40(1): 5–22.
- Leithwood, K. (1992). Transformational Leadership and School Restructuring.
- Leithwood, K. A., & Sun, J. (2012). The nature and effects of transformational school leadership: A meta-analytic review of unpublished research. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(3), 387- 423. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X11436268>
- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2006). Transformational school leadership for large-scale reform: Effects on students, teachers, and their classroom practices. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 17(2) 201-227.
- Leithwood, K., & Mascall, B. (2008). Collective leadership effects on student achievement. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 55(4), 529-561.
- Leithwood, K., Seashore, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). Review of research: How leadership influences student learning.
- Mohapi, S. J., & Chombo, S. (2021). Governance collaboration in schools: the perceptions of principals, parents, and educators in rural South Africa. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 7(1), 1994723.
- Msila, V. (2022). Black Women School Leaders: Building Effective Schools Against the Odds. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, 11(1), 1-23.
- Naidoo, P., & Mestry, R. (2019). Instructional leadership development for principals: A South African context. *Instructional Leadership and Leadership for Learning in Schools: Understanding Theories of Leading*, 237-265.
- Naidoo, P., & Petersen, N. (2015). Towards a leadership program for primary school principals as instructional leaders. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 5(3), 1-8.
- Nguyen, T. H., Gasman, M., Washington Lockett, A., & Peña, V. (2021). Supporting Black women's pursuits in STEM. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 58(6), 879-905.
- Pirelli, G. E. (2016). How school leaders might promote higher levels of collective teacher efficacy at the level of school and team. *English Language Teaching*, 9(3), 174-180.
- Potokri, O. C. (2011). *The academic performance of married women students in Nigerian higher education* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria).
- Potokri, O. C. (2022). *Feminisation of poverty among female-headed households in post-genocide Odi community in Niger-Delta region of Nigeria* (Doctoral dissertation, University of South Africa (South Africa)).
- Rhode, D. L. (2017). *Women and leadership*. Oxford University Press.
- Rubin, H. (2009). *Collaborative leadership: Developing effective partnerships for communities and schools*. Corwin Press.
- Saharan, V. A., Kulhari, H., Jadhav, H., Pooja, D., Banerjee, S., & Singh, A. (2024). Introduction to research methodology. In *Principles of research methodology and ethics in pharmaceutical sciences* (pp. 1-46). CRC Press.
- Sammons, P. (1995). *Key characteristics of effective schools: A review of school effectiveness research*. B & MBC Distribution Services, 9 Headlands Business Park, Ringwood, Hants BH24 3PB, England, United Kingdom.
- Sandberg, S. (2013). *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. Knopf.
- Sarong, J. S. (2024). Fostering Collaboration and Team Effectiveness in Educational Leadership: Strategies for Building High-Performing Teams and Networks. *Randwick International of Education and Linguistics Science Journal*, 5(2), 727-743.
- Setlhodi, I. I. (2020). Collaboration practices between the two tiers of school leadership in eradicating underperformance. *South African Journal of Education*, 40(3).

- Shapiro, J. P., & Stefkovich, J. A. (2016). *Ethical leadership and decision making in education: Applying theoretical perspectives to complex dilemmas*. Routledge.
- Simuyaba, E., & Potokri, O. C. (2022). (Dis) enablers of democratization of secondary school governance in Zambia. *Eurasian Journal of Social Sciences*, 10(3), 143-159. <https://doi.org/10.15604/ejss.2022.10.03.001>
- Sinthumule, D. A., & Tsanwani, A. R. (2017). The role of security guards in creating an effective learning environment in South African schools. *Journal of Educational Studies*, 16(1), 168-183.
- Sinyosi, L. B. (2021). *Leadership enhancement amongst female principals of secondary schools in Vhembe District of South Africa* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Smith, B. S., & Squires, V. (2016). The role of leadership style in creating a great school. *SELU Research Review Journal*, 1(1), 65-78
- Steinmann, B., Klug, H. J., & Maier, G. W. (2018). The path is the goal: How transformational leaders enhance followers' job attitudes and proactive behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 2338.
- Suskie, L. (2018). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Teague, L. J. (2015). Higher Education Plays Critical Role in Society: More Women Leaders Can Make a Difference. In *Forum on Public Policy Online* (Vol. 2015, No. 2). Oxford Round Table. 406 West Florida Avenue, Urbana, IL 61801.
- Theoharis, G. (2024). *The school leaders our children deserve: Seven keys to equity, social justice, and school reform*. Teachers College Press.
- Tintoré, M., Cunha, R. S., Cabral, I., & Alves, J. J. M. (2020). A scoping review of problems and challenges faced by school leaders (2003-2019). *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, 1-38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220942527>
- Tomic, R. (2016). Transforming A School's Culture Through Collaboration, Relationships, And Shared Values: A Change Leadership Plan.
- Tshipani, R. A. (2021). *Challenges faced by females occupying leadership position at selected South African Higher Education Institutions, South Africa* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Udin, U. (2020). Transformational leadership and organizational commitment: a review of the literature. *Journal of Research and Opinion*, 7(2), 2623-2626.
- Xu, Z., Wang, Y., & Qian, Y. (2025). The design and application of in-depth interviews in primary care research. *Chinese General Practice Journal*, 2(2), 100062. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cgj.2025.100062>
- Xulu, Z. N. (2020). *The role of school principals in building the capacity of the school governing bodies to manage school finance in primary schools* (Doctoral dissertation).

