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N M PHEBENI; Phumuzani Mpofu

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The role of transformational leadership in promoting cultural change in Eswatini High Schools

[1]Naboth Mudavanhu Phebeni & [2]Phumuzani Mpofu

Abstract

This study examined how transformational leadership can foster positive cultural change in Eswatini High School by addressing persistent challenges such as rigid administrative structures, teacher burnout, poor student attendance, and disengaged learning environments. It explored how this leadership style can reshape school culture in Eswatini's unique socio-cultural and economic environment. The study was guided by Bakker and Demerouti's (2006) Job Demands Resources (JD-R) model. The model provided a structured lens to analyse how school leaders balance job demands and available resources to enhance motivation, culture, and educational outcomes. Thematic analysis, a robust method that integrates data, uncovers insights, and formulates patterns and trends, was employed to analyse the collected data, to unearth key leadership practices that contribute to a thriving school environment ensuring the study's rigor and originality. The qualitative study involved interviews with five principals, five deputy principals, fifteen teachers, and fifteen students from five High Schools in Mbabane cluster Eswatini. The study underscores that educational reform is a pressing need, and transformational leadership is a crucial tool that can be used to address this issue. It concluded that when schools adopt transformational leadership practices, they enhance their chance of creating a collaborative community environment where teaching and learning thrive. The potential for positive change through transformational leadership is not just significant but inspiring, offering a beacon of hope for the future of education in Eswatini.

Keywords: *transformational leadership, culture, principals, school*

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About the authors:
[1]Corresponding author. University of Kwazulu Natal, Durban South Africa. PhD in leadership and Educational Management. Email: nabothphebeni2@gmail.com
[2]PhD, Post Doc, The University of Witwatersrand School of Human and Community Development. Department of Psychology. Email: mpofup89@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Several factors have marred school culture, which has impacted the type and quality of education in Eswatini. According to a UNICEF Eswatini Country Office Annual Report 2023, the country's unique socio-economic situation, poverty, and gender inequalities have topped the factors affecting school culture and education. Another significant factor is the need for school leaders to adapt their leadership styles to the country's cultural context, which is crucial for effective leadership. This cultural sensitivity is not just an essential aspect of leadership in Eswatini but a necessary one, and the findings of this study, particularly relevant in this context, can significantly contribute to improving the educational system in Eswatini.

Recent studies have described unfavourable cultures in schools due to the increase in the number of adverse reports, such as the report on the increasing number of principals and deputies appointed without adequate training and experience (Ndzinisa et al., 2024). This has put several leaders in the spotlight on how they run schools and has not absolved them from being accountable to the stakeholders. Although the Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training (2018) outlined in their policy document how they want to send their principals for continuous professional development to empower them, reports from schools suggest that a significant discrepancy exists between the type of leadership in schools, which is often characterized by autocratic type of leadership, and the desired leadership on the ground. This discrepancy underscores the urgent and critical need for transformational leadership in Eswatini's schools, which cannot be overstated in the current educational landscape.

The transformational leadership approach focuses on building a community school environment characterized by open communication, teamwork, and collaboration. This approach is not just a strategy but a necessity to attain high academic excellence in schools (Kotamena et al., 2020). Leaders who embrace community and environment building as attributes of a positive school environment often succeed in articulating their vision, empowering their staff and students, and getting them to buy in to work towards attaining the high expectations they set as a school (Sasan et al., 2023). As such, a school's leadership type is critical in promoting the success of the teachers, students, and the school due to its conducive and supportive environment. This collaborative environment, where community involvement is beneficial and essential for academic success, underscores the immense value of each stakeholder's contribution, making them an integral and valued part of the educational journey.

The aim of this research was to explore the role of transformational leadership in promoting cultural change within Eswatini high schools. It sought to understand how transformational leadership practices can influence the development and implementation of cultural change, shaping the overall educational environment and promoting a positive, progressive school culture. The objectives of the study were: 1) to explore the impact of transformational leadership on teacher motivation, student engagement, and culture in Eswatini high schools; 2) to analyse how school leaders balance the job demands and resources to drive cultural transformation, using the Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R) model as a framework; and 3) to identify key challenges, such as limited resources and resistance to change, that hinder the implementation of transformational leadership in Eswatini High Schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 History and Background of Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership, first conceptualized by Downton (1973) and further developed by Burns (1978), emphasizes leaders' abilities to inspire and motivate their teams to achieve beyond their expectations. Bass (1985) extended this framework by introducing measurable components of success within transformational leadership. At its core, transformational leadership involves leaders setting goals that encourage team members to adopt new behaviors, driven by the leader's strength and vision. White (2024) asserts that team members are motivated to follow due to the leader's compelling personality, which shifts their expectations and perceptions, ultimately inspiring them to change. Despite its roots in the 20th century, transformational leadership remains highly relevant, offering an authentic leadership style that continues to impact organizations today. The theory is relevant in addressing the challenges within Eswatini's educational context where school culture often suffers from either rigid administrative structures or ineffective leadership styles. With its emphasis on collaboration, it has the potential to foster a positive school culture, as principals will be challenged to be open, trustworthy, transparent, and innovative all ingredients capable of driving positive change.

Idealized influence. The idealized influence trait of the transformational leader refers to their ability and capacity to lead by exhibiting a positive example. Kariuki (2021) says such leaders can exert themselves emotionally on their followers because they always try to perform

authentically at the highest level. Workers look up to them as role models for behaviour and conduct in different working areas due to their transparency, trust, honesty, and respect (Langat et al., 2019). The leader exudes charisma, has integrity, and is idolized by the workers who develop trust and find it natural to follow their lead. In the case of Eswatini where leadership is often criticised for its autocratic tendencies, idealised leadership can provide the necessary shift towards more collaborative and inclusive leadership styles.

Idealized leaders lead from the front and strive to uphold respectable organizational behaviour. Their ability to influence acts as an adhesive that cements workers and leaders together, which is critical in promoting change in a school's culture. Idealized transformational leaders do not manipulate their workers to support their vision. However, they work hard to convince the workers that they are the right leaders to take them forward in their everyday work, personal growth, and professional development (Kariuki, 2021). Through their hard work, the workers see a bright future with their leader and are willing to take up responsibilities to support the vision and goals of the school.

Inspirational motivation. Yukl (2010) argues that for a leader to be transformational, they must have inspirational motivation linked to creativity. It contends that if workers are regularly exposed to innovative ideas, successful outcomes, and ongoing support from their leader, they experience this, inspiring them to greatness. Workers do not act on their ideas if inspired; they doubt and see them as failures. Böttger et al. (2017) say that when they see the success of the ideas implemented by their leader, they are motivated to enact their ideas. Leaders who have inspirational motivation in them help turn the fortunes of their workers by turning their ideas into reality.

Several studies have indicated that positive school environments that promote teacher efficacy, community belonging, collaborative relationships, and open communication manifest themselves because of ethical leaders. Such leaders show concern for the school's vision, parental involvement, and teacher and student welfare through modeling appropriate behaviour (Capulso et al., 2021; Stanley et al., 2019). Inspiration changes the individual first, which influences their thinking and decision-making. In the case of Eswatini where teacher and student motivation often lag expectations, principals who inspire, with clear, shared goals, and a compelling vision can significantly impact school culture. Teachers and students who feel inspired are more likely to accept change and strive for excellence (Yukl, 2010; Stanley et al., 2019).

Many prosperous schools worldwide depend heavily on the efficiency of their leaders. Teachers' choices to be meticulous in planning, teaching, and assessing students' work are usually responses to the leaders' motivation and influence. Gribanova and Abeltina (2020) argue that satisfied, motivated teachers and students with higher spirit levels create a desire in leaders to also perform at a high level to maintain high standards of teaching and learning in the school. In schools with inspirational motivators, teachers and students easily accept change from a leader who inspires them (Das et al., 2019). They are friendly and articulate what needs to be done at school, offer clarity on roles that each member must perform, and have passed several tests in their eyes and built goodwill.

Intellectual stimulation. Intellectual stimulation involves a leader's behaviour and how they engage and conduct themselves when trying to create a positive school climate. The leader must create an environment where teachers and students feel comfortable challenging the long-standing beliefs the teachers, students, and other stakeholders may have to effect the change they want in the school (Sandvik et al., 2018). In Eswatini schools, it is crucial to overcome stagnation and foster innovation in teaching and learning.

Research has shown that a leader's ability to intellectually stimulate their team significantly impacts the school's status quo. Sandvik et al. (2018) argue that this stimulation enhances workers' creative ability, innovation, and decision-making. It encourages the exploration of new ideas and injects innovation, thereby transforming the school's outlook. This culture of innovation, fostered by intellectual stimulation, leads to knowledge sharing, increased engagement, worker efficacy, and potential school improvement (Change, 2019). It also prepares workers for future growth and appointment to higher positions, sharpening their critical thinking, pedagogy, professional development, exposure, and decision-making (Moshood et al., 2020).

Individualized consideration. Several studies have concluded that when leaders demonstrate individual consideration for their workers, job satisfaction significantly increases, leading to improved work performance and overall productivity (Chebon, 2019). Leaders who practice individualised consideration are seen through their ability to recognise the unique talents of their workers and invest in them individually. They show and convince their teachers and students that they care and are concerned with their personal and professional well-being and overall development (Ondari et al., 2018). In Eswatini's educational system, where teachers often lack the support and resources they need, individualised consideration can create

a more supportive and empowering environment for both teachers and students. This can foster a sense of ownership, personal growth, and responsibility, which is essential for improving school culture (Chebo, 2019; Reza, 2019).

School leaders can implement individualized consideration by recognizing and utilizing the unique abilities of their teachers, students, and other stakeholders to improve the school (Reza, 2019). For instance, appointments to leadership roles such as head of department, netball coach, curriculum lead, or choir master can be made based on the person's expertise. This ensures that responsibilities are allocated to those best suited to handle them (Khalil & SahibZadah, 2017). In addition, leaders can provide personalized mentoring and support to help teachers and students develop their roles, leveraging their potential.

2.2 Effect of transformational leadership in school cultural dynamics

James Mcgregor Burns introduced transformational leadership in 1978, and Bass developed and popularised the theory in the 1980s. The 1990s saw continued application and refinement of the concept and it provided a specific framework for enhancing old educational policies that considered relationships, staff members, and students invaluable school assets (Senjaya et al., 2020). It prioritized creating a positive environment where all staff and students want to excel and succeed in their work (Rafia et al., 2020). The goal was to recreate the school as a community where all members are empowered, share the same vision, and work hard to achieve the school's goals.

Several studies have highlighted how the school culture significantly drives teachers' and students' commitment, motivation, and job satisfaction to perform. In contrast, a hostile negative environment stifles energy, innovation, and creativity and lowers the morale of the stakeholders, resulting in adverse outcomes (Senjaya & Anindita, 2020). Transformational leadership, often viewed as a variant of shared leadership, aims to help leaders ensure change by preparing and encouraging workers to be ready. Bayraktar and Enez (2020) conclude that employees are encouraged to be innovative and adaptive to changes that can strengthen their engagement, keep them motivated to excel, and improve their performance and that of the school.

A positive environment where teachers and students are involved tremendously improves the goal setting of the school as there is shared interest, collaborative action, and a higher commitment from the stakeholders as they feel significant and valued and are more

likely to exhibit higher job satisfaction (Firmansyah et al., 2022). A greater involvement of teachers and students helps them to relate to the school processes as they understand their roles and how they align with the more excellent vision of the organization. A two-way relationship is created where the principal, teachers, students, and stakeholders invest time to understand the goals and objectives and how they want to achieve them through regular meetings and constructive feedback (Negussie & Hirgo, 2023).

Schools across the world have significantly used transformational leadership as they try to improve their instructional practice. For instance, schools in Qatar have been using the guidance of the Qatar National Development Strategy 2011 -2016 towards attaining the Qatar National Vision 2030 (Qatar National Development Strategy, 2011). The government enunciated this policy to create greater accountability from school leaders. Hasan et al. (2019) highlight that its other purpose was to build constructive school leaders who implement instructional practices, such as differentiated instruction and formative assessment, that can enhance the performance of teachers, students, and overall school outcomes. Qatar's government aims to run schools like a profit-making business model; in schools, it becomes student and school performance. They acknowledge that through transformational leadership, schools can progress as the approach advocates for teacher improvement for performance. When teachers are satisfied, they perform their roles to the best of their abilities (Andriani et al., 2018). The positive outcomes of this approach in Qatar are a testament to its potential for success.

Studies in Jakarta, Indonesia found a positive correlation between transformational leadership and several variables, including job satisfaction, school culture, organizational commitment, and school performance. Education in Indonesia falls under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kementerian or Kemdikbudristek) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kementerian Agama or Kemenag). They believe that transformational leadership is the cornerstone of success in their schools. They describe it as intentional leadership that develops strategic educational plans in supporting schools in different structures, which helps achieve school and national goals (Nuel et al., 2021). The studies revealed that when there is teamwork in schools, and teachers are allocated to teaching subjects of their specialty and lead activities they are qualified and passionate about, optimism spreads across the school, improving its productivity and performance (Ogabo et al., 2021). They concluded that collaboration and involvement of all school stakeholders are beneficial

and crucial for school success. It leaves them confident, committed, positive, expectant, and willing to perform their role, which takes the school to a new height (Ugoani, 2020).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study was underpinned by Baker and Demerouti's (2006) Job Resources Demand Model JD-R, which assumes that workers' performance is determined by psychological factors within the work environment settings related to burnout and work engagement (Lesener et al., 2019). The job demands, which can be physical, mental, or emotional, can cause significant strain on the workers if not managed, potentially leading to adverse outcomes for the organization. Understanding the potential adverse outcomes is crucial, as these can be avoided with effective management of job demands. On the other hand, job resources such as autonomy, support, and available feedback can motivate or demotivate workers, impacting organizational outcomes (Roskams et al., 2021). The model was relevant for this study as it emphasizes the importance of resilient leaders who can deal with different environmental contexts. Their ability to establish a positive school culture, regardless of context, is a fundamental tool for successful teaching and learning.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of the study

The study’s ontological assumption was that transformational leaders influence the school's culture regardless of context. As it uses a qualitative approach, it is situated within the interpretive paradigm, a significant design that empowers the researcher to consider multiple perspectives and truth versions from the participant’s interpersonal views obtained from their interactions (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

3.2 Site and Sampling Methods

This explorative study used the interpretive design, which allowed the researcher to identify principals' roles as transformational leaders in changing a school's culture (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the selection of participants with direct experience and insights for the study. The sample consisted of five principals, five deputy principals, ten teachers, and ten students who were purposefully

selected based on their leadership roles, teaching experience, or direct engagement in school activities that contribute to cultural transformation (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The selection of schools assumed that transformational leadership could foster a positive school culture, making these institutions suitable for studying the phenomenon. Three variables were considered in selecting the participants. Firstly, they were selected if they held leadership positions and a principal or deputy principal. Secondly, they needed to have at least three years of teaching experience, and finally, if they were students who were actively involved in school leadership or cultural initiatives. To ensure the study focused on participants with relevant insights, individuals with less than one year of experience in their respective roles and students who had no direct involvement in school improvement initiatives were excluded. The sample size was guided by Cresswell's (2014) qualitative research sampling recommendations. This helped to ensure that the number of participants aligned with the depth and breadth required for thematic analysis.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

The study used a semi-structured interview guide to collect data from the research participants. The questions were open-ended and customized to allow the collection of comprehensive data (Ruslin et al., 2022). Although the researcher maintained the interview structure, this flexible method allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions to understand better the participants' perceptions, reflections, and experiences of school culture and leadership type (Mashuri et al., 2022).

3.4 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Thematic analysis was used to organize and process the data collected. The study applied the interpretive thematic analysis (ITA), which deconstructed a large amount of data into significant concepts (Valtakoski, 2019). Coding and indexing of the data transcripts were created and labeled according to the important relationships that emerged. Relevant data was gathered, compared, refined, and put under each emerging theme until a consistent thematic map was evident (Naeem et al., 2023). To enhance the reliability of the study, the researcher adhered to the principle of data saturation where data collection and coding continued until no new themes emerged, and patterns of insights emerged from the analysis. This ensured that all identified themes that represented the experiences of participants were included. Any

inconsistencies in the data were further discussed through peer debriefing with experts to arrive at a mutual understanding.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The University of KwaZulu Natal Research Ethics Committee approved the study before the researchers contacted or involved any potential participants. This was followed by crucial permission from the Ministry of Education and Training Eswatini, the gatekeeper of schools in the Mbabane District, where the study was conducted. The researcher visited schools to obtain permission from principals and speak with deputy principals and teachers as participants to get their informed consent. The rights of the participants were explained to them, and their privacy was a top priority throughout the research process. The research was ethically conducted, and the rights and privacy of the participants were fully respected (Denscombe, 2021).

4. Findings and Discussion

The following are the themes generated from the study on the practices and strategies employed by transformational leaders to facilitate cultural change in Eswatini high schools.

Creating a shared vision and collaborative culture. Principals (P), deputies (DP), teachers (T), and students (S) all agreed that transformational leadership, through its emphasis on shared values and participatory decision-making, fosters a shared vision that is instrumental in building a positive school culture. For instance, deputies, teachers, and students expressed that...

> "*Our school culture encompasses our shared values. It makes us one community. When we contribute to everyday school decisions, we feel valued. As students, we feel excited when the school takes the output of our meetings with school prefects and implements the ideas."* T1, T2, T5, T8, T10, T13, T15, DP1, DP2, S1, S5

> *"Our teachers have indicated that they feel empowered when we engage them professionally in big decisions that affect their work and the overall running of the school. When engaged, we think part and parcel of the school's vision and will work hard to achieve the goals."* P3, P2

Leaders who clearly articulate the school's vision enhance school culture by including their teachers and students in decision-making. The changes in school culture resulting from this shared decision making and vision, go beyond what the participants reported as their perceptions. In schools where participatory decision making was implemented, teachers expressed feeling more empowered and triggered increased collaboration within departments. Teachers in these schools reported an improvement in teaching practices and student engagement, in addition to feeling more supported in their continuous professional development.

In addition, students in collaborative environments highlighted excitement when their suggestions in meetings with school prefects were taken onboard and incorporated into school plans. They indicated that, in their schools, this feedback loop has created a sense of ownership of school activities resulting in their increased participation. This significantly accompanied a reduction in absenteeism and a marked improvement in academic outcomes as students feel more valued and integrated into the school systems. Collaboration gains leaders the support of everyone, which enables them to set high expectations for the school (Sasan, 2023). For a school vision to be successful, it needs participatory decision-making with leaders appreciating that crafting the vision of a school is a joint process where all staff members and students will need to be involved in creating a strong synergy in the school (Wilson Heenan et al., 2023).

DP1, DP3, DP4, and DP5 confirmed how lack of participation can lead to a dysfunctional school and build negative energy in the school environment.

> "*When we make unilateral decisions, we remove a critical factor in the school's success. The lack of professional interaction and closed atmosphere eradicate connections around the school and our community. We often struggle to mobilize resources as a school to push for the curriculum or policy change as there is a lack of support due to a lack of involvement."*

Studies on transformational leadership have reported that successful leaders meet regularly with their staff and students. Their staff appreciates them because they see them do things and involve them in running the school's activities, fostering a sense of community. They create time for one-on-one meetings with teachers and students and offer personal and professional support, encouraging members to participate in school activities (Li & Liu, 2022). The emotional well-being of teachers, students, and the community is promoted when leaders

create an open environment where all stakeholders feel included and valued and have a genuine role to play (Graham et al., 2022).

Setting high expectations for the school. As educational and instructional leaders, principals play a significant role in shaping institutions' direction, culture, and priorities. Their influence is crucial in setting and maintaining a school with high standards for teachers and students (Culduz, 2024).

> *"As instructional leaders, it is our duty and responsibility to give direction and leadership to the teachers, students, and parents. Setting school standards usually begins with engaging all stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents, to communicate and implement the school goals. We work hard to involve all staff members in our vision, helping them appreciate what we are trying to achieve and the steps we want to follow. When we do it well, we get their buy-in, which is not just a sign of agreement but a source of motivation and inspiration. This energizes them, and everyone feels integral to the school's success."* P1, P2, DP3, DP5, P4

Leaders who sell the school vision to stakeholders have a higher chance of setting higher standards for their school. This is because they can focus on and hold teachers, students, and other workers accountable for upholding the school's reputation (Culduz, 2024). As change agents, school leaders are responsible for setting an environment that promotes interaction and dialogue on professional matters that affect the school's running. Mincu (2022) says that when a vision is set through teamwork, it is viewed as everyone's vision, and all members strive to see it through, feeling a sense of responsibility and commitment to the shared goal. School expectations are communicated clearly through continuous professional development and regular feedback on performance. The result of these practices is an increased commitment from teachers, who feel empowered and accountable for achieving the school's goals.

> *"Part of our role requires us to be change agents responsible for instilling the best instructional practices in the school. We try to get involved in curriculum development, school pedagogy, monitoring teaching and learning, and general teacher and student discipline. Sometimes, we struggle with this function because of work overload, while in other cases, lack of adequate training impedes our ability to keep up to date with changing pedagogy. High school expectations are upheld when we allow ourselves to lead or support some functions."* DP1, DP3, P2, P4, P5

Teachers and students achieve higher school outcomes in an open and caring environment. They perform highly because they feel supported, motivated, and trusted. According to Freed et al. (2021), the regular support and feedback they receive about their teaching approaches, students' work, and overall classroom management empower and encourage them to improve so the school can have high outcomes. Apathy develops when they feel neglected, undervalued, and less trusted (Freed et al., 2021).

> *"Performing is easier when we have all the necessary resources. A principal or deputy is also beneficial in developing the school curriculum. They appreciate our needs and resources and support us with continuous professional development to improve teaching and learning. Regular staff and departmental meetings to discuss school best practices in the classroom equip us with improved methods and assessment practices."* T1, T2, T3, T5, T6, T7, T8, T12, T13, T15

The assertions are evident in positive trends in academic performance and a continuous culture of improvement in schools managed by transformational leaders as suggested in the excerpts. Teachers in these schools reported feeling more motivated to improve their instructional practices, as they are happy with the regular, constructive feedback, and fully embrace the standards and expectations set by their leaders as they are happier with their alignment to their professional goals.

Several studies have concluded that transformational leadership can influence the performance of teachers and students in the school. When teachers and students are adequately supported with relevant resources for their learning, their creativity and innovation are enhanced (Ripki et al., 2020). Teachers need to be supported with their teaching methods and use of technology to raise the school's standards. Andriani et al. (2018) recommend using flexible teaching approaches to develop well-rounded students who can pass examinations and take up social responsibilities using what they learned in school.

Creating a community. Transformational leaders, particularly principals, are crucial in building their schools into communities. They must ensure that the school's educational policies align with societal needs and can help children solve the world's problems. Dogaru and Anghel (2019) highlight that the first step begins with the principal taking specific actions or strategies to create an environment where teachers, students, staff members, and parents feel comfortable working and contributing to the school's success.

> *"Teachers and students spend most of their time at school. They work hand in hand with other staff members to support the school's activities. Teachers are responsible for planning and teaching lessons and guiding and supervising students. As leaders, we have a duty of care. We must create an open environment where teaching and learning can occur. Open communication, trust, collaboration, empowerment, and teamwork must exist. The students, teachers, and parents must feel accepted and coexist as a community. The school and the community must have a bi-directional, interdependent relationship."* P1, P2, P5, DP2, DP5

Teachers, students, and parents should be able to identify with their school. It should be a place that caters to their psychological needs. This sense of belonging fosters the development of shared norms and values and a collective pursuit of common goals (Abdullah & Ramleea, 2016). When schools cultivate a strong sense of community, students find developing their emotional and social skills easier, leading to improved academic performance. Teachers, in turn, feel more supported in their work and are inspired to raise the school's standards. Students look forward to attending schools where they feel safe, have healthy friendships, and can excel in their academic studies.

> *"I look forward to attending school when I feel my needs will be met. Learning is easier when the school can provide all the resources we need. We are happy when the school principal, deputy, and teachers talk and listen to us. We are integrated into the management of school activities through our school prefects and leaders. They act as a bridge between the school leadership and us. Our parents know what is happening at school and support the school during open days, sports days, and fundraising events."* S1, S4, S5, S7, S9, S12, S13, S14

School leaders need to take responsibility for educating children in a positive environment so that they can affiliate with the school. Students get more involved with their school activities and refrain from poor habits such as drug abuse and absenteeism. This also solidifies their relationship with the parents, making the school a community (Pop, 2021). When students and teachers have a sense of community, they are satisfied with set goals and increase their engagement in teaching and learning to improve their outcomes. Positive relationships among all the members, characterized by support and respect, solidify the concept

of community as there is fairness, high learning value, concern for others, school spirit, and personal accountability.

Schools become communities when leaders prioritize collaboration among teachers, students, and staff and establish consistent rules across the school. However, the cornerstone of this community is open, regular communication between the school and the parents. Dogaru and Anghel (2019) conclude that transparency is crucial for the success of any school. When schools and parents work together to support student learning, students feel more connected and engaged.

Empowering others. In a collaborative effort, transformational leaders share their future school vision and work with teachers, staff, and students to achieve it. This inclusive approach motivates them and increases their job esteem, professional practice, and organizational commitment (Flaherty, 2018).

> *"We derive much motivation from being part of the school planning process. This makes us the fabric of the school. Instead of being members of the structure, we help create and implement decisions that guide the school's direction and improve instructional practice for the school."* DP1, DP3, DP5, T2, T4, T7, S3, S5, S6, S7, S10, S11, S13

Principals have a significant role to play in the school, and they must guide and support the development of the individual roles of all their workers. This ensures that the contribution of each member is valued as they are integral to the school's success. They appoint teachers and students to positions where they assume leadership responsibilities based on their abilities and skills. Teachers can grow to become head of department, director of sport, curriculum leader, and teacher in charge of drama. students can be school prefects; some are appointed head boy or head girl.

The data indicates that principals have made a concerted effort to empower both teachers and students by involving them in decision-making processes and appointing them to positions of responsibility. This approach has a positive impact on the school culture. The appointment of teachers to positions of responsibility has increased their morale and given them more autonomy to make decisions. Responses from the students on the other hand showed their increased engagement in extracurricular activities with some taking leadership roles. This has contributed to a more cohesive school environment.

> *"We are there to help run the school when responsibilities are genuinely allocated to us. When principals consult, train, and appoint us to positions in the school, our morale doubles. The school is dysfunctional when one person makes all the decisions, and all of us await their following action. This creates a disconnection within the school structure. Deputy principals, Heads of Department, subject leaders, and sports coaches all act as bridges between their department and principal, creating a system in the school."* T2, T4, T5, T7, S2, S3, S6, S8, S10, S13, S14

Teachers and students feel inspired and recognized when the principal commends their efforts. They thrive on being more creative, feel stimulated in their development, and are challenged to improve their work engagement, as their social and emotional mindset, which helps them perform at work, is in a good space (Schechter et al., 2024). Transformational leaders who nurture and support the autonomy of their workers drive the workers and encourage them, which is essential for school success. Significant research has been done on teacher and student engagement in the school. Higher levels of engagement have been found to stimulate higher levels of motivation and performance in the school (Davis et al., 2024).

A positive school climate empowers teachers, staff, and students. It challenges them to become competent and reassures them of their significance in shaping the school's culture. Prastyani et al. (2024) highlight that the principal is responsible for shaping the school climate so that all staff feel connected and engage professionally in an environment supporting productive outcomes that spur growth.

> *"I work better and with a positive mind when the school climate is favorable." Classrooms are our everyday offices; we need to feel comfortable and supported. We feel empowered when we have the autonomy to make crucial decisions and direct the students in their learning. When principals give us a leading role in the classroom and support us with pedagogy and discipline, the quality of learning in the school improves."* T1, T2, T4, T6, T8, T11, T12, T15

Teachers have also highlighted how the autonomy given to them in making decisions and classroom management, in addition to leading pedagogical issues has improved their teaching practices, which has helped with classroom discipline, and student absenteeism and fostered a positive school culture with improved student outcomes.

Principals must acknowledge teachers' leadership role in directing student learning in the classroom. Teachers lead inside the classroom, and their pedagogical leadership is extended

outside the classroom (Capulso et al., 2021; Gul et al., 2022). As they spend extended amounts of time with students, they become figureheads to students regarding their learning in the classroom and their link and connection with the community. This creates healthy relationships where teachers can get the best out of their students. In contrast, students can challenge teachers to use more creative approaches that enhance their understanding and improve their performance in school (Reid et al., 2022).

5. Conclusion

This study suggests that transformational leadership has the potential to foster cultural change in Eswatini High Schools. Evidence in the study suggests that this could be achieved through improvements in teacher and student engagement, collaboration, and building a school community. However, the findings show that more work needs to be done in these areas for any positive changes to be realised as much of the transformation in Eswatini High Schools is still in its infancy and requires a long-term commitment for meaningful change to be realised. Although transformational leadership has been viewed as a powerful tool in motivating and empowering school stakeholders, its implementation in Eswatini needs to be supported by addressing significant challenges befalling the country such as limited resources, and resistance to change which have entrenched the systems and practices in the country. Bar these challenges, the study still views transformational leadership as an approach capable of creating an inclusive and collaborative school culture. It should, however, not be viewed as the panacea but should be an approach that principals can adapt to their context to achieve cultural transformation that is meaningful and sustainable in schools.

For schools to produce quality results school principals should strive to create a culture that embodies collaboration, growth, and a sense of community. They can achieve this by engaging their teachers, students, and the wider school community. Principals must encourage teamwork and regular dialogue with stakeholders focusing on the school's mission, vision, and objectives. They must establish and set high standards in their schools and support teachers and staff through staff development and training so that they keep abreast with the changes. The Ministry of Education and Training must develop structured programs for training school leaders before appointment to equip them with skills and tools that support their work. They could also introduce rewards and recognition for schools that demonstrate cultural and academic improvements through transformational leadership. They can also establish

mechanisms that help them monitor and assess the effectiveness of school leadership in fostering cultural change and academic achievement.

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ORCID

Naboth Mudavanhu Phebeni – https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2016-8919

Phumuzani Mpofu - https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5671-9263

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