

RELATIONAL AND STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS OF SELF-LEADERSHIP AMONG PRINCIPALS AND HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This study explored the relational and strategic dimensions of self-leadership among principals and heads of departments in public high schools in Bindura District, Zimbabwe, within increasingly demanding educational contexts marked by limited resources, policy shifts, administrative burdens, and declining teacher morale. While previous leadership studies have largely concentrated on managerial and instructional functions, limited attention has been paid to how school leaders enact self-leadership through relational engagement and strategic responsiveness in everyday school practice. Grounded in Manz's Self-Leadership Theory and Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory, the study adopted an interpretivist qualitative case study approach to examine how school leaders practise and experience self-leadership in challenging school environments. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with twelve purposively selected participants, comprising four principals and eight heads of departments from four public high schools. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, was employed to analyse the data. The findings revealed that relational and strategic self-leadership was enacted through effective communication, empathy, visionary thinking, adaptability, goal orientation, and role modelling. These practices enabled school leaders to foster trust, articulate institutional goals, navigate contextual challenges, and positively shape school culture. However, the study also identified challenges associated with emotional labour, performance expectations, and continuous adaptation within resource-constrained settings. The study contributes to educational leadership scholarship by broadening understandings of self-leadership beyond self-regulation to include relational influence and strategic adaptability. The study recommends leadership development programmes that strengthen communication, empathy, and adaptive leadership competencies in school leadership preparation and practice.

Keywords: adaptability; communication; empathy; role modelling; school leadership; self-leadership; visionary leadership

Introduction

School leadership remains a critical determinant of organisational effectiveness, teacher performance, and learner achievement within contemporary educational systems. Increasingly complex educational environments characterised by policy reform, resource constraints, technological change, accountability pressures, and social transformation require school leaders who are capable not only of managing institutions administratively,

but also of leading relationally and strategically (Areri, 2025; Delport et al., 2021). In many African educational contexts, including Zimbabwe, school leaders operate under challenging conditions marked by inadequate infrastructure, shortages of teaching resources, declining staff morale, overcrowded classrooms, and heightened public expectations regarding educational quality. These conditions place significant pressure on school leaders to maintain organisational stability, inspire staff commitment, and respond adaptively to changing educational realities. Consequently, leadership effectiveness increasingly depends on leaders' ability to regulate themselves while simultaneously influencing, motivating, and supporting others within complex institutional environments. Against this backdrop, self-leadership has emerged as an important theoretical and practical framework for understanding how leaders influence their own thinking, behaviour, and motivation in pursuit of organisational goals (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006). While early self-leadership scholarship focused primarily on intrapersonal regulation, recent studies increasingly recognise that self-leadership also possesses relational and strategic dimensions that become visible through communication, empathy, role modelling, adaptability, and visionary influence (Da Fonseca et al., 2022; Shek et al., 2023). Within educational settings, school leaders are required to communicate institutional vision effectively, build supportive relationships, demonstrate empathy, respond flexibly to change, and model ethical conduct in ways that inspire trust and organisational commitment. These relational and strategic enactments of self-leadership are particularly important in under-resourced schooling contexts where formal authority alone is insufficient for sustaining effective school management.

Despite the recognised importance of effective school leadership, public schools in Zimbabwe continue to experience significant organisational and educational challenges that undermine institutional effectiveness and learner performance. School leaders frequently operate within contexts characterised by inadequate resources, limited leadership preparation, declining staff morale, curriculum changes, administrative overload, and increasing accountability demands (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2023). Traditional leadership approaches that rely predominantly on bureaucratic authority and hierarchical control have proven increasingly inadequate in addressing these complex and rapidly changing educational realities (Tenha, 2022). Contemporary schools require leaders who are capable of building trust, communicating effectively, motivating staff, responding adaptively to change, and fostering collaborative organisational cultures. However, many school leadership development programmes continue to prioritise technical and managerial competencies while paying insufficient attention to the relational and strategic dimensions of leadership practice. Furthermore, although self-leadership has gained increasing attention within organisational scholarship, existing research has predominantly conceptualised self-leadership as an internal process focused on self-regulation, self-discipline, and individual behavioural management (Inam et al., 2023; Neck & Houghton, 2006). Empirical evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa reflects a similar trend. For example, Delport et al. (2021), in a South African study of school principals, examined self-leadership primarily in relation to personality traits, self-regulation, and school performance, with limited attention to how self-leadership is enacted through relational interactions with teachers and other stakeholders. Similarly, Da Fonseca et al. (2022) investigated the influence of self-awareness on leadership effectiveness in South

Africa and largely conceptualised self-leadership as an individual cognitive and behavioural capacity rather than a relational process. Within Zimbabwe, Tenha's (2022) study on school head leadership practices focused predominantly on leadership behaviours associated with school performance and pass rates, without explicitly examining how leaders translate self-leadership into relational influence through communication, empathy, role modelling, or strategic adaptability. These studies have contributed significantly to understanding leadership effectiveness; however, they largely privilege intrapersonal dimensions of self-leadership and provide limited insight into its relational enactment within educational settings.

Limited attention has been given to how self-leadership becomes externally enacted through relational influence, communication, empathy, strategic vision, adaptability, and role modelling within educational contexts. In Zimbabwean public schools specifically, little is known about how principals and heads of departments practise and experience relational and strategic self-leadership while navigating challenging organisational conditions. Existing studies have focused more broadly on school leadership and management without examining how self-leadership principles shape leaders' interactions, influence, and strategic direction within schools. Consequently, there remains limited contextual understanding of how relational and strategic dimensions of self-leadership operate within Zimbabwean public secondary schools.

Although international scholarship increasingly acknowledges the importance of relational leadership practices in organisational effectiveness, limited research has explored how self-leadership is enacted relationally and strategically within educational settings, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. Existing self-leadership studies have largely concentrated on intrapersonal regulation, individual agency, self-motivation, and performance enhancement within corporate and educational environments (Aquino et al., 2025; Dilber et al., 2022). Consequently, insufficient attention has been paid to the ways in which school leaders enact self-leadership through communication, empathy, visionary thinking, adaptability, and role modelling in their day-to-day interactions with staff and learners. In Zimbabwean public schools specifically, there remains little empirical evidence regarding how principals and heads of departments translate internal self-regulatory processes into visible relational influence and strategic leadership practices under conditions of resource scarcity, policy uncertainty, and increasing accountability demands. This represents a significant contextual and conceptual gap because effective school leadership in such environments requires not only self-management but also the capacity to influence, motivate, and support others through relational engagement. Therefore, this study addresses an important gap in the literature by examining how relational and strategic dimensions of self-leadership are enacted among principals and heads of departments in public high schools in Bindura District, Zimbabwe. The rationale for this study emerged from the growing need to strengthen sustainable, relational, and adaptive leadership practices within Zimbabwean public schools operating under increasingly complex educational conditions. Given the limitations of purely managerial approaches to school leadership, there is a need to understand how school leaders influence organisational culture, motivate staff, communicate vision, and adapt strategically to contextual challenges through self-leadership practices.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to explore the relational and strategic dimensions of self-leadership among principals and heads of departments in public high schools in Bindura District, Zimbabwe.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by Self-Leadership Theory (Manz, 1986) and Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1998). The integration of these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how school leaders regulate their own behaviour while simultaneously influencing and motivating others within complex educational environments.

Self-Leadership Theory posits that individuals influence and direct themselves through behaviour-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought patterns in order to achieve desired outcomes (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006). Behaviour-focused strategies include self-goal setting, self-observation, self-reward, and self-correction, which enable individuals to regulate their actions and maintain performance. Constructive thought strategies involve positive self-talk, mental imagery, and reflective thinking that support motivation, resilience, and effective decision-making. Within educational leadership contexts, self-leadership provides a useful lens for understanding how principals and heads of departments manage their emotions, behaviours, and professional responsibilities while responding to challenging organisational conditions. Although Self-Leadership Theory traditionally focuses on intrapersonal regulation, contemporary scholarship suggests that self-leadership also has relational and strategic implications. School leaders who effectively regulate themselves are better positioned to communicate organisational goals, demonstrate empathy, model professional behaviour, and respond adaptively to changing educational demands. Consequently, self-leadership extends beyond personal management to influence interpersonal relationships and organisational effectiveness.

Transformational Leadership Theory complements Self-Leadership Theory by explaining how leaders inspire, motivate, and influence followers to achieve collective goals and organisational improvement (Bass, 1998). The theory is underpinned by four core dimensions: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. Idealised influence refers to leaders serving as ethical role models, while inspirational motivation involves articulating a compelling vision that encourages commitment and shared purpose. Intellectual stimulation encourages innovation, creativity, and problem-solving, whereas individualised consideration focuses on supporting and developing followers according to their unique needs and circumstances. The relevance of Transformational Leadership Theory to this study lies in its emphasis on relational influence and strategic leadership practices. Communication, empathy, visionary thinking, adaptability, and role modelling, which emerged as key dimensions of self-leadership in this study, closely reflect the principles of transformational leadership. Through effective communication and visionary leadership,

school leaders inspire commitment and organisational direction. Through empathy and individualised consideration, they foster trust and supportive relationships, while role modelling and adaptability strengthen credibility, resilience, and organisational responsiveness.

The integration of Self-Leadership Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory provides the conceptual foundation for this study. Self-leadership explains the internal processes through which school leaders regulate their thoughts, behaviours, and motivations, while transformational leadership explains how these internal capacities are translated into relational influence and strategic action within schools. Together, the theories support the argument that effective school leadership involves both self-management and the ability to positively influence others. This integrated framework guided the exploration of communication, empathy, goal setting and visionary thinking, agile leadership, and role modelling as relational and strategic dimensions of self-leadership among principals and heads of departments in public high schools in Bindura District, Zimbabwe.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to generate rich, detailed, and context-sensitive understandings of the relational and strategic enactment of self-leadership within school management contexts. Qualitative research is suitable for studies that seek to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, meanings, and interpretations of social phenomena within natural settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The approach enabled the researcher to examine how school leaders understood and practised communication, empathy, visionary thinking, agility, and role modelling as outward expressions of self-leadership. Furthermore, the qualitative approach allowed participants to articulate their leadership experiences in their own words, thereby generating nuanced insights into how relational influence and strategic leadership practices operate within resource-constrained Zimbabwean public schools. The study employed a qualitative case study design to facilitate an in-depth exploration of self-leadership as relational influence and strategic enactment within a bounded educational setting. Annamalah (2024) explains that a case study design enables researchers to investigate complex social and organisational phenomena within real-life contexts. The bounded system for this study consisted of four purposively selected public high schools in Bindura District, Zimbabwe. The case study design was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to explore how school leaders communicate vision, build trust through empathy, adapt to changing conditions, and model professional conduct within specific institutional environments. The design further provided contextual depth and enabled the researcher to examine how relational and strategic self-leadership practices are shaped by organisational realities, resource limitations, and evolving educational demands within Zimbabwean schools.

The population for the study comprised school management personnel in public high schools within Bindura District, Zimbabwe, specifically principals and heads of departments, who occupy key leadership positions within schools. Purposive criterion

sampling was utilised to select participants who possessed direct experience and relevant knowledge concerning leadership practices within school management contexts (Musundire, 2025). The final sample consisted of twelve participants drawn from four purposively selected public high schools, including four principals and eight heads of departments. Participants were selected based on their leadership responsibilities, experience in school management, involvement in communication and decision-making processes, and familiarity with institutional leadership challenges within Zimbabwean public schools. The inclusion of both principals and heads of departments enabled the study to capture diverse perspectives on relational and strategic self-leadership practices, including communication, empathy, visionary thinking, agility, and role modelling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which served as the primary method of data generation for the study. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provide flexibility for probing participants' responses while maintaining consistency across interview sessions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The interviews enabled participants to describe their experiences, perceptions, and understandings of relational and strategic self-leadership within their school management roles. Interview questions focused specifically on communication practices, empathetic leadership, goal setting, visionary thinking, adaptive leadership, and role modelling within schools. A total of five semi-structured interview questions were used to guide the interviews. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, depending on the depth of participants' responses and the need for follow-up probing. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accurate capture of responses and to minimise the risk of data loss. The interviews were conducted in English, which was the common professional language used by all participants within their school environments. Following data collection, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcription process involved repeated listening to the recordings to ensure accuracy and completeness. Transcripts were subsequently reviewed alongside the original recordings to verify the correctness of the transcribed data before the commencement of thematic analysis. The use of semi-structured interviews further enabled the researcher to explore participants' relational experiences, leadership strategies, and contextual challenges in greater depth while allowing room for elaboration and reflection. Interviews were conducted within participants' school environments, thereby generating authentic and contextually grounded data regarding self-leadership enactment in Zimbabwean public schools.

The interview data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to identify, organise, interpret, and analyse recurring patterns and themes emerging from participants' narratives. The analysis process involved familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analytical report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this process, the study identified key themes relating to relational and strategic dimensions of self-leadership, including communication, empathy, goal setting and visionary thinking, agile leadership, and role modelling. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to generate deeper interpretive insights into how school leaders translate internal self-

regulation into visible relational influence and strategic leadership practices within educational settings. Ethical principles were carefully observed throughout the study to ensure the dignity, confidentiality, and protection of all participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of data collection. Permission to conduct the study was also secured from the Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and the participating schools. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without negative consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms and participant codes were used in place of participants' names, and all research data were securely stored. The researcher further ensured that the study did not expose participants to physical, emotional, or professional harm during the research process.

Limitation of the Study

Although the study generated valuable insights into relational and strategic self-leadership practices within school management, several limitations were acknowledged. The study was limited to four public high schools within Bindura District, Zimbabwe, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts or geographical settings. The study focused exclusively on principals and heads of departments, thereby excluding the perspectives of teachers, learners, parents, and other educational stakeholders who may have offered additional insights into relational leadership practices within schools. Furthermore, because the study adopted a qualitative case study design, the findings were context-specific and not intended for statistical generalisation. In addition, the reliance on self-reported interview data may have introduced social desirability bias, as participants may have presented themselves and their leadership practices in favourable ways during interviews. Despite these limitations, the study provided rich and contextually grounded insights into communication, empathy, visionary leadership, agility, and role modelling as relational and strategic dimensions of self-leadership within Zimbabwean public school management contexts.

Findings

The findings and discussion section outlines and interprets the data obtained through semi-structured interviews with principals and heads of department. Drawing on participants' experiences and perspectives, the discussion engages relevant theoretical and empirical literature to explore how intrapersonal self-leadership practices shape school management within selected public high schools in Bindura District, Zimbabwe. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants are identified using participant codes, where "P" denotes principals and "H" denotes heads of department.

1. Communication

The data confirms the different forms of communication among the public schools in the district and the importance of communication in a work context, such as a school. Six out of the 12 identified communication as a skill necessary for self-leaders. One participant explained that communication forms the basis of leadership practice:

...it starts from the communication aspect, how I communicate with my subordinates and my superior because I feed into a system. (P4)

Another participant echoed this view, noting that communication is essential in maintaining good working relationships:

We also have to be good communicators to our colleagues. (H6)

For participant H2, communication was directly tied to promoting the shared vision of the department:

...the department appreciates that they have to be well informed of the departmental motto, the vision and the like...

Another participant pointed out that open communication helps counter misinformation and reduces the power of the grapevine:

You also need to be a good communicator. You need to communicate with your subordinates so that they know what is happening in my department. (H8)

Participant H1 described that meetings are a platform of providing feedback to departmental members:

We hold the staff meetings regularly... so that we give feedback on the past term and we also set objectives for the next one... So it is through communication that staff members also give feedback in order to understand what has been transpiring in the department....

The practical side of communication was also highlighted, with meetings seen as a key platform for feedback and goal setting:

Having meetings through platforms formed for a particular event with teachers involved being in that WhatsApp group. So you send messages through that group just to update members of the group. (P3)

2. Empathy

Six out of 12 participants acknowledged empathy as an essential skill for self-leaders. The data indicates the importance of human relations between self-leaders and their subordinates. A participant observed the need to have feelings for their subordinates:

And we also need to learn that relational aspect. Apart from us being supervisors and wanting people to meet my deadlines, it's that relational aspect. We've got to know each other. Whenever somebody's got a problem, we've got to be rallying behind them and giving them the full support as family... (P4)

Another participant highlighted the need to show empathy when you are a leader:

You also need to have some empathy within you. Feel for your members in the department but have a firm grip. When approached by individuals, you don't have to follow everything they recommend to you, but you use empathy where it is needed)..... (H7).

A further view was that empathy means treating the department like a family and providing support during personal challenges:

When we are working, we are a family; we assist each other when we have social problems. I should feel for them (teachers) when they have personal issues as a caring HOD. (H1)

This view was corroborated by participant P1, who explained that many staff face personal difficulties, and leaders need to sympathise with them:

My staff go through so many personal issues; I sympathise with them all the time.

Another participant noted that empathy also involves the ability to relate well to people with diverse characters and backgrounds:

You need to be very good with people. Because you have to deal with different people and characters. (H8)

This finding was further substantiated by participant H4, who described how the HOD conducts briefings to check the feelings of his teachers:

From time to time, I have informal briefings with teachers in my department just to hear how they are feeling, and I normally respond with words of encouragement.

3 Goal Setting and Visionary Thinking

A prominent finding that emerged from the data was evidence of goal setting and visionary thinking from school leaders. One participant explained that leadership requires clarity of purpose, stressing that knowing what to achieve and working systematically towards it are central to raising school outcomes:

You just have to look at what you want to achieve, the goals and objectives – for example, at a school you make sure you achieve your key result areas – you achieve them and you get good results for the school. (P1)

Extending this focus on results, another participant described personal goals that included not only improving outcomes but also addressing resource challenges, such as pushing for a science lab to give learners hands-on experience:

My personal goal is one – to get good results at the end of the year. Number two is to address challenges; like, at our school particularly, we have challenges in the science department – we don't have labs... At the end of the year, our form 4 learners are supposed to write a practical paper, but they don't have the hands-on practice. They don't have the apparatus to use. So, one of my aims is every day I

will be pushing the admin to have something like a lab for the students so that our learners have hands-on experience. (H4)

Beyond improving results, another participant aimed to strengthen the department by securing adequate teaching resources, such as textbooks and learner materials:

The current pass rate, yes, it's pleasing, but we still wanted to improve the pass rate of the department and to have it adequately resourced in terms of textbooks and in terms of resources that are needed by our learners. (H6)

Others expressed more ambitious personal goals. One participant's objective was to make the school excel in every respect and gain wider recognition:

..... My personal goals as an HOD – I always want to achieve the best. The best results, the best for our learners, the best for the school. I want to put our school on the map in everything (H8).

This vision of excellence was echoed by another participant, who aspired to position the school as the most sought-after in the district:

My personal vision is to make this school become the school of first choice in the district. If a parent is looking for a place, they will choose us. (P3)

Some goals were tied to curriculum development, such as expanding subject offerings to the advanced level:

If you look at the subjects in the Humanities department, we are offering 3 of them up to the advanced level, and my main goal as an HOD is to have heritage studies offered up to the advanced level so that we have all the subjects offered up to the advanced level. (H2)

Others looked beyond their own schools, aspiring to raise academic standards more broadly. One participant described a goal of improving science education across the entire province:

My personal goal is just to improve the learning of sciences in this whole province in general. (H5)

For some, however, goal setting was described more simply as a process of setting clear targets for oneself:

The goals that you set for yourself. (P4)
You have to set targets. (P2)

4 Agile Leadership

The data revealed agile leadership as an important aspect of self-leadership, helping school leaders respond to challenges in dynamic contexts. One participant described this simply as the ability to cope with situations and handle them as they arise:

Being able to cope with the situation and handling situations as they arise are important. (P1)

For one leader, agility meant avoiding stagnation and making sure the school adjusts policies in response to emerging needs:

My school should not be stagnant in its policies. My school should look at the future... (P2)

To strengthen capacity within his department, one participant encouraged teachers to improve their qualifications and adopt more learner-centred teaching methods:

I have also encouraged teachers without pedagogy to enrol in pedagogy so that they can apply it within the teaching and learning process for our students. I have realised that the lecture method is not enough; teachers should not just pour information on passive students, but they should also make use of learner-centred methodologies. (H1)

Another participant emphasised the importance of flexibility, noting that leadership and planning must adapt as circumstances change:

With time you can't just have one vision throughout. At times because of changing circumstances, you shift the goal post to face another direction. (P3)

The evolving nature of educational leadership was also highlighted, with one participant describing how schools now engage in policy influence and curriculum development:

The teaching of nowadays is changing a bit because we are now writing papers and influencing policy. Of late, they [authorities] tend to listen because at times when we put our submissions through the system, certain things are now changing at grassroots levels. So this is what we do. We've seen the curriculums changing after every five years. We also do some input. We also tell them what works and what doesn't work, and they listen. We are saying for schools, there is no one size fits all. (P4)

Another participant stressed the need for improvisation, particularly when schools face resource shortages that could disadvantage learners in examinations:

In this current situation, our learners are now writing paper three, and we find that schools have got challenges. We don't have enough resources to provide the necessary equipment so that learners have hands-on experience. So if you don't improvise, it means your learners will lag behind and they will not have practical experience. They will not be able to write the paper for the exam. So we have to improvise so that they have hands-on practice. (H4)

5. Role Model

For half of the participants, self-leadership was closely tied to being a role model, with the belief that personal conduct sets the standard for colleagues to follow. One participant explained that leaders must demonstrate seriousness and professionalism in their work, serving as role models not only to colleagues but also to learners:

If you are a leader, you should lead by example. You should be a role model even to the learners. The way you execute your duties in class, they (students) actually know that this teacher is serious business and not coming to play with us. (H8)

Another participant stressed that role modelling was particularly important among colleagues, noting that being exemplary allows others to learn and copy positive behaviours:

You have to be exemplary to your colleagues so that they can copy from you, maybe. (H5)

This was reinforced by a participant who linked role modelling to leadership at the departmental level:

So as a head you set an example, for example, of being hard working. (P3)

For others, role modelling was tied to punctuality and meeting expectations, with one participant stating that being on time and meeting deadlines establishes credibility with subordinates:

I should also be someone who is punctual at the workplace so that you set a real model for your subordinates. Should meet deadlines. (H7)

Another participant broadened the idea of role modelling, describing it as a way of shaping others through one's own character, behaviour and interpersonal skills:

Learning to influence others through your character, behaviour and soft skills. (P1)

One participant emphasised again that role modelling is about setting a consistent example in everyday practices, particularly punctuality:

I always want my subordinates to copy best behaviours from me, so I lead by example so that they can copy me, for example, in terms of punctuality. (H1)

Discussion of the Findings

The findings highlighted how communication is both a personal discipline and a relational practice. Participants' accounts indicate that communication is shaped by both internal processes, such as reflection and self-monitoring, and relational demands within the school environment. From a self-leadership perspective, communication enables behaviour-focused strategies by allowing leaders to seek feedback, clarify expectations, and adjust their actions in response to others (Urrila & Eva, 2024). However, the data also imply that this process is not neutral or effortless. Effective communication requires leaders to consciously regulate emotional responses, manage tone, and decide when and how to speak, highlighting communication as an intentional act of self-control rather than a spontaneous interaction. This reinforces Neck and Houghton's (2006) view that constructive thought strategies are central to self-leadership, as leaders must cognitively frame messages that motivate while remaining aligned with institutional goals.

At the same time, communication emerged as a key mechanism through which transformational leadership is enacted. When leaders articulate a shared vision and clarify departmental goals, they demonstrate inspirational motivation by aligning staff around a common purpose (Sianipar & Putri, 2025). Yet the findings suggest that this influence is contingent on trust and openness. Communication that is perceived as top-

down or overly managerial risks undermining the very alignment it seeks to create, thereby constraining both relational trust and leaders' capacity to exercise self-leadership effectively. Opportunities for dialogue, such as staff meetings and online communication platforms, were positioned as spaces for participation and voice. While these forums can support individualised consideration by recognising staff perspectives, they also place demands on leaders' self-leadership. Leaders must balance inclusivity with decisiveness and openness with accountability. This tension reveals communication as a site where self-leadership is tested, as leaders negotiate competing expectations while remaining anchored to their values and responsibilities.

The findings indicate that empathy is understood by participants not simply as an interpersonal quality but as a disciplined self-leadership practice that requires conscious regulation of emotions, responses, and boundaries. Participants' reflections suggest that effective leadership extends beyond task supervision to include sustained attentiveness to colleagues' personal circumstances, positioning empathy as a deliberate and effortful aspect of leadership rather than an automatic disposition. This relational orientation highlights an often under-examined dimension of self-leadership: the management of one's own emotional responses in interactions with others. Leaders described the need to listen, remain patient, and respond thoughtfully, even in emotionally demanding situations. Within Manz's (1986) Self-Leadership Model, such practices align with constructive thought strategies, as leaders reflect on how to interpret others' experiences, and behaviour-focused strategies, as they intentionally enact supportive behaviours such as encouragement and reassurance. In this way, empathy enables self-leadership by supporting self-regulation, emotional awareness, and purposeful relational action.

However, the data also suggest that empathetic leadership places significant emotional demands on leaders. While participants emphasised care and support, they also acknowledged the need to balance empathy with firmness. This tension indicates that empathy can constrain self-leadership when emotional labour becomes excessive or when leaders struggle to maintain professional boundaries. The expectation to be consistently understanding may limit leaders' capacity to prioritise their own well-being or to make difficult decisions, revealing empathy as a complex and potentially draining leadership practice. From a transformational leadership perspective, participants' descriptions of treating staff as a "family" align closely with individualised consideration, where leaders attend to followers' personal needs and development (Sánchez et al., 2025). This approach was perceived as strengthening trust and fostering a supportive school culture. However, the data also imply that such relational closeness may heighten expectations of availability and accommodation, increasing the emotional burden on leaders and challenging their self-leadership capacity. The emphasis on combining care with consistency reflects a nuanced understanding of leadership that resists simplistic interpretations of empathy as leniency. As Ahmed et al. (2024) argue, transformational influence is strengthened when compassion is paired with clear expectations and accountability. In this sense, empathy supports self-leadership when it is consciously regulated and aligned with professional values, rather than driven solely by emotional responsiveness. These findings suggest that empathy operates as a critical bridge between internal self-regulation and relational leadership influence. While empathy

enables self-leadership by fostering trust, motivation, and emotional connection, it can also constrain leaders when emotional labour intensifies or boundaries become blurred. Practising empathy as self-leadership therefore requires ongoing reflection, balance, and intentional self-management.

The findings indicate that goal setting and visionary thinking are central mechanisms through which participants organise their leadership practice and sustain motivation over time. Participants described both personal and institutional goals, ranging from improving pass rates to expanding curriculum offerings and enhancing the reputation of their schools. These accounts suggest that goal setting is not a discrete planning exercise but an ongoing self-leadership process that structures daily decision-making and prioritisation. From a self-leadership perspective, these practices align with behaviour-focused strategies, particularly self-goal setting and self-observation (Manz, 1986). Participants' emphasis on identifying priorities, defining objectives, and monitoring progress reflects deliberate self-regulation aimed at maintaining focus amid competing demands (Neck & Houghton, 2006). In this sense, goal setting enables self-leadership by providing direction, reducing ambiguity, and reinforcing disciplined action. However, the data also suggest that an intense focus on targets may narrow leaders' attention, potentially constraining responsiveness to emerging relational or contextual needs that fall outside predefined goals.

Participants' references to positioning their schools as "schools of first choice" or "putting the school on the map" reflect ambitious visionary thinking that extends beyond routine administration. From a transformational leadership perspective, such aspirations align with inspirational motivation, as leaders articulate compelling futures that generate collective purpose and optimism (Matsila & Malebana, 2026). These visions appear to energise staff and encourage persistence in the face of resource constraints and systemic challenges. At the same time, the findings suggest that visionary leadership carries implicit pressures. Aspirational goals may heighten expectations and intensify performance demands, placing additional strain on leaders' self-leadership capacity. When visions are closely tied to measurable outcomes such as pass rates or school ranking, leaders may experience tension between maintaining ethical, learner-centred practices and meeting externally visible indicators of success. This tension highlights how visionary thinking can simultaneously motivate and constrain self-leadership.

The importance of vision was further reinforced by participants' emphasis on aligning daily practices with long-term aspirations. As Maran et al. (2022) note, clearly articulated vision provides a strategic framework that helps leaders situate immediate challenges within a broader purpose. For participants, vision was not abstract but grounded in practical realities, including resource limitations, curriculum development, and community expectations. However, translating vision into action requires sustained self-regulation, adaptability, and resilience, particularly in contexts where systemic barriers limit leaders' control over outcomes. Goal setting and visionary thinking function as powerful enablers of self-leadership by fostering direction, motivation, and coherence. Yet they also introduce constraints when ambition outpaces capacity or when success is narrowly defined through performance metrics. Self-leadership in this context is therefore

characterised by an ongoing balancing act between aspiration and realism, discipline and flexibility.

The findings show that agility operates as a key self-leadership capacity that enables school leaders to respond to uncertainty, instability, and resource constraints. Participants described adjusting policies, improvising solutions, and responding to emerging challenges, suggesting that agility is not merely flexibility but a disciplined form of responsiveness shaped by contextual demands. Within Manz's (1986) Self-Leadership Model, these practices align with behaviour-focused strategies, particularly self-observation and behavioural adjustment. Agility enables self-leadership by allowing leaders to regulate their responses and sustain momentum in demanding situations. However, the data also suggest that continual adaptation may push leaders into reactive patterns, limiting opportunities for strategic reflection and thereby constraining self-leadership. Agile leadership further requires emotional regulation, as leaders are expected to remain composed and solution-focused during periods of change. While this supports stability and confidence, it also increases emotional and cognitive load, potentially masking systemic challenges that individual adaptability cannot resolve. From a transformational leadership perspective, agility is closely linked to intellectual stimulation. Participants described encouraging innovation, learner-centred approaches, and professional development, fostering a culture of growth (Abakirov et al., 2025). At the same time, such expectations can heighten pressure on both leaders and staff, requiring careful regulation to avoid change fatigue. Agility also reflects individualised consideration, as leaders support teachers' development in differentiated ways, though this places additional relational demands on leaders' self-leadership capacity (Ogunrinbokun, 2023). Agility functions as both an enabler and a constraint of self-leadership. While responsiveness and adaptability support resilience and continuity, the cumulative demands of constant adjustment may erode reflective space and sustainability.

The findings indicate that role modelling is understood by participants as a central mechanism through which leadership values are enacted and made visible in everyday practice. Leaders emphasised behaviours such as punctuality, dedication, and professionalism, suggesting that role modelling functions as a form of implicit leadership communication through which expectations are conveyed without formal instruction. From a transformational leadership perspective, these practices align with idealised influence, where leaders build trust and credibility by embodying the values they seek to promote (Bass, 1998). By consistently demonstrating commitment and reliability, leaders position themselves as reference points for acceptable conduct, reinforcing a culture of accountability and professionalism (Caldeira & Infante-Moro, 2025). However, the data also imply that this emphasis on consistency places sustained pressure on leaders to perform visibly at all times, potentially constraining self-leadership by limiting space for vulnerability or error.

Role modelling also reflects behaviour-focused self-leadership strategies. Practices such as self-monitoring, self-cueing, and self-discipline enable leaders to regulate their own conduct in ways that can be consciously modelled for others (Manz, 1986). Participants'

accounts of meeting deadlines and maintaining high standards illustrate how self-leadership translates into observable behavioural norms. As Wang et al. (2022) note, leaders influence others daily through the examples they set, often more powerfully than through formal directives. Yet this visibility may intensify self-surveillance, where leaders feel compelled to maintain exemplary conduct even under strain. Beyond task-related behaviours, participants highlighted character and relational qualities as critical aspects of role modelling. This aligns with transformational leadership's emphasis on individualised consideration, where leaders indirectly mentor others through ethical conduct and interpersonal sensitivity (Jacob & Thilagra, 2022). By modelling respect, fairness, and integrity, leaders foster environments conducive to professional growth and shared responsibility. However, the expectation to consistently embody these ideals may increase emotional labour, particularly in challenging or resource-constrained contexts. Thus, role modelling emerges as both an enabling and constraining dimension of self-leadership. While leading by example strengthens trust, clarifies expectations, and reinforces organisational values, it also heightens leaders' exposure to scrutiny and self-imposed pressure. Effective self-leadership in this context therefore requires balancing visibility with authenticity and discipline with self-compassion.

Contribution of the Study

This study contributes significantly to the scholarship on self-leadership in educational management by expanding the understanding of how self-leadership is practised within school leadership contexts. While existing literature predominantly conceptualises self-leadership as an intrapersonal process involving self-regulation, self-motivation, behavioural control, and cognitive self-management, the findings of this study demonstrate that self-leadership in schools extends beyond internal regulation and becomes enacted relationally and strategically. The study reveals that school leaders practise self-leadership through communication, empathy, visionary thinking, agile leadership, and role modelling, thereby influencing others while simultaneously managing themselves. In this regard, the study reconceptualises self-leadership as a multidimensional construct that incorporates emotional, relational, behavioural, cognitive, and strategic dimensions within educational environments.

A major contribution of the study lies in its development of a relational and strategic self-leadership framework that integrates the identified leadership dimensions into a coherent whole. Communication emerged as a central mechanism through which school leaders articulate institutional goals, strengthen organisational cohesion, resolve conflict, and foster collaboration among staff members. Empathy enabled leaders to establish trust, provide emotional support, and strengthen interpersonal relationships within schools. Visionary thinking and goal setting provided long-term direction and institutional purpose, while agile leadership enabled leaders to respond effectively to uncertainty, policy changes, and contextual challenges. Role modelling further reflected the visible enactment of professionalism, accountability, discipline, and ethical conduct through which leaders influenced organisational culture and staff behaviour. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that self-leadership functions through both self-management and relational influence.

The study is significant because it provides contextually grounded insights into how principals and heads of departments enact relational and strategic self-leadership within resource-constrained public-school environments. The findings may inform leadership development programmes, school management practices, and educational policy by highlighting the value of effective communication, empathy, adaptability, visionary thinking, and role modelling in responding to contemporary educational challenges. Furthermore, the study may assist educational policymakers, leadership trainers, and school management teams in strengthening adaptive and collaborative leadership practices within schools. The study further contributes theoretically by extending self-leadership and transformational leadership theories within the context of under-resourced public schools in Zimbabwe. Traditional self-leadership theory primarily emphasises autonomy, self-goal setting, intrinsic motivation, and self-observation. However, the findings indicate that school leaders operate within demanding institutional environments characterised by resource shortages, emotional strain, administrative overload, and policy uncertainty. Consequently, self-leadership within educational settings becomes deeply relational, emotional, and contextually mediated. Leaders are required not only to regulate their own behaviours and emotions but also to motivate, support, and guide others within unstable educational environments. The study therefore refines self-leadership theory by demonstrating that effective school leadership requires emotional resilience, relational management, and strategic adaptability alongside personal self-regulation.

Importantly, the findings reveal both complementarities and tensions within relational and strategic self-leadership practices. Communication, empathy, visionary thinking, and role modelling reinforced one another through trust-building and collaborative influence. At the same time, these leadership practices generated significant emotional and professional pressures. Empathy intensified emotional labour, role modelling increased expectations for continuous professionalism, and visionary thinking heightened accountability and performance demands. These findings demonstrate that self-leadership is not a fixed or harmonious process but an ongoing negotiation between organisational expectations, emotional regulation, relational responsibility, and strategic adaptation. From a practical and policy perspective, the study highlights the need for leadership development programmes that extend beyond technical and managerial competencies to include communication skills, emotional intelligence, adaptive leadership, wellness support, reflective practice, and strategic self-management. The findings further suggest that schools and education departments should cultivate collaborative and supportive leadership cultures capable of promoting sustainable, adaptive, and human-centred leadership practices within increasingly complex educational environments.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relational and strategic dimensions of self-leadership in school management by examining how self-leadership is externally demonstrated through communication, empathy, visionary thinking, agile leadership, and role modelling within public schools. The findings indicate that self-leadership extends beyond personal self-regulation and functions as a relational leadership practice that significantly influences organisational culture, teamwork, and institutional effectiveness. Effective communication emerged as a critical mechanism through which school leaders articulate institutional goals, maintain organisational unity, and encourage collaborative participation among staff members. Empathy was further identified as an essential leadership attribute that enables leaders to establish trust, provide emotional support, and strengthen professional relationships within schools. In addition, visionary thinking allows leaders to provide strategic direction and inspire collective commitment towards achieving school improvement objectives, while agile leadership enables school leaders to respond effectively to uncertainty, contextual challenges, and changing educational demands. Role modelling also emerged as an important dimension of self-leadership, as leaders who demonstrate professionalism, ethical conduct, and accountability positively influence the attitudes and behaviours of staff members.

The study further revealed a strong relationship between relational and strategic self-leadership and transformational leadership practices. Leaders who demonstrate empathy, adaptability, communication skills, and visionary thinking are better positioned to motivate teachers, foster collaborative school cultures, and strengthen organisational resilience. In this regard, the study contributes to educational leadership scholarship by illustrating how internal self-regulation translates into visible and relational leadership practices that influence school effectiveness and staff morale. The findings therefore challenge individualistic understandings of self-leadership by emphasising its relational, emotional, and context-responsive nature. However, the study also highlights the challenges associated with relational and strategic self-leadership. Sustained emotional regulation, continuous adaptability, and public role modelling may contribute to emotional exhaustion, decision fatigue, and leadership strain, particularly within under-resourced school contexts. The study therefore concludes that relational and strategic self-leadership is an essential foundation for adaptive, sustainable, and human-centred school leadership in contemporary educational environments.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Communication and Empathetic Leadership Capacity

Education ministries, district education offices, leadership development institutions, and school management teams should prioritise the development of communication and empathetic leadership competencies among principals and heads of departments. This may be achieved through continuous professional development programmes, leadership workshops, mentoring initiatives, emotional intelligence training, active listening exercises, and conflict-resolution seminars that equip school leaders with the skills

required to communicate effectively and build supportive professional relationships. Schools should further institutionalise regular staff engagement forums, reflective dialogue sessions, participatory decision-making structures, and transparent feedback mechanisms that encourage openness, trust, and collaboration among staff members. This recommendation is particularly important because the findings revealed that communication and empathy are central mechanisms through which school leaders articulate institutional goals, foster collegial relationships, strengthen staff morale, and promote organisational cohesion. Strengthening these competencies is likely to yield immediate improvements in workplace relationships, staff commitment, collaborative school cultures, and overall school effectiveness, particularly within resource-constrained educational environments.

2. Promote Strategic and Adaptive Leadership Development

Educational policymakers, leadership development agencies, teacher training institutions, and school management teams should strengthen programmes that develop strategic, visionary, and adaptive leadership capacities among school leaders. This can be implemented through strategic planning workshops, leadership coaching, scenario-based problem-solving activities, change-management training, and collaborative school improvement planning processes that assist leaders in setting realistic goals while remaining responsive to changing educational demands. Education departments should also provide schools with flexible planning frameworks and contextual support that enable leaders to adapt policies and practices to local circumstances without compromising accountability. The significance of this recommendation lies in the study's finding that visionary thinking, goal setting, and adaptability enable school leaders to maintain organisational focus, respond effectively to uncertainty, and sustain school improvement despite resource limitations and policy challenges. Strengthening these capacities will enhance institutional resilience, improve strategic decision-making, and support sustainable educational transformation within contemporary school contexts.

3. Support Leader Well-being and Sustainable Leadership Practices

Education authorities, school governing bodies, employee wellness units, and professional leadership associations should establish support mechanisms that promote leader well-being and sustainable leadership practice. Such initiatives may include peer-support networks, professional mentoring programmes, counselling services, wellness workshops, stress-management training, and reflective leadership forums where school leaders can share experiences and coping strategies within supportive professional communities. Schools should also encourage balanced workloads and create organisational cultures that recognise the emotional demands associated with leadership responsibilities. This recommendation is significant because the findings demonstrated that communication, empathy, adaptability, and role modelling often require substantial emotional labour, which may contribute to leadership strain, decision fatigue, and emotional exhaustion when adequate support is absent. Providing structured well-being support will help school leaders maintain effectiveness, resilience, and professional

commitment while reducing the risk of burnout and enhancing leadership sustainability over the long term.

4. Reinforce Ethical Role Modelling and Professional Conduct

School governing bodies, education departments, leadership development institutions, and senior management teams should reinforce ethical leadership and professional conduct as fundamental components of school leadership practice. This may be achieved through values-based leadership programmes, ethics training workshops, mentoring initiatives, professional conduct seminars, and recognition systems that acknowledge exemplary leadership behaviours. School leaders should be encouraged to model integrity, accountability, punctuality, fairness, transparency, and professionalism in their daily interactions with staff and learners, while schools should foster collective responsibility for maintaining ethical standards across the organisation. This recommendation is important because the study found that role modelling serves as a visible expression of self-leadership through which leaders influence staff behaviour, strengthen organisational culture, and reinforce professional expectations. Supporting ethical role modelling will contribute to stronger trust, enhanced organisational accountability, improved professional standards, and more positive school cultures, thereby supporting sustainable school improvement and educational effectiveness.

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