

DIFFERENT PATHS TO THE SAME GOAL: LEADERSHIP APPROACHES IN HIGH-PERFORMING SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BOTSWANA

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Abstract

Leadership is a critical determinant of organisational performance, particularly within the education sector where it enhances teaching quality, school culture, and student achievement. This study examined how leaders in high-performing senior secondary schools in Botswana employ different leadership approaches to achieve similar goals of excellence. Underpinned by the constructivist paradigm, the study adopted a phenomenological qualitative design to explore the lived experiences of 16 school leaders, including school heads, deputy school heads, and heads of departments, purposively selected from eight consistently high-performing public and private schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. Findings revealed that while both public and private school leaders emphasised teamwork and democratic leadership, contextual factors influenced their approaches. Public school leaders highlighted parental involvement as a major contributor to their schools' success, whereas private school leaders attributed theirs to the availability of human and material resources. Across both sectors, leaders fostered collaboration, encouraged participation in decision-making, and promoted a learning-oriented culture where mistakes were addressed through mentoring and coaching. Key leadership traits identified were respect, honesty, trustworthiness, and vision, developed through experience, education, and professional development. However, the study also uncovered significant gaps in leadership training, indicating that many leaders assumed their roles without adequate preparation. This study concludes that while the paths to success vary, effective leadership in Botswana's high-performing schools converges on shared principles of teamwork, inclusivity, and consistent professional growth. A proposed teamwork-based leadership model is presented as a framework to guide emerging leaders and inspire performance improvement in less successful schools.

Keywords: leadership styles, teamwork, transformational leadership, professional development, high performance, Botswana.

Introduction/background

Leadership is the process of influencing the activities of an organised group towards goal setting and achievement (Day & Sammons, 2013; Gutterman, 2023). It is a critical determinant of organisational performance, particularly within the education sector where it enhances teaching quality, school culture, and student achievement (Day et al., 2020). In schools, leaders initiate positive reforms, ensure effective learning (Bakare & Oredein, 2021), and influence decision-making at all levels (Amalia et al., 2019). According to Kiral (2020), successful school leaders are known to empower teachers and other education stakeholders through extended leadership that enhances positive changes. Similarly, Mulokozi and Mwemezi (2024) noted that high performing school leaders involve stakeholders in academic planning and decision making, and encourage cooperation and motivation of teachers and learners alike. These practices are important for learners' performance.

The leadership styles adopted by organisational leaders have a direct and significant influence on overall organisational success (Al-Khaled & Chung, 2020; Parveen et al., 2024). A variety of leadership styles including autocratic, democratic, transactional, situational, bureaucratic, charismatic, transformational, coaching, collaborative, paternalistic, servant, and laissez-faire, are available for a leader to adopt (Khan et al., 2016; Lee, 2020), depending on their context and organisational goals. In the context of education, the manner in which school leaders manage and motivate teachers and staff ultimately determines the school's level of performance. This position is reinforced by several scholars who assert that effective leadership is a key predictor of institutional achievement (Mgbeze, 2014; De Lacerda, 2015; Aghahowa, 2021).

Furthermore, effective school leaders are often distinguished by certain traits and behaviours, such as self-confidence, vision, emotional intelligence, and strong interpersonal skills, which enable them to inspire and guide their teams toward common goals (De Lacerda, 2015; Madanchian et al., 2017). When these personal qualities are complemented by appropriate leadership styles, they create a strong synergy that enhances school culture, teacher commitment, and ultimately student performance. Within the context of high-performing schools, these attributes and leadership approaches form the foundation upon which educational excellence is built, even though the specific paths leaders take to achieve such success may differ.

In Botswana's education system, schools operate under two main ownership structures which are the public (state-owned) and private institutions. Although both are guided by the national education policies and assessment frameworks, notable disparities exist in their performance levels. These differences are most evident in results from key national examinations such as the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), the Junior Certificate Examination (JCE), and the Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE), which marks the culmination of senior secondary education. Given the established link between leadership effectiveness and organisational performance, it is plausible that leaders in high-performing schools, whether public or private, demonstrate more adaptive and effective leadership

approaches. This assumption is grounded in the belief that the style, behaviour, and traits of school leaders directly influence teaching quality, staff morale, and ultimately, student achievement (Day et al., 2020).

While the importance of effective leadership in education is widely recognised, there remains limited clarity in the Botswana context about which specific leadership behaviours yield the most favourable outcomes. Against this background, this study explored and compared the leadership styles and behaviours of leaders in high-performing public and private senior secondary schools in Botswana, with a view to understanding how different leadership pathways can lead to the same goal of sustained academic excellence.

Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by the transformational, contingency, situational, behavioural, and skills-based theories of leadership. Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) was first introduced by James MacGregor Burns and later expanded by Bass and Riggio (2005). The theory emphasises how leaders collaborate with their followers to identify needed changes, create a shared vision, and execute changes through commitment and mutual inspiration (Burkus, 2010; Campos, 2020). Transformational leadership is therefore concerned with developing followers' potential and motivating them to transcend self-interest for the achievement of collective goals.

The TLT comprises of four key components which are inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, idealised influence, and individualised consideration (Farnsworth et al., 2024). Inspirational motivation refers to a leader's ability to inspire followers to commit to organisational goals through a shared vision and teamwork (Lai et al., 2020; Tamunomiebi & Okwudiri, 2021). In the context of this study, school heads in high-performing senior secondary schools are expected to motivate both the teachers and the students toward achieving institutional excellence. Meanwhile, intellectual stimulation involves encouraging creativity, innovation, and critical thinking among followers (Renjith et al., 2015; Northouse, 2016). Applied to this study, it implies that successful school leaders promote participatory decision-making and problem-solving by promoting innovation among teachers and learners.

In contrast, idealised influence describes leaders who act as ethical role models, by demonstrating integrity and earning the trust and respect of their followers (Ugochukwu, 2021). In high-performing schools, this is reflected in heads who model professionalism, thereby inspiring teachers and students alike. Finally, individualised consideration captures the leader's attention to individual needs through mentoring, coaching, and professional development (Farnsworth et al., 2024). This element demonstrates the importance of continuous capacity building and personalised support in sustaining school success.

Overall, the TLT provides a fitting foundation for this study because it explains how school leaders in both public and private high-performing institutions in Botswana achieve excellence through vision-driven, collaborative, and adaptive leadership. In a dynamic educational landscape,

transformational leadership offers the flexibility and human-centered approach necessary for guiding schools toward the shared goal of sustained academic achievement.

In addition to the transformational leadership theory, this study also draws insights from the contingency and situational leadership theories, which emphasise that effective leadership depends on the interaction between the leader's style and the specific context or situation. The contingency theory posits that environmental and organisational factors influence which leadership approach is most effective, while the situational theory suggests that leaders must adapt their style to suit the demands of different circumstances and decision-making processes (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Within this study, these perspectives reinforce the view that school leaders in high-performing senior secondary schools in Botswana must be flexible and responsive, adjusting their leadership approaches to align with their school environments while applying transformational principles to inspire and sustain success.

The theoretical framework also incorporates insights from the Behavioural and Skills-based Theories of Leadership, which are closely related and rooted in behaviourism. The behavioural theory posits that people can become effective leaders through learning, observation, and experience (Cherry, 2022), whereas the skills theory emphasises that effective leadership depends on acquired knowledge, abilities, and competencies (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). In this study, it is assumed that effective school leaders demonstrate specific skills, behaviours, and characteristics, majorly developed through continuous training, mentoring, and professional development, that enable them to guide their teams successfully.

Overall, the integration of these leadership theories provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding leadership in high-performing senior secondary schools in Botswana. Together, the theories suggest that successful leaders are visionary, inspirational, adaptable, context-aware, and equipped with the behavioural and technical skills for sustaining educational excellence.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework developed in this study (Figure 1) shows the relationship between the study ideas and how they are linked to explore the research problem (Adom, Hussein & Adu-Agyem, 2018). As illustrated in Figure 1, this study conceptualises successful leadership as the dependent variable, influenced by three key independent variables which are leadership styles, leadership skills and behaviours, and the elements of transformational leadership theory.

The left section of the figure represents the variety of leadership styles available to school leaders. In line with contingency and situational leadership theories, the framework assumes that effective leaders select and apply the most appropriate leadership style based on the specific contextual nuances. The right section of the figure highlights the behaviours and skills essential for effective leadership. Drawing on behavioural and skills-based leadership theories, it is posited that school leaders must possess and continually develop relevant competencies through professional development, mentoring, and reflective practice. At the center of the framework lies

the transformational leadership construct, comprising the four key elements. These elements underscore the leader’s ability to inspire and motivate followers, encourage creativity and innovation, serve as an ethical role model, and respond to the individual needs of team members. Put together, Figure 1 depicts how the interaction of leadership style, skill, and transformational behaviours contributes to successful school leadership. This framework guided the study in examining how leaders in high-performing public and private senior secondary schools in Botswana apply diverse leadership approaches to achieve the shared goal of sustained academic excellence.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for leadership effectiveness in schools



Source: Researchers’ conceptualisation

Literature review

The concept of leadership has been interpreted from multiple perspectives. These perspectives are often shaped by context and discipline. Northouse (2004) defines leadership as the ability to influence a group toward the achievement of common goals, while Vacar (2015) and Jani and Suryadinata (2023) similarly argue that leadership essentially revolves around influence. Malik and Azmat (2019) extend this view by describing leadership as providing meaningful direction and mobilising collective effort towards specific objectives. Bush and Glover (2003) add a visionary dimension by viewing leadership as the unification of people around shared values and the institutionalisation of a common vision. In an integrative sense, Bruce and Kathleen (2006) conceptualise leadership as a process of selecting, equipping, training, and inspiring followers to realize organizational goals through value-based influence.

The conceptual complexity of leadership extends to school leadership (SL), and scholars acknowledge the absence of a universally accepted definition of SL (Day et al., 2000; Newman, 2013; Sellami et al., 2019). This study aligns with the definition of SL by Bush and Glover (2003). According to the authors, SL refers to the process of influencing school members towards achieving educational objectives. Effective school leaders, therefore, formulate a vision grounded

in professional and personal values, mobilise stakeholders around that vision, and guide their schools to achieve collective aims (Sellami et al., 2019). In essence, SL entails setting shared goals and inspiring commitment to the goals in the education process. It has emerged as a global priority due to its direct influence on teacher motivation, student achievement, and overall school improvement (Pont et al., 2008; Hallinger & Huber, 2012). High-performing schools are consistently associated with effective leadership (Bush, 2018), which fosters efficiency, innovation, and continuous improvement (Wallace Foundation, 2013; UNESCO, 2016).

Leadership styles, which are the consistent patterns of behaviour for guiding, motivating, and managing others (Cherry, 2021), form the practical expression of leadership. Numerous styles have been identified, including autocratic, democratic, transactional, transformational, situational, bureaucratic, charismatic, servant, and others (Lee, 2020). While situational and contingency perspectives show that no single style suits all contexts (Ghazzawi et al., 2017), empirical evidence highlights the positive association between democratic, situational, collaborative, transformational, and ethical leadership and school performance (Oyetunji, 2006; Billig, 2014; Abazeed, 2018; Oco, 2022; Ugwu & Pansiri, 2022). These theoretical claims are reinforced by empirical studies. Tedla et al. (2021) in a study that examined secondary schools in Eritrea found that democratic and situational leadership styles positively affected school performance, whereas autocratic and laissez-faire styles had negative impacts. In South Africa, Bush and Glover (2016) reported that leadership challenges, such as administrative rigidity and poor stakeholder relations, impeded school improvement. These contextual challenges underscore the need to emulate practices from high-performing institutions.

In Botswana, limited research has directly examined leadership styles in high-performing schools. Moswela and Kgosiadialwa (2017) observed that most school leaders employ democratic leadership but face constraints from imposed policies and social challenges such as drug abuse. Tsayang's (2011) comparative study of management teams and teachers identified a preference for collaborative leadership but did not examine its correlation with school performance. These gaps justify the present study, which explores the leadership approaches adopted in consistently high-performing senior secondary schools in Botswana, particularly in the post-Covid-19 era marked by educational transformation.

Beyond leadership style, personal and professional attributes are important for leadership effectiveness. Successful leaders exhibit qualities such as integrity, emotional intelligence, confidence, empathy, innovation, and a strong moral compass (Antonakis et al., 2004; Holsinger, 2018; Kapur, 2020; Ugwu, 2021). Such traits are often cultivated through professional learning and reflective practice (Nsubuga, 2008; Pheko, 2008). Understanding which of these traits and behaviours are common among leaders in high-performing schools in Botswana provides valuable insights into how diverse leadership pathways converge towards the shared goal of sustained educational excellence.

Methodology

Paradigm, approach and design

This study was informed by the constructivist paradigm which rejects the notion of an objective reality that exists independently of human perception (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Constructivism assumes that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed through individual experiences and interactions. The aim, therefore, is to understand how people interpret and make sense of the phenomena they encounter (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). A qualitative research approach was adopted to gain a deep understanding of the leadership styles practiced by leaders in high-performing schools in Botswana. This approach enabled the researchers to capture participants' perspectives in their own words and from their own lived experiences (Cropley, 2019). Within this approach, a phenomenological research design was employed. This design is relevant for an in-depth exploration of how individuals experience and perceive a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Participant recruitment

The population for this study comprised of school leaders in high-performing public and private senior secondary schools across Botswana. School leaders were selected because they are central to decision-making and the application of leadership practices within their institutions. The senior secondary level was particularly chosen because despite a general national decline in academic results (Salani, 2019), some schools have consistently demonstrated exceptional performance.

Using purposive sampling, sixteen school leaders were selected from eight high-performing public and private senior secondary schools. This sampling technique was appropriate for the selection of participants with direct experience and relevant knowledge to address the research phenomenon (Gentles et al., 2015). Selection was based on schools' performance in national examinations over the preceding five years.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, guided by predetermined questions that allowed flexibility for probing and follow-up discussions (Wahyuni, 2012). The interviews were conducted face-to-face in participants' natural settings by the third author who is an experienced educator. Reflexive notes were kept throughout the data collection process to ensure that the researcher's background did not influence participants' responses. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure data accuracy and completeness. Data saturation was reached when no new information, patterns, or insights emerged from subsequent interviews, indicating that the collected data were sufficient to address the research questions (Rahimi&Khatooni, 2024).

Data analysis followed the thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first and second authors independently coded and developed preliminary themes. The themes were then compared, discussed, and refined collaboratively to ensure accuracy and credibility. To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to Guba and Lincoln's criteria, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Enworo, 2023).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Botswana. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and participants' right to withdraw were strictly observed in this study.

Findings and discussion

Five major themes emerged during thematic data analysis. To provide context and a clearer understanding of the perspectives shared, this section begins with a presentation of the biographical characteristics of the participants. This background information situates their responses within their professional and personal experiences, to enhance the interpretation of the themes that follow.

Biographic characteristics

The participants comprised of school heads, deputy school heads, and heads of departments from high-performing public and private senior secondary schools in Botswana. In private schools, most participants were school heads (62.5%), while in public schools, deputy school heads constituted the majority (50%). Participants were aged between 45 and 60 years, indicating sufficient maturity and professional experience for their leadership roles. Males predominated in both public (62.5%) and private (87.5%) schools. Although gender distribution varied, the focus of the study was on leadership styles rather than gender representation. In terms of experience, most public-school leaders (50%) had over 21 years of leadership experience, while the majority of private-school leaders (62.5%) had at least two years of experience. This demonstrates that all participants had adequate exposure to school leadership practices. Regarding qualifications, the majority held master's degrees, mainly in educational leadership and administration. This signifies strong academic preparation for their roles. Employment terms also differed, with all public-school participants serving on a permanent and pensionable basis, while most private-school participants (87.5%) were employed on contract.

Teamwork as a key to school success

One of the strongest themes that emerged from the data was teamwork, which participants across both public and private schools consistently identified as the foundation of their sustained high performance. Leaders described teamwork as a culture that promotes collaboration among teachers, students, parents, and administrators. This collaboration fosters shared responsibility for

success. In public schools, participants frequently associated success with teacher commitment, collaboration, and parental involvement. As one participant explained, “We are successful because we work together...teachers plan together, cooperate, and support each other. That’s it...teamwork.” Another added that, “Our success comes from cooperation and using people’s strengths through committees. We plan and implement together”. A third participant summarised this sentiment by emphasising that supportive administration, dedicated teachers, disciplined students, and parents worked collaboratively to ensure success.

Similarly, private school leaders highlighted teamwork as the driving force behind their performance. In their case, teamwork was reinforced by collaborative planning, inclusivity, and resource availability. One participant stated: “We have a high level of teamwork and dedication here. Everyone is involved in planning for success...it’s our plan, not just mine”. Another emphasised the spirit of collaboration: “There is cooperation between teachers, students, and leaders. When someone struggles, others step in to keep things moving”.

Private school leaders also noted that teamwork thrived within supportive environments characterised by adequate resources, small class sizes, and qualified and motivated teachers. As one participant noted, “students here have access to learning resources, small classes, and experienced teachers. The environment itself encourages collaboration and excellence”.

Across both school types, teamwork emerged as more than just cooperation. It was described as a shared leadership practice grounded in trust, inclusivity, and collective accountability. Leaders viewed themselves as facilitators who promote participation, collaboration, and mutual support. These qualities appear central to the sustained success of high-performing schools in Botswana.

Different leadership paths towards teamwork and success

Given that the majority of the participants in both public and private schools attributed their schools’ sustained success to teamwork, the researchers further explored the leadership styles that fostered such collaboration. In public schools, five out of eight participants reported that they adopt a democratic leadership style as the main approach for promoting teamwork and shared responsibility. They described their leadership as consultative, collaborative, and inclusive, and they emphasised the role of open communication and collective decision-making. As one participant explained, “We use a collaborative approach. We allow ideas and opinions to be shared democratically”. Another added, “Democratic...where everyone takes part in the development of the school”.

While democratic leadership emerged as the dominant style, a few participants acknowledged blending it with other approaches when circumstances required flexibility. For instance, one leader noted that he employed situational leadership by adapting his style to specific challenges, though democratic practices remained his default approach. Another leader mentioned that she occasionally applied transformational leadership to inspire staff and sustain teamwork.

This combination of leadership styles shows that there is no single style for achieving success. Therefore, effective leaders in these schools adjusted their methods while maintaining a participatory culture.

A similar pattern was observed among private school leaders. The majority also identified democratic leadership as central to their teamwork culture, while others highlighted elements of servant, transformational, or even authoritative leadership applied contextually. Notably, leaders who described themselves as servant or inclusive still reflected democratic tendencies by encouraging participation and valuing the input of staff and students. As one participant summarised, “decisions are often collective and democratic....authority is distributed across departments”.

Overall, the findings from this second theme reveal that although leadership approaches varied, both public and private school leaders pursued a common goal of enhancing teamwork as a foundation for high performance. Their diverse yet converging practices exemplify how different leadership paths can lead to the same successful outcomes.

Consistency, tolerance, and inclusive leadership amid uncertainty

A key theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of consistency, tolerance, and inclusive leadership in sustaining school performance, even in times of uncertainty such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants across both public and private schools noted that they remained steadfast in their leadership approach, while adapting strategies that would make things to work perfectly.

Public school leaders highlighted that despite the pandemic, their vision, mission, and leadership approaches remained unchanged. They maintained that consistency enhanced a sense of stability and direction for both staff and learners. One participant explained, “We remained consistent. Our goals and vision did not change because of Covid...we needed to soldier on and make sure we achieved what we targeted for”. Another added, “No, I didn’t change my style. Why change what is working? In fact, I became more democratic, even though we used virtual communication most of the time.”

Similarly, leaders in private schools also noted that they stayed true to their core leadership styles while adjusting their operational strategies. One participant reflected, “Leaders do not change their style of leadership but change their approach and strategies to accommodate emerging issues.” Another shared a more empathetic adaptation, “I didn’t change the style; instead, I reinforced it and became more caring. People were dealing with loss and trauma, so I had to be attentive and supportive”. These reflections illustrate how effective leaders in high-performing schools balanced stability with compassion by maintaining consistency while responding to human needs.

Tolerance also emerged as a defining attribute of high-performing leaders. Participants across contexts acknowledged that they allowed subordinates to make mistakes, viewing them as learning opportunities rather than failures. As one participant noted, “I give room for mistakes because it encourages creativity...repeated mistakes receive respectful cautions”. Another affirmed, “Mistakes are part of professional growth. When they make mistakes, I mentor and coach them”. Such tolerance was consistently tied to improved performance, as it promoted a culture of trust, accountability, and continuous learning.

Moreover, involvement of subordinates in decision-making was identified as a crucial leadership practice that promoted ownership and transparency. All participants reported that they engaged staff and other stakeholders when making key decisions. One leader explained, “It is important...if the decision will impact someone, that person should be involved to ensure accountability”. Another added, “Involving them serves as a means of communication. They receive exactly what was agreed without distortion”. Overall, this theme demonstrates that leaders in high-performing schools in Botswana navigated challenges through consistency, tolerance, and inclusiveness. This further illustrates how different leadership paths can converge towards the same goal of sustained excellence.

Essential leadership traits and behaviours for sustained school success

Participants highlighted leadership traits and behaviours that they considered essential for achieving and sustaining high performance in schools. Across both public and private school contexts, participants consistently noted the importance of trustworthiness, honesty, respect, and vision as the most defining attributes of successful leaders. These traits were viewed as foundational for building credibility, motivating followers, and maintaining collective commitment to shared goals.

More so, participants described visionary leadership as critical for articulating a clear sense of direction and inspiring others toward long-term objectives. As one participant explained, “a leader should be visionary to articulate where the school needs to go. Being honest and trustworthy makes followers confident in the leader. If they can’t trust me, my vision will come to nothing”. This connection between trust and vision highlights the interdependence between personal integrity and organisational success.

Similarly, participants linked honesty and respect with creating a positive and cooperative school culture. One leader remarked, “A leader should be respectful, trustworthy, honest, and open-minded. I treat everyone...teachers and students...with respect because the energy I give is the energy I get back. They trust me because I am always honest”. Another added, “leaders should be visionary, motivate people by engaging and listening to them, manage resources well, and treat everyone with respect”. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that successful leadership in high-performing schools goes beyond positional authority and is instead rooted in character,

interpersonal sensitivity, and shared purpose. Vision, honesty, and respect enable leaders to inspire confidence and align staff efforts towards common educational goals.

The role of experience, education, and continuous learning in leadership growth

Building upon the traits and behaviours highlighted earlier, participants across both public and private schools acknowledged that effective leadership is not innate. They noted that leadership effectiveness is developed over time through experience, formal education, and continuous professional learning. Most school leaders acquired their leadership traits and approaches through progressive exposure, mentorship, and participation in workshops or academic programs rather than through natural disposition.

In public schools, participants generally indicated that they had not received formal leadership training before assuming their positions. However, they actively pursued growth opportunities through professional development initiatives offered by the Ministry of Basic Education and Skills Development or internal school programmes. One participant noted, “No, I didn’t attend any training before assuming my position, but I did my Master’s in Leadership. Sometimes I attend workshops organised by government, and these workshops help me grow as a leader”. Another highlighted the importance of professional development opportunities, adding, “I attend professional development exercises most of the time and they are paid for by the school...I think they help improve my leadership qualities”.

Additionally, several participants in public schools reflected that on-the-job experience was central to developing leadership competences. As one explained, “I grew through the ranks. I only attended the induction workshop after I was given the post. These workshops are important because we learn how to be good educational leaders”. This demonstrates that practical engagement, reflection, and structured learning environments contribute meaningfully to leadership evolution within the public sector.

In private schools, the pattern was comparable but with distinct nuances. Leaders in these institutions often made personal financial investments in their professional growth. This reflects a culture of self-driven development. One participant remarked, “I worked with a mentor and attended professional development exercises paid for partly by myself. I always try to find something positive in each session”. Another shared, “I wasn’t born a leader; I developed to be one. I attended leadership school in the US and other professional courses which I paid for myself. Things in the world keep changing, so do leadership challenges”.

These reflections collectively show that effective leadership development in high-performing schools is a deliberate and continuous process which is influenced by exposure, mentorship, education, and reflective practice. Whether supported by institutional structures, government initiatives, or personal commitment, the pursuit of ongoing professional growth enables school leaders to adapt to changing contexts, refine their approaches, and sustain success within Botswana’s dynamic educational landscape.

Discussion of findings

This study explored the leadership approaches adopted by school leaders in high-performing senior secondary schools in Botswana. The findings reveal that democratic leadership was the most dominant style, especially in promoting teamwork and collaboration among staff. Most leaders attributed their schools' success to teamwork, which agrees with the views of Holsinger (2018) and Kapur (2020) that teamwork is an important feature of effective leadership. High-performing leaders gave direction to collective effort in line with the individualised motivation aspect of transformational leadership by encouraging participation and shared decision-making (Farnsworth et al., 2024).

While both public and private school leaders valued teamwork, there were some contextual differences. Leaders in public schools highlighted parental involvement as an important factor in their success, whereas those in private schools pointed to adequate human and material resources, such as qualified teachers and well-equipped classrooms. This suggests that leadership style alone does not explain school success. Success therefore operates within a broader context that includes stakeholder engagement and resource mobilisation. Even so, leaders in private schools demonstrated their capacity to strategically use the available resources to achieve set goals, which reflects sound leadership practice.

To achieve teamwork, most leaders applied a democratic leadership style, while a few preferred a situational approach. However, the dominant element remained democratic. These findings are consistent with those of Tedla et al. (2021), who found that both situational and democratic styles contribute positively to school performance. The findings also confirm earlier observations by Moswela and Kgosidialwa (2017) that democratic leadership is prevalent in Botswana's schools. However, they differ from Tsayang's (2011) view that collaborative leadership is most common. Nevertheless, democratic leadership encourages participation, creativity, and group cohesion, leading to improved performance (Lee, 2020).

Some leaders also employed situational leadership by adapting their approach to prevailing circumstances. This finding aligns with situational and contingency leadership theories which propose that leadership effectiveness depends on the fit between style and context (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Asana, 2021). Interestingly, even during the Covid-19 pandemic, participants mentioned that they largely maintained their leadership styles. This consistency suggests that they had already developed flexible approaches suitable for crisis management, echoing Asana's (2021) view that effective leaders assess situations and apply the most appropriate style.

Successful leaders showed tolerance, consistency, and involvement of subordinates. They gave room for mistakes and used such moments for coaching and mentoring, thereby creating a learning environment. This finding supports Soegiarto et al.'s (2024) view that effective leaders challenge their followers through mentorship and innovation. It also reflects the individualised consideration dimension of transformational leadership (Ugochukwu, 2021). Moreover, involving

subordinates in decision-making also enhanced ownership and accountability. This, in turn, reinforced teamwork and school success (Mulokozi & Mwemezi, 2024)

Participants also highlighted personal traits and behaviours such as honesty, trustworthiness, respect, empathy, and vision as essential for effective leadership. These qualities are widely discussed in leadership literature (Bush & Glover, 2003; Kapur, 2020; Ugwu, 2021; Ugwu&Pansiri, 2022). Being visionary enables leaders to communicate direction and inspire others to pursue shared goals (Bulawa & Mhlauli, 2019), while trust and honesty strengthens relationships and credibility which are characteristics of ethical and idealised influence leadership (Ugochukwu, 2021; Ugwu & Pansiri, 2022).

Finally, this study found that leadership development in high-performing schools is experience-driven and education-supported. Most participants agreed that they were not born with leadership traits but developed them through experience, formal education, and professional development. This supports behavioural and skills leadership theories, which argue that effective leadership can be learned through training and experience (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Cherry, 2022). While public school leaders were often sponsored for workshops, those in private schools funded their own development due to their personal commitment to growth.

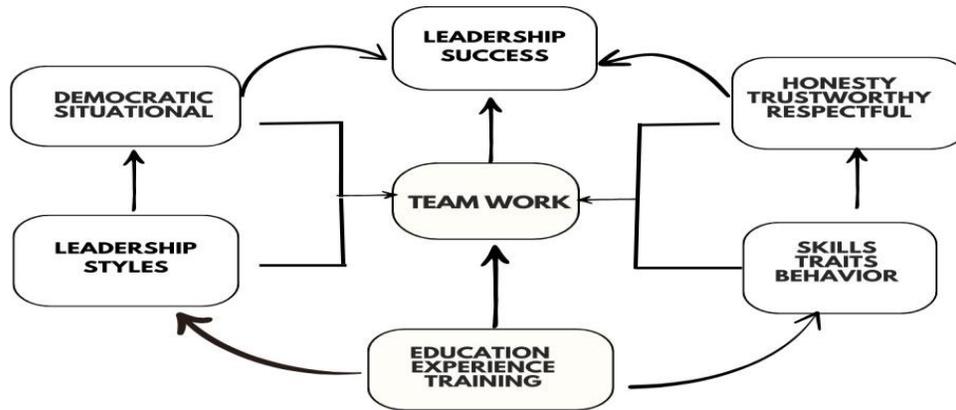
Conclusion

The findings of this study show that successful leadership in Botswana's high-performing senior secondary schools is characterised by democratic and situational approaches that encourage teamwork, shared responsibility, and professional growth. Effective leaders combine personal integrity and vision with continuous learning and adaptability to sustain high performance in their schools.

Study implications

The findings of this study have important implications for policy, practice, and future research. There remains a clear gap in the training of school leaders in Botswana, particularly prior to their appointment. This finding confirms earlier concerns by Pheko (2008) that the absence of a structured leadership training policy continues to affect leadership effectiveness in Botswana. It is therefore recommended that appointments to school leadership positions be based on both educational qualifications and relevant experience. Newly appointed leaders should undergo pre-service leadership training and participate in regular refresher courses to enhance their effectiveness. The Ministry of Education and Skills Development should extend such professional development initiatives to include both public and private school leaders.

Figure 2: Successful School Leadership (SSL) Model



Drawing from the findings, the Successful School Leadership (SSL) Model was developed (Figure 2). The model positions teamwork as central to leadership success and proposes that school leaders promote a collaborative culture through the integration of suitable leadership styles such as democratic and situational approaches. These styles should be complemented by key traits and behaviours such as honesty, trustworthiness, respect, and vision. The SSL Model further assumes that education, training, and experience are critical in developing leadership competencies and in selecting the most appropriate style to promote teamwork. The model thus serves as a practical framework for both emerging leaders and those in low-performing schools seeking to improve performance through effective, inclusive leadership. Ultimately, leadership success depends on the individual leader’s willingness to engage in continuous learning and professional growth.

Finally, future research should extend this study by exploring leadership styles in low-performing schools to compare the dynamics that differentiate them from high-performing ones. Longitudinal studies could also be applied in examining how leadership training and professional development influence school performance over time.

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