



Leadership For Care and Support in Teaching and Learning: Stories of Four Primary School Teachers in Deprived Contexts

By

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DECLARATION

I, Kaylin Govender, declare that:

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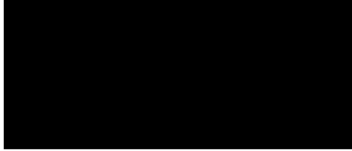
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SUPERVISOR'S STATEMENT

This dissertation has been submitted with my approval.



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Date: 25/11/2025

ABSTRACT

In South African primary schools located in underprivileged areas, teachers are often expected to provide care and support in addition to academic instruction to meet the diverse social and emotional needs of their learners. Despite the crucial role that this kind of leadership plays, little empirical research has been conducted on how teachers perceive and implement care-oriented leadership in settings with limited resources. This study examines the lived experiences of four primary school teachers who oversee and practice care and support education in underprivileged settings. The study employed a qualitative, narrative inquiry design guided by Servant Leadership Theory, collecting data through collage inquiry and narrative interviews. The narratives of the participants were subjected to thematic analysis in order to shed light on their conceptions of their duties, the factors that support or hinder their leadership, and the strategies they use to maintain support and care in their classrooms. The findings show that teachers serve as nurturers, advocates, facilitators of social-emotional learning, collaborators, and lifelong learners. Their leadership is hampered by excessive workloads, scarce resources, and structural injustices, but it is bolstered by professional development, positive school cultures, and supportive school leadership. Teachers exhibit resilience, autonomy, and inventiveness in the face of these difficulties, and supported through personal faith and by modifying trauma-informed and community-based strategies to support the well-being of their learners. The study concludes that an ethical and transformational practice at the heart of inclusive education is teacher leadership for care and support. It emphasises the necessity of institutional cultures that foster caring and supportive policy implementation, as well as context-sensitive professional development, enabling teachers to lead with moral purpose and empathy. The study recommends practical, context-responsive strategies to strengthen teachers' leadership for care and support through targeted professional development, structured emotional and peer support systems, formalised community-engagement roles, and school-wide innovation initiatives that bridge the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities in under-resourced contexts. In addition to offering valuable insights for teacher development and policy improvement in schools with limited resources, the study contributes to the broader conversation on compassionate and inclusive leadership in education.

Keywords: Leadership, Care, Support, Teacher Leadership, Inclusive Education

DEDICATION

This dissertation is first and foremost dedicated to God Almighty, the Author and Finisher of my faith. It stands as living proof that He hears and answers prayers and that every promise spoken by Him is fulfilled in His perfect time. Through every challenge, He remained my constant source of strength, wisdom, and peace. Truly, “*The one who calls you is faithful, and He will do it*” (1 Thessalonians 5:24). This work is a testimony of His goodness and unwavering grace.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

Acronym	Meaning
ADHD	Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
CoP	Community of Practice
CSTL	Care and Support for Teaching and Learning
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DI	Differentiated Instruction
LTSM	Learning and Teaching Support Materials
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PD	Professional Development
PLC	Professional Learning Community
SACE	South African Council for Educators
SEL	Socio-Emotional Learning
SGB	School Governing Body
SIAS	Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support
SMT	School Management Team
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1. Introduction

Education is an act of caring, fostering relationships, and serving a moral purpose in addition to imparting knowledge. The responsibility of the teacher extends well beyond academic education in South Africa, as many schools are still located in socioeconomically disadvantaged environments. To ensure that learning remains feasible for all learners, despite contextual and structural obstacles, teachers are often asked to lead with empathy, fortitude, and moral conviction (Fortunado & Canoy, 2021; Bertram & Mxenge, 2022). In this way, providing care and support via leadership in teaching and learning becomes an essential component of educational practice, influencing not only learner accomplishment but also social justice and human dignity (Noddings, 2013).

The idea of leadership for care and support emphasises the teacher's twin roles as caregiver and teacher. While juggling crowded classrooms, limited resources, and community issues, teachers in under-resourced environments usually have to attend to the emotional, social, and material needs of their learners (Mawila, 2022; Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025). Their daily deeds (feeding, supporting, or stabilising them emotionally) demonstrate a type of servant leadership based on relational ethics, empathy, and service (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010). Such leadership embodies the conviction that human connection, care, and support are essential for effective education (Culduz, 2023).

Despite the importance of care in education, little is known about how teachers experience and exercise leadership for care and support, especially in the context of South Africa's most underprivileged schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to document and analyse the lived experiences of four primary school teachers who lead teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts. The study aims to illuminate how teachers navigate conflicts between moral principles and systemic issues through their personal narratives, as well as how their leadership styles foster inclusive, caring, and transformative learning environments (Naicker, 2019; Van der Rheede & Dreyer, 2024).

Ultimately, this study is based on the belief that providing care and support through leadership is not an add-on role for teaching, but instead its fundamental purpose. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how educational leadership can promote human flourishing and academic performance in environments of hope and scarcity by amplifying the voices and stories of teachers (Nkambule, 2020; Adetiba, 2024).

This chapter introduces the study and establishes its conceptual foundation. The study begins with an examination of its background, which situates the research within the broader South African educational landscape and highlights the persistent inequalities that make leadership for care and support a pressing concern. The problem statement identifies the specific gap in understanding how primary school teachers experience and enact care-oriented leadership in contexts of deprivation. At the same time, the rationale for the study explains the scholarly, professional, and personal motivations that informed this research. The significance of the study is discussed in terms of its potential contribution to the fields of educational leadership and inclusive pedagogy. This chapter also presents the key research questions and objectives that guide the inquiry, followed by the conceptualisation of key concepts central to the study's theoretical and analytical framing. The organisation of the study outlines the structure of the dissertation, and the chapter concludes with a summary that encapsulates the key points and transitions to the next chapter.

1.2. Background of the study

The legacy of apartheid, which solidified racial, social, and economic disparities in many spheres of society, including education, has long influenced South African education (Fortunado & Canoy, 2021). Before 1994, racial factors influenced educational access and quality, meaning that Black learners attended underfunded and inadequately resourced schools while White learners attended well-funded ones. Deep-rooted inequalities persist in the educational system, despite the emergence of democracy and the government's commitment to equity, access, and restitution (De Clercq, 2020). Apartheid's aftereffects are still evident in the form of spatial segregation, socioeconomic hardship, and structural injustices, all of which work against providing all learners with high-quality education.

South African schools are categorised into quintiles according to the socioeconomic circumstances of the communities in which they are located, with Quintile 1 denoting the

poorest and Quintile 5 the least disadvantaged, in an attempt to redress these disparities (DBE, 2010). Quintile 1 schools, which educate a significant percentage of the nation's learners, are nevertheless characterised by overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, substandard facilities, and hazardous learning environments (West & Meier, 2020). Teachers are under tremendous pressure to provide quality teaching and learning, despite scarce resources, because of these material and contextual constraints. According to Fortunado and Canoy (2021), teachers in these situations frequently take on a variety of responsibilities, including those of caregivers, counsellors, and community champions, which reflects the emotional and moral labour that accompanies their job.

Since 1994, the South African educational system has also seen a rise in diversity, with learners from various socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds occupying classrooms (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). Because of this diversity, inclusive teaching and leadership methods that acknowledge and celebrate individual differences, advance equity, and address the diverse needs of learners are necessary (Rogahang et al., 2024). According to Noddings (2013), caring and support are the cornerstones of inclusive education in this setting, guaranteeing that every learner feels appreciated, respected, and encouraged to realise their full potential. This is further supported by White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (DBE, 2001), which states that inclusive education aims to make schools into compassionate and encouraging spaces for everyone, not only learners with disabilities.

Nonetheless, providing care and support in schools with limited resources remains a significant challenge. While institutional inefficiencies, such as restricted access to psychosocial services and low parental involvement, further restrict inclusion, Naicker (2019) points out that teachers are frequently ill-equipped to recognise and address learning difficulties. Notwithstanding these obstacles, teachers continue to exercise agency by using innovative and contextually sensitive teaching methods to help learners in their academic, social, and emotional development (AlAjmi & Alsaleh, 2023). Their dedication is a perfect example of what Greenleaf (1977) refers to as servant leadership, in which leaders behave with empathy and moral purpose, prioritising the needs of others.

According to research, learners exhibit higher levels of engagement, attendance, and accomplishment when teachers lead with compassion and relational ethics (Thornberg et al., 2020; Neil, 2024). On the other hand, especially in underprivileged neighbourhoods, a lack of

care and support leads to high dropout rates and disengagement (Madlela, 2024; Adetiba, 2024). According to Thornberg et al. (2020), schools need to transform into “cultures of care,” where the welfare of both teachers and learners is prioritised, and leadership is relational rather than hierarchical. The South African environment, where educational transformation rests not just on policy but also on the daily moral actions of teachers, is a perfect fit for this style of leadership, which is based on compassion, inclusivity, and shared responsibility.

In light of this, this study investigates how primary school teachers lead teaching and learning for care and support in underprivileged environments. The study aims to shed light on how leadership techniques based on empathy, moral purpose, and resilience support teaching and learning in situations of scarcity, focusing on the lived experiences and personal narratives of four primary school teachers. It contends that teacher leadership for care and support is the ethical and transformative heart of teaching, a practice that continuously enacts humanity, equity, and hope in South African classrooms.

1.3. Problem statement

Despite South Africa’s post-apartheid commitment to social justice and inclusive education, many primary schools still operate in environments of severe socioeconomic disadvantage that hinder effective instruction (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). In these settings, teachers are required to fulfil a variety of responsibilities that go beyond teaching in the classroom, such as providing care, offering counselling, and advocating for the overall well-being of learners (Naicker, 2019). The importance of care and support is acknowledged by national policies, such as the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) framework (DBE, 2014). However, a gap remains between the policies’ goals and the realities faced by teachers in underfunded schools. These teachers face overcrowding, inadequate supplies, food shortages, and psychological issues that jeopardise the well-being of both teachers and learners (Bundy, 2020; West & Meier, 2020).

Additionally, there are few empirical studies on how primary school teachers perceive and exercise leadership for care and support in such circumstances, despite the fact that inclusive education and teacher leadership have been studied independently (Mokhampanyane, 2024). Most of the research focuses on learner outcomes or structural innovations rather than the professional and personal narratives of teachers’ compassion, fortitude, and moral mission. As

a result, little is understood about how teachers maintain encouraging learning environments and lead with compassion in the face of hardship. Therefore, by investigating the lived experiences of four primary school teachers who lead for care and support in teaching and learning in underprivileged environments, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and offer contextually grounded insights that respond to this identified gap. Gaining insight from their experiences can help us better understand how leadership based on relational ethics, empathy, and service can improve the educational experiences of learners under challenging situations.

1.4. Rationale for the study

The study's justification stems from the realisation that understanding teaching and learning in South African primary schools requires considering the ethical and affective aspects of teacher leadership. Teachers frequently serve as learners' lifelines in environments characterised by poverty, inequality, and a lack of resources, taking on leadership duties that go well beyond the classroom (Chaaban & Sawalhi, 2020). Through the lens of servant leadership and the ethic of care, this study examines these realities to shed light on how teachers embody moral purpose, service, and compassion in their day-to-day work. The rationale is thus offered in three interconnected dimensions: the theoretical rationale, which describes the conceptual and scholarly foundation of the study; the professional rationale, which places the research in the larger educational and policy context; and the personal rationale, which reflects the researcher's reflective and experiential engagement with the phenomenon being studied.

1.4.1. Theoretical rationale

The Servant Leadership Theory (Greenleaf, 1977), which emphasises leadership as an act of service based on empathy, moral purpose, and dedication to others' growth, serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. This concept is quite similar to the ethic of care (Noddings, 2013), which emphasises human connection and well-being and sees teaching as a moral and relational activity. Through service-oriented behaviours that promote learners' holistic development, teachers in under-resourced environments can show care and support. Servant leadership offers an interpretative framework through which to view these behaviours.

According to earlier studies, this type of leadership extends beyond official power and manifests itself in everyday acts of advocacy and kindness (Spears, 2010; Ughulu, 2024).

Additionally, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of teacher leadership as relational and context-responsive, particularly in underprivileged school environments, by integrating servant leadership with the ethics of caring. Servant leadership prioritises humility, empathy, and stewardship, whereas leadership styles frequently highlight transformational or instructional aspects (Eva et al., 2019). This viewpoint enables the study to investigate how teachers lead ethically and emotionally in situations where trauma, inequity, and scarcity influence day-to-day school life. Consequently, by establishing compassion and moral accountability as essential, rather than incidental, components of successful teaching and learning, the study theoretically broadens the conversation on educational leadership.

1.4.2. Professional rationale

In a professional capacity, this study addresses a pressing need in the South African educational system to rethink teachers' roles as leaders of support and care. Teachers in underprivileged schools still face emotional and structural obstacles that prevent inclusive teaching, even in the face of progressive policy frameworks like the Department of Education's 2001 Education White Paper 6 and the Department of Basic Education's 2014 Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) Policy (Engelbrecht, 2020). According to research, these teachers often take on informal leadership roles, serving as community mediators, social workers, and counsellors in addition to their teaching duties (Naicker, 2019).

Nonetheless, the literature still fails to acknowledge and conceptualise these leadership approaches adequately. This study offers insights into teachers' lived experiences that can guide policy implementation, leadership development programs, and teacher development initiatives. Policies and school leaders can create professional development programs that promote relational, emotionally intelligent, and contextually sensitive leadership by considering how teachers lead for care and support. This makes the study helpful in improving learner support and teacher professionalism in demanding learning settings.

1.4.3. Personal rationale

On a personal level, my work experiences in South African primary schools, where learners are vulnerable to deprivation and emotional distress, are the source of this study. Seeing how teachers continue to support, care for, and encourage learners in the face of insurmountable obstacles has deepened my respect for their emotional and moral fortitude. The desire to comprehend and honour teachers' narratives of compassion and resilience through academic research was sparked by this firsthand experience with the phenomenon.

This research is an intellectual and emotional journey that offers a chance to elevate the voices of teachers and shed light on the frequently unseen leadership styles that support learners in underprivileged environments. Researchers can investigate lived experience through empathy, introspection, and relational depth through qualitative investigation, as Creswell et al. (2023) point out. Thus, this study demonstrates my dedication to connecting scholarly research with real-life, relatable narratives that illuminate the ethical core of education.

1.5. Significance of the study

This study has great theoretical, professional, and sociocultural value because it methodically sheds light on a currently understudied topic: how primary school teachers in South African environments with minimal resources exercise leadership for care and support in teaching and learning. Theoretically, it advances the literature on leadership and educational studies by bridging the gap between the actual practices of teachers working under constraints and the abstract values of care-based leadership, such as servant leadership and the ethics of caring. According to research, servant leadership has a favourable impact on organisational culture, job satisfaction, teacher engagement, and morale in educational settings (Makirimani & Naicker, 2025). Through the application of this framework to the South African primary school context, the study expands the conceptual lens of leadership research into morally and emotionally complex settings, thereby increasing our understanding of how leadership for caring manifests in situations of scarcity.

The findings of this study will have immediate implications for teacher development, school leadership initiatives, and policy implementation from both professional and pedagogical perspectives. Learner outcomes, classroom climate, and teacher retention are all significantly

influenced by teacher well-being, professional autonomy, social support, and leadership practices, according to recent reviews (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2023). This study provides evidence-based insights into the daily leadership practices that foster inclusive, supportive, and resilient learning environments by documenting the lived experiences of teachers who lead for care and support in underprivileged schools. Professional development frameworks, leadership training programs, and targeted interventions that aim to enhance learner support and teacher agency in challenging situations can all benefit from these ideas.

Additionally, this study addresses the enduring disparities in the South African educational system at a broader social and policy level, with a focus on Quintile 1 schools' resource-constrained settings, where learners often experience limited support, infrastructure deficiencies, and reduced access (West & Meier, 2020). The study highlights the moral and relational aspects of teaching and learning by focusing on how teachers lead for care and support in these settings. It achieves this by recognising that education encompasses not only academic outcomes but also dignity, belonging, and overall well-being. Thus, the study adds to the policy discussions around learner support services, inclusive education, and teacher leadership models that emphasise relational ethics, empathy, and context-sensitive practice. Through this approach, a more comprehensive understanding of educational leadership is promoted, one that is consistent with the principles of fairness, social justice, and human flourishing in South Africa's varied and resource-constrained educational environment.

1.6. Clarification of terms

In this study, terms such as *deprived*, *underprivileged*, *disadvantaged*, and *under-resourced* are used to describe the schooling contexts and communities in which the research is situated. While each of these words may carry slightly different connotations in everyday use, for the purpose of this study, they are regarded as synonymous and interchangeable.

These terms collectively refer to schools and learners who experience socioeconomic and infrastructural constraints that limit access to quality educational resources, opportunities, and support. The intention is not to label or stigmatise any group, but rather to acknowledge systemic inequalities that shape the lived realities of teaching and learning within such contexts.

Through clarifying this at the outset, the study aims to maintain consistency in terminology while allowing for a nuanced understanding of the broader challenges faced by schools in economically marginalised communities.

1.7. Main aim of the study

Examining how primary school teachers conceptualise and practice leadership in teaching and learning for care and support within disadvantaged situations is the main aim of this study. The study specifically aims to comprehend how teachers view their leadership responsibilities, pinpoint the factors that facilitate or hinder their capacity to lead for care and support, and examine the strategies they use to deal with and overcome situational obstacles. Through this investigation, the study hopes to advance knowledge of how teacher leadership for care and support is implemented in educational settings with limited resources.

1.8. Key research questions

This study is underpinned by the three research questions that follow:

- What understandings do primary school teachers have about their role in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?
- What factors affect primary school teachers in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?
- How do primary school teachers deal with or overcome negative factors (if any) when leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?

1.9. Key research objectives

This study is underpinned by the three research objectives that follow:

- To explore primary school teachers' conceptualisations of their role as leaders of teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts.

- To identify the constraining and facilitating factors that influence primary school teachers' ability to provide care and support within their teaching and learning leadership in deprived contexts.
- To analyse the strategies employed by primary school teachers to navigate, mitigate, or overcome the challenges they face in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts.

1.10. Conceptualisation of key concepts

According to Hammond and Wellington (2020), key concepts help researchers clarify and define the scope of their research. They identify the major themes, ideas, or phenomena to investigate, ensuring the research remains focused and purposeful. Hence, for the context of this study, five key concepts will be discussed: Leadership, Care, Support, Teacher Leadership, and Inclusive Education.

1.10.1. Leadership

According to Bush (2020), multiple definitions of leadership have changed and evolved over the years. Nienaber (2016) defines leadership as a process whereby an individual influences and motivates a group to achieve a common goal or helps them accomplish more than they believe they can do. Du Plessis (2021) and Mestry (2020) concur that leadership is a continuous, dynamic process of influencing behaviour to promote cohesiveness and coherence in an organisation. In a school context, Culduz (2023) argues that the primary purpose of leadership is to ensure academic success through mentoring, training, and material improvements, such as training teachers to address learning barriers in the classroom. Therefore, leadership, in the context of this study, is understood as a process of influencing and motivating teachers, learners, and parents to utilise their capabilities and talents towards achieving common goals that result in academic success.

1.10.2. Care

Baker and Burker (2023) assert that care frequently entails a sincere and compassionate concern for others' well-being, safety, and happiness. It entails paying focused attention to their wants, emotions, and circumstances. Schaffer (2022) further posits that care typically entails nurturing and safeguarding the well-being of persons, particularly those who are vulnerable, such as children, the elderly, or people with special needs. It entails creating a safe and supportive environment. Therefore, care focuses on the actions of people with the intention of ensuring the well-being of others, especially during times of crisis, regardless of the scale of the crisis. In this study, care is defined as a relational and ethical practice in which teachers consciously support learners' academic, emotional, and social well-being by responding with moral responsibility, empathy, and attentiveness, especially in the difficult circumstances of underprivileged school environments.

1.10.3. Support

Pasipamire and Hoskins (2019) posit that support frequently entails providing tangible assistance, counsel, or resources to someone in need. This can be financial aid, physical assistance with duties, or providing knowledge and guidance. Longakit et al. (2025) further postulate that support can be provided in the form of emotional or motivational support. Words of encouragement, expression of confidence in one's talents, and positive reinforcement can provide the psychological support required to endure and succeed. According to Hove and Phasha (2024), support might also take the form of validation and appreciation. Simply listening to, empathising with, and acknowledging another person's feelings or experiences can be a great source of support. Therefore, support involves providing a helping hand (assistance) to those in need with the aim of helping them face or mitigate the difficulties they may be experiencing. In this study, support is defined as a caring and intentional act in which teachers help learners overcome contextual and personal learning obstacles by offering them academic, emotional, and practical support. This creates an environment where all learners can succeed despite hardship.

1.10.4. Teacher leadership

According to Grant and Drew (2022), teacher leadership is the practice of teachers assuming leadership duties and responsibilities within the educational system, both within and beyond the classroom. Shen et al. (2020) argue that teacher leaders may be involved in resolving disagreements or addressing difficult situations within their schools. They foster a sound and collaborative school culture. Gandolfi and Mills (2022) further argue that many teacher leaders are deeply committed to achieving educational justice. They strive to ensure that every learner, regardless of their background or circumstances, has access to a high-quality education. Therefore, in this study, teacher leadership refers to teachers who utilise their power and expertise to positively impact the school, thereby improving teaching and learning, which may lead to quality and accessible education for all learners.

1.10.5. Inclusive education

Spandagou (2021) postulates that inclusive education is a concept and approach that attempts to provide an equitable and high-quality education for all children, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, needs, or traits. Jardinez and Natividad (2024) assert that the core tenet of inclusive education is that all learners, regardless of their differences, should be able to learn together in the same educational setting. Inclusive education encompasses a broader vision of fostering, accepting and supportive school communities where every learner can succeed, rather than simply placing learners with disabilities in regular classrooms. Hence, in the context of this study, inclusive education entails providing support services, such as special education services, speech therapy, counselling, or assistive technology, to suit the unique requirements of specific learners.

1.11. Organisation of the study

To facilitate a clear exposition, the subsequent sections of this research are arranged in the following order:

Chapter one: Introduction and background

This chapter presents the research study and provides the background information necessary to understand leadership for support and care in education. It provides the study's background, identifies the research topic, and lays out the main research questions, objectives, significance, and justification for the study. The chapter ends with a summary of the dissertation's organisation and clarifies important key concepts.

Chapter two: Literature review

In the second chapter, the literature on inclusive education, the ethic of caring, and teacher leadership in under-resourced school environments is critically reviewed, drawing on both local and international sources. It highlights important discussions, patterns, and knowledge gaps by examining earlier empirical research and theoretical viewpoints that inform the topic. The chapter outlines the academic framework that supports the research and argues for the necessity of a study focusing on the real-world experiences of teachers in care-oriented leadership.

Chapter three: Theoretical framework

The study's theoretical foundation is presented in Chapter Three, which draws from Robert Greenleaf's Servant Leadership Theory (1977). The fundamentals of servant leadership, including empathy, stewardship, dedication to the development of others, and community building, are examined in this chapter, along with their influence on the study's interpretation of teacher leadership for care and support. It discusses how servant leadership is relevant in an educational setting, particularly in South African primary schools with limited resources, where teachers often lead through acts of service, compassion, and moral purpose rather than formal authority.

Chapter four: Research design and methodology

This chapter describes the research design and methodological decisions employed in the study. The selection of participants, data-generating techniques, and analytical procedures are justified, and the qualitative, narrative inquiry approach used to investigate teachers' experiences is explained. To ensure the study's integrity and credibility, this section also addresses ethical concerns, reliability issues, and the researcher's positionality.

Chapter five: Data presentation, discussion and analysis

The information gathered from four primary school teachers through collage inquiry and narrative interviews is presented and examined in Chapter Five. The chapter groups the findings into major themes that illustrate how teachers lead for care and support in teaching and learning in deprived contexts. To provide participants with a comprehensive understanding of their leadership experiences, the conversation integrates their personal narratives with previously published works and theoretical insights.

Chapter six: Summary, conclusion and recommendations

The study's main conclusions are summarised in the last chapter, which also connects them to the objectives and research questions. It provides an academic analysis of the research's theoretical, contextual, and methodological contributions before offering helpful recommendations for teachers, school leaders, and legislators. Through emphasising the study's implications for further research and its contribution to improving leadership for care and support in education, the chapter wraps up the dissertation.

1.12. Chapter summary

This chapter has laid the groundwork for the study by locating it within the intricate framework of South African education, which is still characterised by significant socioeconomic inequality and the legacy of apartheid. It has highlighted the crucial issue of how primary school teachers in underprivileged environments conceptualise and implement leadership for care and support in their day-to-day work, despite policy pledges to diversity and social justice. The study's theoretical foundation in Servant Leadership, its professional significance for teacher development and policy implementation, and the personal inspiration gained from observing the deeply moral work of teachers were all introduced in this chapter. This chapter has outlined the scope and aim of the research by presenting the main research questions and objectives, as well as the fundamental ideas that guide the study. It has paved the way for a qualitative investigation into the real-life experiences of teachers, which is expected to yield findings that are both academically significant and essential for creating more effective, compassionate, and responsive learning environments in times of deficit. Building on this foundation, the next chapter will conduct a thorough examination of the pertinent literature.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the background and context of the study, highlighting the research problem, aims, objectives, and the study's significance for leadership in teaching and learning for care and support in primary schools. It provided an overview of the study's theoretical foundation and presented the key motivations behind exploring how teachers fulfil their leadership roles in creating supportive learning environments.

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature relevant to the phenomenon under study. It discusses key concepts related to care and support in education, with a specific focus on the leadership responsibilities of primary school teachers. The review examines the importance of care and support in promoting inclusive education and learner well-being, and it investigates how teachers act as frontline leaders in nurturing learners' academic and emotional development. In addition, the chapter analyses factors that either enable or hinder teachers in leading care and support in their classrooms and schools. It also examines teachers' practices for overcoming barriers and ensuring that learners receive the support they need to thrive.

The literature discussed will directly inform and help answer the following research questions:

- What understandings do primary school teachers have about their role in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?
- What factors affect primary school teachers in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?
- How do primary school teachers deal with or overcome negative factors (if any) when leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?

Therefore, this chapter will provide insights that inform the analysis and interpretation of the study's findings by critically engaging with the previous literature and identifying gaps that the current research seeks to address.

2.2. Care, support and leadership in deprived educational contexts

Teacher leadership in resource-constrained schools is frequently framed in terms of care and support. Scholars such as Noddings (2013) conceptualise care as a moral and relational orientation that shapes pedagogical decision-making and teacher–learner relationships. This perspective foregrounds ethical responsibility and attentiveness to learners’ holistic well-being. Similarly, inclusive education scholars argue that equitable participation requires intentional relational and structural support mechanisms (Ainscow, 2020). However, while this body of literature powerfully theorises care as an ethical stance, it often abstracts care from the material conditions in which it is enacted. The assumption that care can be consistently practised may overlook the realities of overcrowded classrooms, limited institutional capacity, and socio-economic instability characteristic of deprived schooling contexts.

Support, as articulated in international and national frameworks (UNESCO, 2017; DBE, 2010), is typically described in terms of structured interventions, referral systems, and coordinated services. These policy frameworks position schools as sites of integrated provision, where teachers are expected to identify, coordinate, and respond to learners’ academic and psychosocial needs. While such policies establish important normative expectations, they tend to frame leadership for care and support as procedurally attainable, provided that systems are in place. Less attention is given to how teachers themselves interpret, negotiate, or even redefine these expectations in contexts where resources are scarce and institutional support fragmented.

In deprived South African contexts, care-oriented leadership is further complicated by pervasive socio-economic pressures, including poverty, food insecurity, community violence, and systemic inequality (Bundy, 2020; DBE & UNICEF, 2015). The existing literature acknowledges these structural constraints; however, much of it positions teachers either as implementers of policy or as victims of systemic failure. There is comparatively limited exploration of teachers as active agents who construct and enact leadership for care and support within and against these constraints. This creates an important conceptual gap between policy prescriptions and lived leadership practice.

Furthermore, while trauma-sensitive and restorative approaches are increasingly promoted as essential in high-risk environments (Jovanovic, 2021), research often focuses on programme implementation rather than on how teachers experience the emotional and moral labour

associated with sustaining such practices. Questions, therefore, remain about how teachers understand their role in leading teaching and learning for care and support, how they navigate competing demands, and how they mobilise both relational and material resources in everyday practice.

This study conceptualises care and support not merely as policy mandates or abstract ethical commitments, but as contextually negotiated leadership practices embedded in teachers' daily work. In foregrounding teachers' narratives in deprived primary school contexts, the study examines how leadership for care and support is interpreted, enacted, and sustained under conditions of constraint. In doing so, it addresses the limited attention given to teachers' lived experiences and contributes to a more situated understanding of the interplay between agency, structural limitation, and educational equity.

While the literature conceptualises care and support as ethical imperatives embedded in inclusive education policy and relational pedagogy, there is less clarity about how these imperatives are enacted through teacher leadership in specific socio-economic contexts. Policy frameworks articulate expectations for integrated care and support; however, they often understate the contextual realities that shape how teachers interpret and implement such responsibilities. Understanding leadership for care and support, therefore, requires a closer examination of how teacher leadership is theorised and practised within its context. The following section explores teacher leadership as a relational and contextually negotiated practice.

2.3. Teacher leadership in context

Teacher leadership is widely conceptualised as the influence teachers exercise beyond formal positional authority to enhance teaching, learning, and school culture (Oppi & Eisenschmidt, 2022). Scholars emphasise that such leadership is embedded in everyday professional practice and collaborative engagement rather than confined to administrative roles (Aliu, 2023). In the South African context, teacher leadership often emerges informally, as teachers respond to localised learner and community needs (Van der Vyver et al., 2021). Collectively, these perspectives challenge hierarchical models of leadership and foreground relational and distributed forms of influence.

However, much of this scholarship presents teacher leadership as inherently generative and developmental, often assuming organisational conditions that enable collaboration and shared decision-making. Distributed leadership theory, for example, frames school reform as a collective enterprise (Lu, 2022), but it frequently presupposes structural stability and adequate capacity. In deprived schooling contexts, where resources are limited and institutional pressures high, distributed leadership may operate less as a strategic reform model and more as a compensatory response to systemic gaps. This raises important questions about how leadership is enacted when teachers assume additional responsibilities out of necessity rather than formal designation.

Empirical studies illustrate that teacher leaders adapt curricula to enhance cultural relevance (Teitelbaum, 2020), mentor struggling learners, and build partnerships with families to address absenteeism and disengagement (Van der Vyver et al., 2021). While these practices demonstrate relational and responsive leadership, they are often discussed without sustained interrogation of the emotional labour, policy demands, and socio-economic constraints that shape them. Consequently, teacher leadership risks being idealised as collaborative and adaptive without fully accounting for the contextual pressures that shape its practice.

Furthermore, limited research explicitly examines how teacher leadership intersects with care and support in teaching and learning. Although relational practices are acknowledged, the literature seldom explores how teachers themselves interpret leadership when care is not peripheral but central to educational survival in deprived communities. Questions, therefore, remain about how informal leadership interacts with formal policy frameworks, how resource limitations reshape leadership practices, and how socio-economic realities influence teachers' understandings of their roles.

Examining teacher leadership within context thus requires moving beyond abstract leadership models to consider how leadership for care and support is negotiated within specific socio-economic and institutional conditions. This study builds on existing scholarship by foregrounding teachers' narratives in deprived primary school settings and exploring how leadership for care and support is understood, enacted, and sustained amid structural constraints.

While teacher leadership is increasingly recognised as distributed and contextually responsive, there remains a need to examine how such leadership is concretely enacted in primary school

settings, particularly where care and support are central to teaching and learning. To understand how leadership for care and support materialises in everyday practice, the following section explores the specific roles and practices primary school teachers assume in deprived contexts.

2.4. The roles and practices of primary school teachers in leading for care and support

In under-resourced primary schools, teachers frequently extend their responsibilities beyond academic instruction to address learners' holistic needs, including emotional, social, and developmental dimensions. Evidence indicates that teachers perceive creating safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments as central to their practice, particularly in deprived contexts where learners face multiple challenges (Nygaard et al., 2022). These conditions prompt analytical questions: How do teachers enact leadership that prioritises care and support, and how do contextual barriers shape the strategies they employ?

Teachers' practices in leading for care and support are multidimensional, encompassing nurturing, advocacy, collaboration, facilitation of social-emotional learning (SEL), and continuous professional development. These roles are integrated within teaching and learning, reflecting how teachers respond ethically and practically to learners' needs (UNESCO, 2016). The following subsections critically examine these roles, highlighting the evidence, systemic challenges, and implications for understanding teachers' leadership for care and support in deprived primary school contexts.

2.4.1. Teachers as nurturers and caregivers

In deprived primary school contexts, teachers' roles frequently extend beyond academic instruction to encompass learners' socio-emotional and psychological well-being. Empirical studies suggest that teachers often perceive nurturing learners as intrinsic to their professional identity rather than as an additional responsibility. For example, Cruz et al. (2022), in their examination of the Tealeaf programme in India, found that teachers regarded mental health support as integral to their work, adapting classroom practices to incorporate emotional care despite concerns about workload and social stigma. Such findings suggest that leadership for

care and support is enacted relationally, through everyday interactions, rather than through formal authority structures.

However, while this literature affirms teachers' commitment to nurturing roles, it may inadvertently normalise the expansion of teachers' responsibilities without sufficiently interrogating the structural conditions that necessitate such role extension. The expectation that teachers assume caregiving functions often arises in contexts where social services are limited, and community vulnerabilities are pronounced. In this sense, nurturing becomes both an ethical commitment and a compensatory response to systemic gaps. This dual positioning introduces a persistent tension between moral responsibility and practical constraints, particularly in overcrowded, under-resourced classrooms.

Relational dimensions of care, including trust, empathy, and respect, are consistently highlighted as foundational for fostering learner engagement and resilience (Matchett, 2022; Makoelle & Burmistrova, 2024; Ilhavenil & Aravindan, 2024). However, much of this scholarship foregrounds interpersonal qualities while underexamining how performative accountability frameworks, curriculum pressures, and limited institutional support restrict teachers' ability to provide sustained, authentic care. Framing nurturing primarily as an individual disposition risks obscuring the structural forces that shape how, and to what extent, teachers can enact care in practice. Leadership for care and support, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a matter of teacher compassion or competence; it must be situated within broader systemic and socio-economic realities.

Within the South African context, teachers frequently function as non-familial caregivers in communities marked by historical inequity and ongoing deprivation (Zhou, 2023). Pedagogical caregiving, as conceptualised by Shen et al. (2024), involves intentionally cultivating psychologically safe environments that promote belonging and motivation. Noddings' (2013) ethic of care reinforces that relational attentiveness is central to educational practice rather than peripheral. When viewed through the lens of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010), such nurturing behaviours reflect leadership oriented toward service and ethical responsibility. Nevertheless, what remains less explored is how teachers themselves interpret and negotiate these caregiving expectations within constrained primary school contexts. Understanding whether teachers perceive nurturing as leadership, obligation, or moral burden is critical for illuminating how leadership for care and support is constructed in practice.

While nurturing and caregiving highlight the relational foundations of leadership for care and support, they do not fully capture how teachers respond to structural barriers that impede learners' well-being. Beyond providing emotional safety, teachers often assume roles that require confronting systemic inequities directly. The following subsection, therefore, examines teachers as advocates for learner well-being, extending care-oriented leadership into more explicit forms of agency and intervention.

2.4.2. Teachers as advocates for learner well-being

In socio-economically deprived contexts, teacher leadership frequently extends beyond nurturing to encompass active advocacy for learners' holistic well-being. Soldaat (2018) shows that South African teachers often serve as intermediaries between home and school, providing emotional support and navigating family–school tensions despite limited formal training and institutional support. Such findings suggest that advocacy is not an optional extension of professional identity but an embedded dimension of leadership for care and support. However, the literature often presents these practices as commendable examples of teacher commitment without fully interrogating the structural conditions that necessitate such advocacy.

Advocacy in under-resourced schools is commonly enacted through classroom-based innovations and informal support mechanisms. Studies show that teachers integrate mental health strategies into everyday teaching, facilitate peer-support initiatives, and conduct emotional check-ins despite constrained funding and limited access to specialists (Reupert, 2019; Ranganathan & Wadhwa, 2023). Similarly, Pillay et al. (2023) describe how teachers blend relational care with formal instruction, challenging conventional professional boundaries and exemplifying adaptive professionalism. While this scholarship highlights teacher agency and creativity, it risks normalising the expansion of teachers' roles without questioning how sustained advocacy affects workload, emotional labour, and professional sustainability.

In South African township schools, advocacy often involves compensating for systemic shortages by providing psychosocial support in overcrowded classrooms with minimal external assistance (Skinner et al., 2019; Kwatubana, 2022). These practices reveal that advocacy is deeply intertwined with structural inequities. Rather than simply reflecting personal dedication, advocacy emerges as a response to policy gaps, inadequate social services, and community

vulnerability. This complicates celebratory narratives of teacher leadership, raising important questions about how teachers interpret their advocacy roles: do they see advocacy as leadership, a moral duty, a professional obligation, or an institutional expectation?

Advocacy further extends into curriculum adaptation and engagement with external stakeholders. Teachers embed well-being and health education into subjects such as Life Orientation to address broader developmental needs (Aquilina & Schembri, 2024; DBE, 2010), and collaborate with specialists and community organisations to establish multi-tiered support structures (Spandagou, 2021). Norman and Eslami (2022) conceptualise this as “pedagogical care-mapping,” where instruction is deliberately tailored to learners’ intersecting needs. From a servant leadership perspective (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010), these practices reflect leadership oriented toward service and social justice. However, while servant leadership foregrounds empathy and moral responsibility, less attention has been given to how teachers negotiate the limits of advocacy within constrained institutional environments.

Advocacy, therefore, represents both an enactment of agency and a response to systemic inequity. Understanding how teachers balance ethical commitment with practical limitations is essential for examining leadership for care and support in deprived primary contexts.

While advocacy highlights teachers’ proactive efforts to address structural barriers affecting learners, such leadership seldom occurs in isolation. Sustained advocacy often depends on collaborative networks within and beyond the school. The following subsection, therefore, explores teachers as collaborators with stakeholders, examining how relational and organisational partnerships strengthen care and support in deprived primary school contexts.

2.4.3. Teachers as collaborators with stakeholders

Collaboration between teachers and stakeholders is widely recognised as a central dimension of leadership for care and support in deprived school contexts. Mweli and Gcelu (2022) emphasise structured parent–teacher engagement as a mechanism for strengthening academic outcomes and enhancing the school’s care ecosystem. In contrast, Adebola and Tsotetsi (2022) extend collaboration beyond dyadic parent–teacher relationships to include community organisations and healthcare professionals, framing it as multi-tiered network leadership. This distinction reveals an important conceptual tension: while some scholarship foregrounds

relational engagement at the micro level, other work conceptualises collaboration as a broader systemic alignment of actors. The variation suggests that leadership for care and support is neither uniform nor procedurally fixed, but negotiated according to stakeholder capacity, institutional culture, and contextual constraint.

Empirical evidence from South African settings further illustrates this complexity. Gcelu (2019) documents teacher-led multi-stakeholder initiatives in the Eastern Cape addressing adolescent pregnancy and learner well-being through partnerships with clinics, peer mentors, and parents. These initiatives demonstrate the transformative potential of collaborative leadership in overcoming contextual barriers. However, they often emerge organically rather than through formal institutional planning, highlighting the adaptive and improvised nature of collaboration in resource-constrained environments. This contrasts with the more structured stakeholder alignment models advocated by Adebola and Tsotetsi (2022), which assume strategic coordination and sustained organisational capacity. Such divergence suggests that collaborative leadership may function differently in deprived contexts, where teachers frequently compensate for institutional fragmentation rather than operate within cohesive support systems.

At the individual learner support level, collaboration is enacted through co-constructed intervention plans and sustained communication with families (Amoako et al., 2021). Zheng (2022) further demonstrates how these practices create multi-layered networks integrating academic, social, and emotional care. While these studies affirm the relational and ethical dimensions of collaboration, they seldom interrogate the power dynamics embedded within stakeholder partnerships. Differences in socio-economic status, educational capital, and institutional authority can shape which voices are prioritised and which responsibilities expand. Moreover, limited attention is given to how teachers balance collaborative expectations alongside teaching, caregiving, and advocacy roles.

From a servant leadership perspective (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010), collaboration embodies leadership grounded in service, relational influence, and commitment to collective well-being. However, servant leadership scholarship often presumes reciprocal trust and shared purpose among stakeholders, conditions that may not consistently exist in deprived communities marked by instability and mistrust. Understanding collaboration as leadership, therefore, requires examining how teachers negotiate relational complexity, institutional limitation, and ethical responsibility simultaneously.

Collaboration thus emerges as both relational and strategic, amplifying teachers' capacity to support learners while simultaneously revealing the constraints under which such networks are sustained. Examining how these collaborative efforts translate into classroom practice is critical for understanding how leadership for care and support becomes embedded in teaching and learning processes.

While collaboration strengthens networks of care beyond the classroom, leadership for care and support must also be operationalised within daily pedagogical practice. One significant mechanism through which this occurs is Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), which integrates relational care directly into curriculum and instruction. The following subsection, therefore, examines teachers as facilitators of Social-Emotional Learning, highlighting how collaborative networks are translated into structured classroom practice.

2.4.4. Teachers as facilitators of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is increasingly positioned as a structured mechanism through which leadership for care and support is operationalised in primary education, particularly in contexts of deprivation. SEL frameworks aim to equip learners with competencies in emotional regulation, relationship building, and ethical engagement (Zieher, 2024). Empirical evidence, such as Li et al.'s (2022) 16-week intervention in a low-income rural Chinese primary school, demonstrates measurable improvements in behavioural outcomes and peer connections, reinforcing the central role of teachers in translating SEL frameworks into classroom practice. These findings underscore the significance of teacher facilitation in embedding care within pedagogy.

However, while SEL literature frequently highlights programmatic effectiveness, it often assumes that structured interventions can be transferred across contexts with minimal adaptation. Scholars such as Laguna et al. (2019) and Omar and Rahman (2023) caution that SEL programmes are sometimes decontextualised from local socio-cultural realities, thereby limiting their relevance in deprived settings. This tension between standardised frameworks and contextual responsiveness reveals a critical dimension of leadership: teachers are not merely implementers of prescribed curricula but interpreters and adaptors of care-oriented models within constrained environments.

The facilitation of SEL, therefore, involves both structured pedagogical strategies and relational modelling. Techniques such as restorative circles, role-playing, journaling, and guided group dialogue are identified as effective in promoting social awareness and self-regulation (Peddigrew et al., 2022; Pyle, 2022). However, other scholars emphasise that the effectiveness of such strategies depends less on technical execution and more on teachers' sustained empathy, attentive listening, and conflict-resolution practices (Jennings et al., 2021; Rahmat, 2020). This divergence highlights a conceptual duality within SEL scholarship: while some approaches prioritise formalised curricula, others foreground teachers' relational and moral agency. Leadership for care and support, in this sense, extends beyond curriculum delivery to encompass modelling socio-emotional competence and cultivating psychologically safe learning spaces.

From a servant leadership perspective (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010), SEL facilitation reflects leadership grounded in empowerment and holistic learner development. Nevertheless, servant leadership scholarship often presumes stable environments that enable sustained relational engagement. In deprived contexts characterised by overcrowding, resource limitations, and emotional strain, facilitating SEL may require considerable adaptive capacity and professional resilience. The literature indicates that effective SEL implementation depends on teachers' reflective practice and their willingness to modify strategies in response to learners' evolving needs. However, limited research explores how teachers themselves experience this adaptive labour or how they develop the competencies necessary to sustain it.

Understanding teachers as facilitators of SEL, therefore, requires examining not only programme outcomes but also the ongoing professional learning processes that enable contextually responsive practice.

If leadership for care and support is enacted through adaptive and reflective classroom strategies, it follows that teachers must continually develop their knowledge and skills to sustain such practices. The following subsection, therefore, examines teachers as continuous learners, exploring how professional growth and reflective engagement shape their capacity to lead for care and support in deprived primary school contexts.

2.4.5. Teachers as continuous learners

Continuous professional learning is frequently presented as essential for teachers working in deprived contexts to sustain leadership for care and support. Dyosini (2024) observes that the complex social, emotional, and cognitive needs of learners in under-resourced schools demand ongoing pedagogical adaptation. Similarly, Datnow (2020) argues that shifts in learner demographics, technological advancement, and educational reform require teachers to engage in sustained professional development. While this literature positions professional learning as a necessary response to contextual complexity, it often frames such development as an individual responsibility, implicitly assuming that teachers have equal access to time, institutional encouragement, and material resources to pursue growth.

Reframing professional learning as a dimension of teacher leadership offers a more nuanced interpretation. When teachers actively cultivate new knowledge and reflective capacity to serve learners better, they enact leadership through self-development rather than positional authority. In this sense, leadership for care and support extends beyond classroom practice to include intentional investment in professional growth. However, the expectation that teachers continuously upgrade their skills may also reproduce pressures within already demanding environments, particularly where formal support structures are inconsistent.

Empirical studies demonstrate that structured, reflective professional development can significantly enhance care-oriented practice. Verster et al. (2024) report that rural South African teachers who engaged in adaptive planning and reflective inquiry shifted from rigid content delivery to more learner-centred approaches, thereby strengthening context-sensitive decision-making. Likewise, Pasuluri (2020) highlights teachers' rapid adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp were repurposed to sustain both academic instruction and social-emotional connections. These examples illustrate that continuous learning can function as a mechanism of agency, enabling teachers to respond creatively to disruption and scarcity.

Beyond technical skill acquisition, professional development fosters reflective and service-oriented practice. Collaborative reflection and peer feedback strengthen trauma-informed strategies, relational classroom management, and inclusive pedagogy (Lingam, 2019; Legodi-Rakgalakane & Mokhapanyane, 2022; Garrity, 2022). From a servant-leadership perspective (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010), such reflective growth represents leadership grounded in

humility, service, and a commitment to learners' holistic development. However, while the literature affirms the value of ongoing learning, it seldom interrogates disparities in access to meaningful professional development or the emotional labour required to sustain continuous adaptation within constrained contexts.

Continuous learning, therefore, emerges as both an enabling mechanism and a potential pressure point in leadership for care and support. Teachers' ability to sustain reflective, adaptive practice is shaped not only by personal commitment but also by organisational culture, leadership support, and systemic conditions. Understanding professional learning as leadership thus requires examining the broader factors that facilitate or constrain teachers' capacity to enact care-oriented practices effectively.

While the preceding subsections have explored the roles and practices through which primary school teachers lead for care and support, these enactments do not occur in isolation from contextual influence. The extent to which teachers can nurture, advocate, collaborate, facilitate SEL, and engage in continuous learning is shaped by a range of factors that both facilitate and constrain. The following section, therefore, examines the factors that affect primary school teachers in leading for care and support in deprived contexts.

2.5. The factors that affect primary school teachers in leading for care and support

The ability of primary school teachers to lead is influenced by a complex interplay of facilitating and constraining variables, despite their critical role in promoting compassion and support in the classroom. Teachers are encouraged to use learner-centred techniques by supportive school leadership that prioritises their well-being and fosters collaborative decision-making (Leithwood et al., 2020). Focusing on providing teachers with trauma-informed and social-emotional learning (SEL) techniques, professional development improves their ability to lead for care and support (Nikolaou & Stamatis, 2023). For instance, Verster et al. (2024) found that despite structural obstacles, self-directed professional development enabled South African teachers to adapt their instruction to meet the diverse needs of their learners. While teacher agency and resilience, developed through mentorship and reflective practice, enable teachers to maintain compassionate relationships even in challenging circumstances, a positive

school culture based on trust and shared values promotes collaboration and reduces burnout (Bentsalo et al., 2025).

On the other hand, several constraining factors hinder teachers' ability to lead for care and support. Opportunities for individualised learner support are diminished by heavy workloads, big class sizes, and administrative obligations (Gqwabaza, 2025). Additional obstacles to inclusive and compassionate teaching include a lack of resources, toxic school climates, and restricted access to professional development (UNESCO, 2020; Yengkopiong, 2024; Rani et al., 2023). These difficulties are exacerbated by more widespread systemic injustices, such as poverty and unequal access to high-quality education (Rogahang et al., 2020).

While the discussion above highlights the potential for teachers to lead compassionately, it is important to acknowledge that, in reality, such practices remain limited and inconsistent across many South African schools, particularly those situated in deprived or under-resourced contexts. Research by Spaul (2013; 2020) and others underscores the deep systemic crises facing the South African education system, including persistent inequalities, poor learning outcomes, and inadequate teacher support structures. As a result, many teachers operate in conditions that are not conducive to sustained, care-oriented practices, despite their professional commitment and moral purpose. This recognition does not detract from the value of such leadership but instead situates it within the broader socio-educational challenges that constrain its full realisation.

In general, care-oriented teaching is encouraged by supportive leadership, professional development, and teacher agency; yet structural and systemic obstacles still impede these initiatives. Policies that prioritise teacher well-being, fair resource distribution, and culturally sensitive professional development are necessary to address these issues.

2.5.1. The factors that facilitate primary school teachers to lead for care and support

Primary school teachers play a crucial role in guiding teaching and learning, providing care and support as schools evolve into holistic settings that promote learners' intellectual and emotional well-being. Several interconnected factors make this leadership role possible, including professional development that equips teachers with inclusive and socio-emotional teaching strategies (Van der Rhee and Dreyer, 2024) and supportive school leadership that

provides guidance and resources (Adams et al., 2023). Positive teacher-learner connections foster trust and responsiveness to learners' needs, while a positive school culture promotes empathy and collaboration (Ansari et al., 2020). Furthermore, teachers may adapt and lead despite contextual constraints due to their agency and resilience (Zhu, 2023). These facilitators' roots in individual qualities and structural support are essential for creating welcoming, encouraging learning environments. Therefore, the following facilitating factors have been identified in the literature: supportive school leadership, professional development, positive school culture, positive teacher-leader relationships, and teacher agency and resilience.

2.5.1.1. Supportive school leadership

In disadvantaged primary school contexts, teachers frequently navigate the intersecting pressures of trauma-affected learners, poverty, overcrowding, and institutional resource scarcity. In such environments, supportive school leadership is often identified as a critical enabler of teachers' capacity to lead for care and support. Beltman (2020) argues that supportive leadership is essential in contexts where teachers must balance academic instruction with significant emotional labour. Similarly, Shula's (2023) study in rural South African schools highlights how principals adopting servant leadership practices, including active listening, empathy, and facilitation of teamwork, contribute to teacher motivation, resilience, and retention. These findings suggest that leadership at the School Management Team (SMT) level plays a pivotal role in shaping whether care-oriented practices are institutionally supported or individually shouldered.

However, while the literature consistently affirms the value of supportive leadership, it often treats "support" as an inherently positive and self-evident construct. Less attention is given to how support is operationalised in everyday school routines or how inconsistencies in leadership practice may undermine teacher agency. Leithwood et al. (2020) contend that effective leadership bridges academic goals with holistic learner development, embedding care into the core functioning of the school. However, in resource-constrained settings, leadership may oscillate between compliance-driven accountability demands and relational care priorities, creating tensions that affect teachers' capacity to sustain support-oriented practices.

Empirical studies demonstrate that leadership which recognises contextual deprivation, through structured routines, collaborative problem-solving, and acknowledgement of socio-economic realities, correlates with enhanced teacher engagement in care-focused practices (Mestry, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Nevertheless, these studies seldom interrogate the sustainability of such leadership approaches in environments marked by administrative overload and systemic constraint. Supportive leadership, when viewed through the lenses of distributed and servant leadership, implies shared responsibility and service-oriented values. However, distributed leadership presumes collaborative capacity, while servant leadership presumes relational trust, both of which may be unevenly present in deprived contexts. This raises important questions about how teachers experience supportive leadership in practice and whether it consistently enhances or occasionally complicates their ability to lead for care and support.

The operationalisation of supportive leadership becomes particularly significant in relation to teacher preparedness. Adewumi et al. (2019) note that many teachers in under-resourced schools lack adequate preparation to identify and respond to diverse learner needs. School leaders, therefore, play a critical role in facilitating mentorship, structured guidance, and targeted skill development (Juan & Hannan, 2025; Braude & Dwarika, 2020). Graven et al. (2024) further demonstrate that professional development initiatives focused on barriers to learning strengthened teachers' diagnostic and responsive capacities. These findings suggest that supportive leadership is not merely relational encouragement but an active process of capacity-building that directly influences teachers' ability to systematically enact care and support.

Supportive school leadership thus emerges as a foundational enabling condition for teacher agency in deprived contexts. However, its effectiveness depends on how it is translated into professional growth opportunities, institutional culture, and practical guidance. Understanding the depth and consistency of such support is essential for analysing the broader factors that facilitate or constrain teachers' leadership for care and support.

While supportive school leadership provides relational and structural foundations for care-oriented practice, its impact is closely intertwined with the availability and quality of professional development opportunities. The following subsection, therefore, examines professional development as a distinct but interrelated facilitator that influences teachers' capacity to lead for care and support in deprived primary school contexts.

2.5.1.2. Professional development

Professional development (PD) is widely recognised as a central enabling mechanism for teachers working in under-resourced schools to lead teaching and learning that incorporates care and support. Makoelle and Burmistrova (2024) argue that in contexts marked by poverty, behavioural challenges, and health-related vulnerabilities, PD must extend beyond instructional enhancement to include preparation for psychosocial support and holistic learner development. Similarly, Bertram and Mxenge (2022) suggest that well-structured PD strengthens teachers' capacity to cultivate inclusive classrooms and promote resilience among vulnerable learners. Collectively, this literature positions PD as a strategic lever for strengthening leadership for care and support.

However, while PD is often presented as inherently beneficial, its effectiveness depends on alignment among content, structure, and context. Watson et al. (2025) contend that teachers' ability to integrate care into daily practice improves when PD is linked to structured frameworks such as the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) programme and UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development initiatives. Programmes emphasising trauma-informed pedagogy, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and inclusive education offer teachers practical strategies for addressing learner trauma, absenteeism, and social disadvantage (UNESCO, 2020). However, such frameworks may assume institutional coherence and consistent implementation capacity, conditions that are not uniformly present in deprived contexts. This raises questions about the extent to which nationally designed PD programmes can adequately account for localised socio-economic complexity.

Research further indicates that collaborative and reflective PD enhances teachers' confidence and adaptive capacity. Mtetwa and Ndemo (2022) highlight how peer networks facilitate the sharing of context-specific strategies, while Munje (2018) reports increased teacher motivation and readiness to integrate care-focused practices following structured PD engagement. These findings underscore the relational dimension of professional learning, suggesting that PD not only transfers knowledge but also strengthens professional identity and collective efficacy. However, translating PD into sustained practice depends on institutional reinforcement. Tshelane (2021) argues that PD can bridge policy aspirations and classroom realities only when tailored to local challenges such as hunger, trauma, and socio-economic disadvantage.

Crucially, the literature suggests that professional development alone is insufficient to guarantee meaningful transformation. The effectiveness of PD is mediated by organisational culture, leadership support, workload distribution, and systemic stability. In environments where care-oriented practices are not legitimised or prioritised, teachers may struggle to implement newly acquired strategies despite training. Professional development thus functions as a necessary but not sufficient condition for enabling leadership for care and support.

Understanding PD as a facilitator, therefore, requires examining the broader institutional climate within which teachers operate. While PD equips teachers with technical and pedagogical tools, the extent to which these tools translate into sustained care-centred leadership depends on the cultural norms, relational trust, and shared values embedded within the school.

If professional development provides the knowledge and strategies necessary for care-oriented leadership, the broader school culture determines whether such practices are supported, sustained, or marginalised. The following subsection, therefore, examines positive school culture as a critical facilitator of teachers' capacity to lead for care and support in deprived primary school contexts.

2.5.1.3. Positive school culture

A positive school culture is commonly defined as the shared values, beliefs, and practices that shape interaction, collaboration, and collective identity within a school community (Bentsalo et al., 2025). Such cultures are characterised by trust, inclusivity, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging among both teachers and learners. Research consistently associates positive school culture with improved academic engagement and learner confidence (Busing, 2025), suggesting that relational climate directly influences educational outcomes. However, while the benefits of positive culture are widely affirmed, the concept is often treated normatively, with limited interrogation of how such cultures are cultivated and sustained in under-resourced environments marked by structural inequity.

In deprived contexts, positive school culture assumes heightened significance because it can mediate, though not eliminate, the stressors associated with poverty, overcrowding, and limited material resources. Bundy (2020) notes that both teachers and learners in disadvantaged

settings experience heightened socio-emotional strain. Makhalemele and Tlale (2021) argue that when schools actively promote empathy, consistency, and respect, teachers are better positioned to provide the emotional stability learners require for meaningful participation. This suggests that school culture operates not merely as a background condition but as an active facilitator of care-oriented practice. However, framing culture as a protective buffer risks overstating its compensatory power, particularly when systemic challenges remain unaddressed.

Moreover, positive school culture plays a crucial role in teacher retention and resilience. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2020) highlight the emotional demands of teaching in underprivileged contexts and the associated risk of burnout. Collegial collaboration, shared decision-making, and open communication are therefore seen as mechanisms that sustain professional motivation (Makirimani & Naicker, 2025). Panindranauth (2023) further suggests that cultures of openness enable learners to voice concerns, thereby strengthening teachers' responsiveness to individual needs. While these findings affirm the enabling function of positive culture, less attention is given to how such cultures are negotiated amid competing accountability pressures, leadership transitions, and limited institutional capacity.

From an analytical perspective, positive school culture can be understood as the relational infrastructure within which leadership for care and support is either legitimised or marginalised. A culture that values empathy, collaboration, and shared responsibility reinforces teachers' agency to enact nurturing, advocacy, and inclusive pedagogies. Conversely, a culture dominated by performative accountability or fragmented leadership may constrain such practices. Positive school culture, therefore, functions as both a facilitator of teacher well-being and a determinant of how care-oriented leadership is operationalised in everyday practice.

Understanding school culture as an enabling condition directs attention to the interpersonal dynamics that give it tangible expression. While institutional values shape the broader climate, the quality of teacher–learner relationships ultimately determines how care and support are experienced within classrooms.

If positive school culture provides the relational foundation for care-oriented leadership, its practical manifestation is most visible in the quality of teacher–learner relationships. The following subsection, therefore, examines positive teacher–learner relationships as a critical

facilitator of teachers' capacity to lead for care and support in deprived primary school contexts.

2.5.1.4. Positive teacher-learner relationships

Positive teacher–learner relationships are widely regarded as central to effective teaching and learning, particularly in primary school contexts where relational interaction forms the foundation of academic and socio-emotional development. Strong relational bonds enable teachers to integrate care and support within everyday pedagogical practices rather than treating them as separate interventions. Maseko and Chigeza (2024) argue that responsive and nurturing relationships allow teachers to identify learners' individual needs and adjust instruction accordingly, thereby promoting both academic achievement and emotional well-being. In socio-economically deprived contexts, this relational dimension assumes heightened importance, as teacher care often operates as a stabilising force amid external adversity.

While emotional responsiveness is frequently highlighted, Awais Irshad et al. (2024) extend the discussion by demonstrating how inclusive pedagogical strategies operationalise relational care in classroom practice. Similarly, Ansari et al. (2020) emphasise trust, respect, and emotional security as preconditions for learner engagement and motivation. Collectively, these studies suggest that effective pedagogy cannot be disentangled from relational support. However, the literature often assumes that teachers possess the time, emotional capacity, and institutional backing required to sustain such intensive relational engagement. In overcrowded, resource-constrained classrooms, enacting relational pedagogy may be both emotionally demanding and structurally constrained.

The theoretical lens of Noddings' (2005) pedagogy of care provides critical insight into this relational emphasis. Noddings conceptualises care as reciprocal, contextually responsive, and grounded in attentiveness rather than authority, challenging hierarchical models of classroom interaction. This perspective is particularly relevant in under-resourced South African primary schools, where teachers frequently assume roles extending beyond academic instruction (DBE, 2014). Empirical evidence reinforces this relational imperative: Kang (2024) demonstrates that learners in psychologically safe classrooms exhibit greater resilience and engagement when teacher care is visible and consistent. However, both Noddings and Kang acknowledge that

structural barriers, such as large class sizes, insufficient training, and policy-practice gaps, limit the full realisation of care-oriented pedagogy.

The Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) framework illustrates this tension. Although policy mandates emphasise psychosocial support, implementation in rural and under-resourced schools remains uneven due to limited resources and systemic instability. This disjuncture underscores a critical insight: positive teacher–learner relationships are not solely products of individual goodwill but are shaped by institutional conditions and professional capacity.

Consequently, positive teacher–learner relationships emerge as both a facilitator and a site of vulnerability in care-centred education. Their sustainability depends not only on supportive policies and school culture but also on teachers’ autonomy, adaptability, and emotional resilience. Relational pedagogy, therefore, intersects with professional agency, as teachers must navigate competing demands while maintaining consistent, meaningful connections with learners.

If positive teacher–learner relationships represent the practical enactment of care-oriented leadership, the capacity to sustain them under structural constraints depends fundamentally on teachers’ agency and resilience. The following subsection, therefore, examines how these personal and professional attributes enable teachers to overcome contextual limitations and lead for care and support in deprived primary school settings.

2.5.1.5. Teacher agency and resilience

Teacher agency and resilience are increasingly recognised as central enablers of leadership for care and support in underprivileged educational contexts (Zhu, 2023). Contemporary scholarship conceptualises both constructs as dynamic and contextually enacted rather than fixed personality traits (Sibanyoni, 2022; AlAjimi & Alsaleh, 2023). This shift moves beyond earlier deficit-oriented perspectives that framed resilience merely as individual coping, instead emphasising the interplay between personal initiative, relational networks, and structural conditions in shaping teachers’ responses to adversity. Within care-centred educational leadership, agency and resilience therefore function as adaptive capacities that enable teachers to sustain ethical commitment amid systemic constraint.

Teacher resilience refers to the capacity to persist, adapt, and maintain professional identity despite persistent challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, high learner vulnerability, and limited institutional support (Versfeld, 2022). Empirical findings from peri-urban South African schools indicate that resilience is socially mediated rather than individually produced. Teachers who participate in collaborative interventions and supportive peer networks report enhanced trust, motivation, and collective efficacy, which in turn strengthen their ability to provide holistic learner support (Versfeld, 2022). This suggests that resilience is relationally sustained and embedded within school culture rather than residing solely within the individual teacher.

Agency, by contrast, denotes teachers' capacity to make deliberate choices and enact purposeful action within constrained environments (Durrant, 2019). In care-oriented practice, agency is evident when teachers reorganise classroom authority, mobilise community partnerships, or draw on informal networks to address learners' emotional, nutritional, and health-related needs (Landa & Donaldson, 2020). Such actions illustrate how teachers navigate and negotiate structural limitations rather than passively accepting them. When agency intersects with resilience, teachers can sustain relational professionalism while adapting to contextual demands. Legodi-Rakgalakane and Mokhampanyane (2022) argue that this intersection fosters empathy, creativity, and flexibility, thereby reinforcing teachers' capacity to enact care in meaningful, contextually responsive ways.

However, while agency and resilience are frequently celebrated as empowering attributes, there is a risk of inadvertently romanticising teachers' capacity to "cope" under persistent structural inequity. High workloads, chronic resource scarcity, and systemic instability can erode both agency and resilience over time. Reflective practice and peer collaboration (Tomlinson, 2021; Versfeld, 2022) may strengthen these capacities, but without sustained institutional and policy-level support, individual adaptability may become unsustainable. This tension highlights a critical insight: agency and resilience are not substitutes for systemic reform, but rather mediating mechanisms that allow teachers to enact care within imperfect conditions.

From a leadership perspective, agency and resilience enable teachers to embody service-oriented, relational professionalism by prioritising learner well-being while navigating structural constraints. However, their effectiveness depends on supportive leadership, professional development, and positive school culture, reinforcing the interdependent nature of the facilitators discussed throughout Section 2.5.1.

While agency and resilience empower teachers to lead for care and support, the contextual realities that necessitate these capacities can simultaneously constrain their expression. The following section, therefore, examines the structural, institutional, and personal factors that hinder primary school teachers' ability to sustain leadership for care and support in deprived educational contexts.

2.5.2. The factors that constrain primary school teachers in leading for care and support

Teachers are unable to successfully lead teaching and learning for care and support as a result of several limitations. The strain of excessive workloads, which provide little time for personalised learner assistance or emotional engagement, is one of the most urgent issues (Lagawid, 2024). Teachers' ability to adopt inclusive and nurturing approaches is further hindered by limited resources, including poor infrastructure, inadequate instructional materials, and limited access to support services, especially in schools with limited funding (Mogale & Malatji, 2025). Teachers' motivation and emotional health can also be harmed by a toxic school culture characterised by low morale, poor leadership, and a lack of teamwork (Mannix-McNamara et al., 2021). These problems are exacerbated by the scarcity of opportunities for professional development specifically designed to care for and support diverse learners, leaving many teachers unprepared to meet these requirements (Rani et al., 2023).

Additionally, it is challenging for teachers to consistently provide care and support due to systemic injustices, including socio-economic and policy-practice gaps, which create uneven conditions that disproportionately affect schools in marginalised populations (Rudolph et al., 2019). These interrelated limitations highlight the urgent need for systemic changes and targeted support to enable teachers to fulfil their leadership responsibilities in this critical area of education. Therefore, the following constraining factors have been identified from the literature reviewed: heavy workload, limited resources, toxic school cultures, lack of professional development and systemic inequities.

2.5.2.1. Heavy workloads

Teachers' heavy workloads are widely recognised as a significant constraint on their capacity to lead teaching and learning for care and support, particularly in socio-economically deprived

contexts (Wahab et al., 2024). Beyond curriculum delivery, teachers in under-resourced schools are often responsible for extensive lesson preparation, continuous assessment, administrative reporting, extracurricular duties, and providing emotional and psychosocial support (Nomtshongwana & Manyakaza, 2025). The cumulative effect of these responsibilities extends beyond physical fatigue; it reduces the cognitive, emotional, and relational resources necessary to sustain care-centred pedagogical practice. Workload, therefore, should not be conceptualised merely as an issue of time management or individual efficiency, but as a structural determinant shaping the depth and consistency of relational engagement within classrooms.

Empirical evidence indicates that chronic workload intensification contributes to stress, burnout, and diminished professional efficacy (SACE, 2022). Bellibas (2023) observes that when teachers are overburdened, they may prioritise procedural compliance and task completion over relational attentiveness. This shift reflects a broader tension between accountability-driven demands and care-oriented teaching. In “task-saturated” environments, as described by Fourie and De Klerk (2024), the mechanical fulfilment of duties can displace intentional relational engagement, undermining the ethical and responsive dimensions of leadership for care and support. For learners already experiencing trauma or socio-economic vulnerability, such diminished relational presence may reinforce feelings of marginalisation rather than belonging.

Heavy workloads also constrain teachers’ ability to provide differentiated instruction and individualised support. Naicker (2019) highlights how limited preparation time restricts adaptive lesson planning, while high teacher–learner ratios intensify pressure and reduce opportunities for sustained interaction. Mdodana-Zide (2023) further argues that in contexts of scarcity, workload, and resource constraints are mutually reinforcing, creating conditions in which teachers operate in a constant state of reactive management rather than proactive, relational leadership. While some teachers demonstrate remarkable resilience under these pressures, reliance on individual adaptability risks normalising unsustainable working conditions.

Importantly, comparative evidence suggests that where institutional measures reduce administrative burden and redistribute responsibilities, teachers are better able to integrate relational and academic support. This underscores a critical insight: enabling leadership for care is not solely dependent on teacher commitment but on structural conditions that allow such

commitment to be enacted meaningfully. Addressing excessive workload is therefore fundamental to sustaining holistic, empathetic, and effective teaching practices in deprived primary school settings.

If heavy workloads constrain teachers' relational capacity and professional efficacy, the scarcity of physical and material resources further compounds these limitations. The following section, therefore, examines how resource shortages function as an additional structural barrier to teachers' leadership for care and support.

2.5.2.2. Limited resources

In socio-economically disadvantaged contexts, limited material and institutional resources significantly constrain primary school teachers' capacity to lead teaching and learning for care and support (Mdodana-Zide, 2023). Inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teaching materials, overcrowded classrooms, and the absence of psychological support services undermine the implementation of inclusive and learner-centred pedagogies (Fitriyah, 2025). These deficits do not merely inconvenience teaching practice; they shape the structural conditions within which care-oriented leadership is either enabled or restricted. When foundational resources are lacking, teachers are often compelled to prioritise curriculum coverage and classroom control over relational responsiveness (Barrientos & Riera, 2024).

The enactment of care-centred pedagogy requires attention to learners' emotional, cognitive, and physical needs (Noddings, 2005). However, in under-resourced classrooms, even necessities such as furniture, stationery, and adequate space may be in short supply. Such material constraints limit opportunities for collaborative learning, differentiated instruction, and psychologically safe engagement. Moreover, the absence of psychosocial support personnel, including social workers and counsellors, frequently results in teachers assuming extended caregiving roles for learners experiencing poverty, neglect, or trauma (March et al., 2022). While this reflects teachers' commitment, it simultaneously exposes a systemic gap in support structures. The resulting tension between curriculum mandates and caregiving responsibilities diminishes teachers' capacity to enact sustained, relational leadership.

Restricted access to technology, specialised training, and professional support further exacerbates educational inequality (Zenda, 2019). Teachers operating under these conditions

often experience professional strain and diminished efficacy, not due to a lack of commitment, but because structural inadequacies restrict their ability to translate care-oriented intentions into consistent practice (Mulaudzi, 2025). Similar patterns are observed internationally. Bajpai and Pandey (2023) report that teachers in developing contexts, including India, confront comparable challenges of overcrowding, limited facilities, and insufficient specialist services. These parallels suggest that resource scarcity operates as a systemic barrier to care-centred education rather than an isolated, localised issue.

Importantly, limited resources not only constrain material provision but also shape relational dynamics within schools. Persistent scarcity can foster competition, frustration, and hierarchical tensions, eroding trust and collaboration among staff members. In such environments, care-oriented practices risk being deprioritised in favour of survival-driven task management. Thus, resource scarcity intersects with institutional culture, influencing both teacher agency and the overall climate within which leadership for care and support is enacted.

If material deprivation constrains teachers' practical capacity to implement care-centred practices, the school's relational and cultural climate may either mitigate or intensify these limitations. The following section, therefore, examines how toxic school cultures further undermine teachers' leadership for care and support in deprived primary school contexts.

2.5.2.3. Toxic school culture

School culture profoundly shapes teachers' professional identities, behaviours, and pedagogical orientations (Thaba-Nkadimene, 2020). In underprivileged contexts, a toxic school culture can significantly undermine teachers' capacity to lead teaching and learning for care and support (Cannon, 2022). Such cultures are characterised not merely by interpersonal conflict, but by entrenched patterns of mistrust, fragmented communication, punitive leadership, resistance to collaboration, and diminished morale (Yengkopiong, 2024). These conditions weaken relational trust and constrain the ethical and empathetic dimensions of care-centred pedagogy.

Empirical evidence illustrates the consequences of dysfunctional institutional climates. Mannix-McNamara et al. (2021) report that teachers operating in toxic environments frequently experience professional isolation, fear of victimisation, and reluctance to engage in

open dialogue. In such settings, reflective practice and collaborative problem-solving, both essential to relational leadership, become difficult to sustain. March et al. (2022) further note that when school leaders fail to model inclusive, compassionate practices, teachers are less inclined to prioritise learner well-being in their own classrooms. This suggests that culture operates as a normative framework that either legitimises or marginalises care-oriented practice. By contrast, collaborative cultures characterised by trust and shared responsibility foster professional dialogue and collective efficacy (Boen et al., 2020), illustrating the stark difference between enabling and constraining environments.

The effects of toxic culture are amplified in under-resourced schools, where teachers are already navigating high learner vulnerability and systemic deprivation. Mdoana-Zide (2023) argues that in contexts marked by poverty and trauma, teachers require emotional energy, autonomy, and institutional backing to sustain empathetic engagement. Hostile or unsupportive climates erode these foundational resources, limiting teachers' professional agency and diminishing intrinsic motivation (Azano et al., 2020; Cannon, 2022). Over time, such environments may compromise teachers' sense of professional purpose and weaken their capacity to maintain relational consistency, a key component of care-centred leadership.

Importantly, addressing toxic culture is not a simple matter of instituting new policies or rhetorical commitments to collaboration. Cultural transformation requires sustained relational repair, leadership modelling, and structural realignment. Without these deeper shifts, superficial interventions may fail to alter entrenched patterns of mistrust or compliance-driven practice. Thus, toxic school culture represents not only an interpersonal challenge but a systemic barrier that constrains the enactment of care and support in everyday teaching.

Even where efforts are made to reform school culture, teachers may remain constrained in their capacity to lead for care if they lack the necessary knowledge, skills, and structured guidance to operationalise relational pedagogy. The following subsection, therefore, examines how inadequate professional development further limits teachers' ability to implement care-centred practices effectively in deprived primary school contexts.

2.5.2.4. Lack of professional development

Professional development (PD) plays a critical role in equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence required to implement inclusive, supportive, and learner-centred pedagogies (Cohn & Barnass, 2020). In underprivileged primary school contexts, however, the absence of sustained, contextually relevant professional development significantly constrains teachers' ability to lead teaching and learning for care and support (Dyosini, 2024). Teachers serving highly vulnerable learners frequently report feeling underprepared to integrate emotional support, trauma responsiveness, and holistic development into routine classroom practice (Mdodana-Zide, 2023). This limitation reflects not a lack of commitment, but a structural gap in institutional support.

Effective professional development extends beyond curriculum coverage to include training in trauma-informed pedagogy, inclusive education, emotional intelligence, and psychosocial support (Nikolaou & Stamatis, 2023). However, in many under-resourced contexts, PD initiatives remain sporadic, generic, and disconnected from teachers' lived realities. March et al. (2022) note that teachers often receive minimal preparation for addressing learners' experiences of poverty, neglect, or abuse. Consequently, care-oriented expectations embedded within policy frameworks are not matched by the practical capacity required for implementation. This disconnect constrains teachers' ability to create emotionally secure, responsive learning environments.

The absence of targeted professional development also affects teacher efficacy and classroom climate. Ventista and Brown (2023) argue that limited PD diminishes teachers' confidence in adopting adaptive and nurturing pedagogies, while access to structured, context-sensitive training enhances collaborative practice, reflective engagement, and learner-centred innovation (Shula, 2023). Comparative evidence suggests that where PD is sustained and strategically aligned with contextual realities, teachers demonstrate increased motivation and improved learner engagement. These findings underscore that professional development functions as a mediating mechanism between policy aspiration and classroom enactment.

The policy–practice gap further illustrates the consequences of inadequate PD. Frameworks such as the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy (DBE, 2014) articulate clear expectations regarding inclusive education and psychosocial support. However, effective implementation depends on teachers receiving sufficient preparation and ongoing

support. In deprived schools, where PD is inconsistent or inaccessible, these policy mandates risk becoming symbolic rather than operational. This reinforces existing inequities, as schools with greater access to training are better positioned to enact care-centred leadership than those facing systemic deprivation.

Overall, the lack of professional development constrains teachers' capacity to translate ethical commitment into sustained practice. Without ongoing, needs-based, and contextually responsive training, care-oriented leadership remains aspirational rather than fully embedded in classroom realities. This limitation reflects broader structural disparities in resource allocation, institutional support, and policy enforcement.

These patterns point to deeper systemic inequities that shape the distribution of resources, training opportunities, and institutional capacity across schools. The following subsection, therefore, examines how systemic and structural inequalities further constrain primary school teachers' leadership for care and support in deprived educational contexts.

2.5.2.5. Systemic inequities

Primary school teachers in underprivileged environments continue to encounter significant barriers in leading teaching and learning for care and support due to systemic inequities embedded within South Africa's education system (Ngubane & Nzima, 2023). Despite sustained post-1994 reform efforts, disparities in school funding, infrastructure, access to learner support services, and teacher development remain deeply entrenched between historically disadvantaged and well-resourced schools (Maseko & Chigeza, 2024). These structural inequities shape the conditions under which teachers attempt to enact care-centred pedagogy, often limiting their capacity to respond comprehensively to learners' academic, emotional, and social needs.

Material constraints such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient teaching and learning resources intersect with limited access to psychosocial support services (Engelbrecht, 2020). Although policies such as the SIAS Policy and White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education (DBE, 2014) articulate strong commitments to learner support, their implementation remains uneven. Funding disparities, governance inefficiencies, and insufficient institutional oversight often create a disjuncture between policy aspirations and

classroom realities. Consequently, teachers are often positioned as the primary agents responsible for compensating for systemic gaps, which contributes to stress, emotional exhaustion, and reduced professional efficacy (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022).

The historical legacy of apartheid continues to compound these challenges. Township and rural schools remain disproportionately under-resourced, with persistent deficiencies in electricity, sanitation, connectivity, and basic infrastructure (Ngidi & Ntinga, 2025). Within such contexts, teachers are expected not only to deliver curriculum content but also to address learners' experiences of hunger, trauma, and social instability (Ogina & Ramare, 2019). This dual burden of instruction and caregiving reflects a structural redistribution of social responsibility onto schools and individual teachers. While many teachers demonstrate agency and resilience in navigating these realities, reliance on individual adaptability risks normalising systemic neglect.

International comparisons further demonstrate that policy–practice gaps are not unique to South Africa. Ainscow (2020) and Booth and Ainscow (2016) observe that inclusive education frameworks in countries such as Finland, Canada, Norway, and Portugal face similar challenges when institutional capacity and resource allocation fail to align with policy mandates. However, the scale and historical depth of inequality in South Africa intensify these tensions. Maree et al. (2023) argue that when expectations for inclusive and care-oriented practice exceed available structural support, teachers face unrealistic demands that undermine sustainable implementation.

Systemic inequities, therefore, represent the macro-structural constraint within which all other barriers, heavy workloads, limited resources, toxic cultures, and insufficient professional development are embedded. While teachers often draw on personal agency, resilience, and informal networks to mitigate these challenges, such strategies cannot substitute for equitable structural reform. Sustainable leadership for care and support depends not only on individual commitment but on systemic alignment between policy, resource allocation, and institutional capacity.

Having examined the structural and institutional constraints that shape teachers' leadership for care and support, the following section explores the strategies primary school teachers employ to navigate these challenges and sustain care-centred teaching practices in under-resourced environments.

2.6. Strategies primary school teachers use to address challenges in leading for care and support

The structural and contextual challenges that primary school teachers face in focused education, which emphasises the leadership for care and support, especially in socioeconomically disadvantaged settings, include overcrowded classrooms, diverse learner needs, limited resources, and learner trauma (Munyadziwa et al., 2025; Sibanda, 2021). Despite these limitations, growing research demonstrates that teachers can effectively employ creative and adaptable teaching strategies to lead in supportive, welcoming environments. The most well-known are community collaboration, customised learning, and trauma-informed teaching. Teachers can respond to learners who have experienced hardship with empathy when they use trauma-informed teaching, which helps to lessen behavioural disturbances and encourage emotional regulation (Meier, 2024; Henshaw, 2025).

Conversely, differentiated teaching enables teachers to adjust the process, content, and evaluation to each learner's unique interests and preparedness level, promoting inclusive engagement and concern for learning (Hove & Phasha, 2022). Community cooperation further strengthens teacher leadership by establishing mutually beneficial relationships with families, social workers, and neighbourhood organisations and guarantees a more comprehensive, team-based approach to learner support and well-being (Sanders et al., 2019; DeVries, 2019). These practices, supported by research and experience, demonstrate how teachers can actively remove structural obstacles while maintaining their position as leaders in fostering environments that are both academically and emotionally stimulating. Therefore, three significant practices that teachers employ to mitigate the factors hindering their leadership in teaching and learning for care and support have been identified: trauma-informed teaching, differentiated instruction, and community collaboration.

2.6.1. Trauma-informed teaching

Trauma-informed education has emerged as a critical strategy for primary school teachers to navigate the structural and relational constraints outlined in the preceding section (Munyadziwa et al., 2025; Meier, 2024). In contexts marked by poverty, community violence, and social

instability, learners frequently enter classrooms carrying emotional and psychological burdens that directly affect engagement and behaviour. Trauma-informed teaching, therefore, provides a framework that enables teachers to lead for care and support while maintaining instructional continuity.

Munyadziwa et al. (2025), in a mixed-methods study conducted in Limpopo Province, found that teachers employed structured routines, rapport-building strategies, and referral mechanisms to manage trauma-related behavioural disruptions. These practices created emotionally predictable classroom environments, which enhanced learner participation despite resource constraints. Importantly, these strategies illustrate how teachers translate relational leadership into structured pedagogical action. Trauma-informed practice thus becomes a mediating mechanism through which teachers sustain care-centred environments amid systemic inequity.

Meier (2024), drawing on a conceptual review of early childhood classrooms, shifts attention toward preventative and scaffolded approaches grounded in neuroscientific insights. Strategies such as mindfulness, sensory regulation, and resilience-building routines are positioned as proactive tools that minimise re-traumatisation and strengthen self-regulation. When considered alongside Munyadziwa et al.'s (2025) findings, trauma-informed teaching can be understood as operating along a continuum: reactive strategies that address trauma manifestations as they arise, and preventive strategies that cultivate long-term emotional regulation and classroom stability. This dual approach reflects a more comprehensive model of care-oriented leadership.

However, trauma-informed teaching is not self-sustaining. Carton et al. (2023) demonstrate that pre-service teachers in Western Australia frequently felt unprepared to respond effectively to trauma due to inconsistent or absent training. While empathy and adaptability are often cited as inherent teacher qualities, such dispositions are insufficient without structured professional learning and institutional support. This resonates with South African research indicating that even experienced in-service teachers require ongoing development to maintain trauma-responsive practice within resource-constrained environments. Thus, trauma-informed teaching, while powerful, remains contingent upon professional development, collaborative cultures, and access to psychosocial expertise.

Collectively, the literature suggests that trauma-informed pedagogy strengthens teachers' leadership for care and support by integrating emotional responsiveness with structured classroom management. However, it does not fully address the diverse academic needs that coexist alongside socio-emotional vulnerability. Learners affected by trauma often present varied cognitive profiles, gaps in foundational knowledge, and differentiated learning trajectories.

Recognising these layered complexities, trauma-informed teaching must be complemented by differentiated instructional strategies that address academic diversity while sustaining relational and emotional support. The following subsection, therefore, examines differentiated instruction as a parallel strategy that enables teachers to respond holistically to learners' varied needs in deprived primary school contexts.

2.6.2. Differentiated instruction

Differentiated Instruction (DI) provides a structured pedagogical framework for primary school teachers to respond to learners' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. In under-resourced contexts characterised by large class sizes, mixed-ability groupings, and limited specialist support, DI operates as both an academic and relational strategy (Hove & Phasha, 2022). In adjusting content, processes, and learning activities, teachers can integrate care into everyday instructional practice rather than treating support as a separate intervention.

Hove and Phasha (2022) observe that teachers in Johannesburg primary schools utilised flexible ability grouping, scaffolded tasks, and individualised interaction to manage classroom diversity. Importantly, grouping was not presented as exclusionary but as a pragmatic strategy to ensure targeted attention in contexts where individualised instruction for every learner was structurally unfeasible. Within this model, differentiation serves as a mechanism for relational attentiveness: teachers closely monitor learner progress, identify emerging needs, and intervene early when academic or socio-emotional difficulties arise.

However, the enactment of differentiated instruction is frequently constrained by the very systemic challenges it seeks to address. Sibanda (2021), in a narrative study conducted in

Tshwane South District, found that while foundation-phase teachers valued DI as an inclusive practice, they struggled with limited resources, heavy workloads, and insufficient professional training. Teachers adapted lesson content and employed flexible groupings within their available capacity, yet these adaptations were often reactive rather than strategically embedded. This suggests that DI, like trauma-informed teaching, requires sustained institutional support to move beyond surface-level modification toward systematic pedagogical transformation.

Phala and Hugo (2025) similarly report that Grade 3 teachers and learning-support practitioners in Tshwane North implemented small-group instruction, alternative activities, and varied reading materials to accommodate learner diversity. Nevertheless, more advanced differentiation strategies, such as tiered assignments and differentiated assessment products, were underutilised. The limitation was not conceptual resistance but restricted access to professional development and collaborative planning structures. These findings reinforce a recurring theme across the literature: care-centred pedagogy depends not only on teacher intention but on enabling conditions that support pedagogical innovation.

Collectively, the evidence positions differentiated instruction as a strategic response to academic heterogeneity and socio-emotional vulnerability. In customising learning experiences, teachers can maintain inclusive classroom environments while sustaining relational awareness of learner progress. However, DI alone cannot address external factors influencing learner performance, such as poverty, family instability, or community-level adversity. Effective differentiation, therefore, benefits from partnerships that extend beyond the classroom.

Recognising that learner diversity is shaped not only by cognitive variation but also by socio-economic context, differentiated instruction must be complemented by collaboration with parents, caregivers, and community stakeholders. The following subsection, therefore, explores community collaboration as a broader strategy for reinforcing care-centred teaching and learning in under-resourced primary school settings.

2.6.3. Community collaboration

Community collaboration is frequently identified as a strategic response to the structural and relational constraints that limit primary school teachers' ability to lead for care and support

(Sanders et al., 2019). In contexts characterised by resource scarcity, emotional strain, and insufficient institutional backing, collaboration with parents, caregivers, and community stakeholders extends the boundaries of classroom-based support. Rather than positioning teachers as isolated providers of care, community collaboration reframes care-centred leadership as a shared social responsibility.

Jama and Lunga's (2021) qualitative study of Foundation Phase schools in South Africa's North-West Province illustrates how teachers mobilised parental expertise, volunteer networks, and local knowledge to address learning barriers. Drawing on Ubuntu principles of interconnectedness and collective responsibility, teachers established relational alliances that supplemented limited school resources. These partnerships enabled the integration of care into daily pedagogical practice and contributed to improved learner engagement. Importantly, this model reflects a shift from deficit-based perceptions of disadvantaged communities toward asset-based collaboration.

Structured collaborative frameworks further demonstrate the potential of cross-sector partnerships. Patel et al. (2023) describe the implementation of Communities of Practice (CoPs) across urban and rural schools in Johannesburg and Limpopo, where teachers, social workers, nurses, and caregivers co-designed well-being interventions. Initiatives such as food distribution, mental health referrals, and family-support programmes illustrate how collaborative planning can institutionalise care beyond individual teacher effort. Teachers reported increased confidence and clarity in responding to learners' needs, suggesting that shared accountability strengthens both professional agency and relational capacity. In this sense, community collaboration mitigates the burden placed on individual teachers by redistributing responsibility across networks of support.

However, the literature reveals important limitations. Many studies focus on short-term projects or context-specific interventions, raising questions about sustainability, scalability, and long-term institutional embedding. There is also limited examination of how power relations, leadership dynamics, and resource inequities shape the effectiveness of collaborative initiatives. Without stable coordination structures, community collaboration risks becoming episodic or dependent on individual champions rather than systemic integration. Moreover, collaboration cannot fully compensate for entrenched systemic inequities; it functions most effectively when supported by enabling policy environments and institutional leadership.

Collectively, the evidence positions community collaboration as a critical strategy for extending care-centred leadership beyond the classroom and addressing socio-economic barriers that influence learner well-being. However, its effectiveness depends on sustained coordination, supportive school cultures, and structural support.

While the literature identifies trauma-informed teaching, differentiated instruction, and community collaboration as key strategies for navigating constraints, significant gaps remain regarding how these strategies are integrated, sustained, and adapted within under-resourced South African primary schools. The following section, therefore, synthesises these gaps to position the current study within the broader body of scholarship on leadership for care and support.

2.7. Gaps identified in the literature

The readings examined in this chapter offer a comprehensive analysis of the roles, practices, and challenges that primary school teachers face when leading teaching and learning for care and support, particularly in underprivileged settings. Nonetheless, several gaps still exist that necessitate further research regarding this phenomenon. One notable deficiency is the scarcity of context-specific research, as most current literature focuses on urban or global contexts, leaving rural and culturally distinct settings unexplored. For example, teachers' experiences in South Africa's Eastern Cape or Limpopo provinces may differ significantly from those in more affluent regions, yet these subtleties are not thoroughly examined. Furthermore, although resilience and teacher agency are recognised as important facilitators, little is known about how teachers actively exercise agency in the face of structural limitations, such as utilising community networks or making the most of minimal resources. Although trauma-informed teaching is emphasised as an approach for mitigating trauma, there is currently no empirical data on its use and long-term efficacy in underprivileged primary schools. Similarly, teachers' viewpoints on bridging policy-practice gaps and systemic injustices are not given enough attention, despite criticism.

Additionally, a significant gap is the lack of longitudinal research, which restricts our understanding of how care and support practices evolve and their long-term impact on learners. The literature also mainly focuses on teachers' opinions, ignoring those of learners and parents,

whose viewpoints could contribute to the discussion of efficient support systems. Furthermore, there is a dearth of intersectional studies that examine how socio-economic position, gender, and racism interact to influence teachers' experiences, which leaves space for further research into how these variables affect care practices. In the wake of COVID-19, which highlighted the importance of digital tools in education, there is also a lack of research on how technology may enhance care in settings with low resources. Another gap is cultural relevance; indigenous frameworks like Ubuntu may not entirely align with Western models of trauma-informed treatment and social-emotional learning, indicating the need for culturally tailored interventions. The last point is that although teacher burnout is recognised, little research has been done on interventions promoting teachers' well-being, which is essential for maintaining care-centred pedagogies in high-stress situations.

Consequently, by filling these gaps, theoretical and practical understandings of teacher leadership for care and support can be significantly advanced. One or more of these topics may be the subject of a research study, which might use mixed-methods, qualitative, or quantitative techniques to produce valuable insights. While participatory research, which involves learners and parents, may provide a more comprehensive understanding of support requirements, a study that combines teacher interviews, classroom observations, and policy analysis, for instance, may offer insight into how care is implemented in the face of systemic challenges. Consequently, by addressing these shortcomings, the study may help advance more sustainable, culturally sensitive, and equitable teaching methods, which would ultimately benefit teachers and learners in underprivileged areas.

Consequently, by filling in several important gaps in the literature, this study will significantly advance the field of educational leadership, management, and policy. The existing body of literature frequently overlooks rural and culturally diverse situations, favouring urban or globalised settings, which restricts the relevance of the findings to South African settings with limited resources. To gather rich, context-specific insights into how primary school teachers overcome systemic barriers, exercise agency, and rely on community networks to lead teaching and learning for care and support, this study will employ an interpretivist paradigm, collage inquiry, and narrative interviews. The lack of comprehensive qualitative reports on teacher leadership in high-poverty settings, where pedagogical methods are shaped by structural injustices, cultural frameworks like Ubuntu, and scarce resources, is immediately addressed by such an approach.

2.8. Chapter summary

This chapter conducted a critical evaluation of the literature on the roles, practices, and enabling and restricting variables of primary school teachers who lead care- and support-oriented instruction in underprivileged settings. The findings show that despite systemic and resource limitations, teachers play a variety of roles as caregivers, advocates, collaborators, and facilitators of social-emotional learning, exhibiting emotional labour, adaptability, and dedication to learners' holistic development.

Facilitating factors, such as supportive leadership, professional development, a positive school culture, and teacher agency, enhances teachers' capacity to enact care-focused practices. On the other hand, structural injustices, toxic educational environments, excessive workloads, and limited resources continue to be significant obstacles. However, through trauma-informed teaching, differentiated instruction, and community collaboration, some teachers continue to demonstrate resilience and creativity, thereby showing their agency in creating supportive learning environments.

The review reveals key gaps, including the absence of intersectional, culturally grounded, and learner-inclusive perspectives, as well as limited research on the long-term impact of care-oriented interventions in rural or under-resourced contexts. These shortcomings underscore the need for contextually aware, participatory studies that foreground teachers' lived experiences. This chapter thus summarises existing knowledge, outlines its limitations, and establishes the rationale for the present study. The next chapter introduces and critically discusses the theoretical framework underpinning this research.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the literature review regarding the phenomenon being studied. The literature review highlighted the roles and practices of primary school teachers in leading teaching and learning for care and support, the factors that affect primary school teachers in leading teaching and learning for care and support and the practices employed by primary school teachers in mitigating the factors that hinder their leadership in teaching and learning for care and support.

This chapter aims to introduce and contextualise Servant Leadership Theory as the study's guiding theoretical framework, highlighting its applicability in comprehending how primary school teachers use learner-centred, compassionate, caring, and service-oriented approaches to lead in challenging situations. This chapter examines the application of servant leadership theory in educational contexts after summarising its background and guiding ideas. Following this, it explains why it was chosen for this study and how it influenced the research questions, methodology, and interpretation of the findings. The possible drawbacks of using this theory in the study are examined in the chapter's conclusion.

3.2. Development of servant leadership theory

Over the years, the theory of servant leadership has evolved from a moral-philosophical concept to a systematic and extensively used framework for leadership (Eva et al., 2019). With the work of later academics, the theory has been gradually refined and expanded, with its roots in Robert Greenleaf's (1970) groundbreaking concept that leaders should first serve others. Every stage of its development shows a growing comprehension of how service-, care-, and ethically based leadership can be conceived and applied in various settings. The theory's applicability to education, especially to teachers who prioritise care and support in demanding school contexts, can be better understood by following its progression.

3.2.1. Origin – Robert K. Greenleaf (1970)

Robert K. Greenleaf first presented the concept of servant leadership in his groundbreaking essay, *The Servant as Leader*, published in 1970. Inspired by Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*, where a lowly servant emerges as the real leader of a spiritual quest, Greenleaf developed the theory. For this reason, Greenleaf began to challenge traditional leadership models and put forth a completely new idea of leadership: the most successful leaders prioritise the needs of others over their own interests (Greenleaf, 1977).

In the late 20th century, Robert K. Greenleaf recognised a growing leadership dilemma in society and business, which prompted him to develop the Servant Leadership Theory. Drawing from his corporate background at AT&T and his reading of Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*, Greenleaf (1977) maintained that great leaders must be driven to serve others, prioritising their needs, development, and well-being over their own goals. His rationale was based on the idea that power-driven, hierarchical leadership styles frequently encouraged distrust in society, disengagement, and unethical behaviour (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 1995). Greenleaf (1977) promoted moral authority, community building, and human flourishing as crucial elements of corporate and social success by arguing that service should be the cornerstone of leadership. This people-centred approach set servant leadership apart from the prevailing leadership paradigms of the era, establishing it as a practical framework for ethical leadership in various circumstances, as well as a moral philosophy (Keith, 2019).

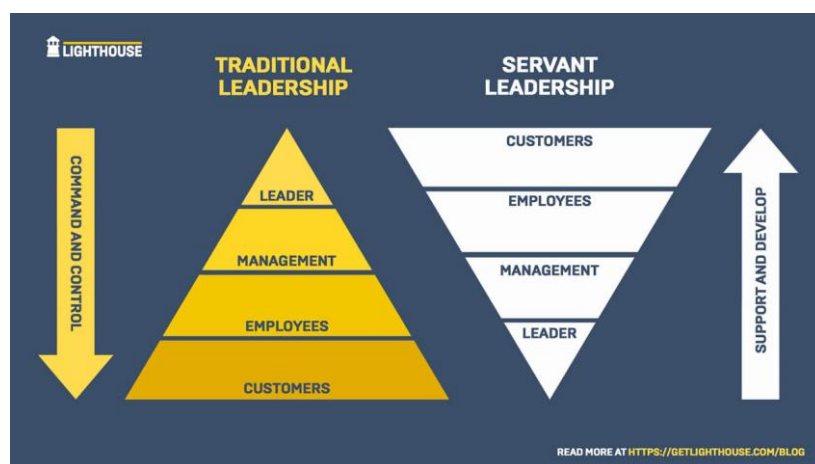


Figure 3.1. Servant Leadership Model Contrasting Traditional Leadership

Note. From *Servant leadership: Everything you need to know*, by J. Evanish, 2022, *Get Lighthouse* (<https://getlighthouse.com/blog/what-is-servant-leadership/>).

The figure on the previous page (Figure 3.1) uses inverted hierarchical pyramids to contrast servant leadership with traditional leadership. With the leader at the top and management, staff, and clients at the bottom, the traditional leadership model uses a “command and control” style. This organisation strongly emphasises hierarchy, authority, and downward decision-making. On the other hand, the servant leadership paradigm inverts the traditional pyramid, with customers (learners) at the top and management, staff, and the leader at the bottom. In this situation, the leader’s primary responsibility is to “support and develop” others, giving followers authority and prioritising their needs, development, and welfare. Robert K. Greenleaf’s (1977) philosophy, which promotes empathy, stewardship, and community building, redefines leadership as service rather than power, and is strongly reflected in this image (Spears, 1995). In stark contrast to the control-driven character of traditional leadership, servant leadership puts the leader at the centre. It represents a bottom-up strategy that promotes trust, cooperation, and long-term organisational health.

The inverted pyramid is especially pertinent to this study because it reflects the realities of leadership for support and care in underprivileged educational environments. Teachers must frequently address learners’ emotional, social, and developmental needs in these settings while promoting education. Consequently, by emulating the values of servant leadership, these teachers prioritise the holistic welfare of their learners over those in positions of power, presenting themselves as facilitators and nurturers rather than remote authorities. In addition to promoting trust and improved teacher-student connections, this method creates welcoming and encouraging learning settings where learners feel appreciated and equipped to thrive despite adversity.

3.2.2. Expansion – Greenleaf’s writings (1970s–1980s)

After "The Servant as Leader" was published in 1970, Robert K. Greenleaf further developed his theories in the 1970s and 1980s, as seen in important books such as "Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness" (1977). Greenleaf discusses the moral and practical aspects of servant leadership in detail, identifying important traits that distinguish servant leaders from more conventional hierarchical leaders. This expansion phase significantly shaped the intellectual underpinnings of servant leadership, even if his work remained philosophical rather than experimentally structured.

The conceptual focal areas that Greenleaf highlights as essential to servant leadership are at the centre of this phase. The following discussion reflects on the focal areas and educational environments and leadership theory:

Greenleaf's (1977) theory of servant leadership provides a strong framework for understanding how teachers can lead for care and support in disadvantaged primary school settings. Greenleaf identifies *listening* as a foundational responsibility of a servant leader and positions it as central to ethical leadership practice. According to Greenleaf (1977), authentic listening extends beyond mere hearing; it involves attentiveness to the needs, concerns, and aspirations of learners, colleagues, and community members. In the context of this study, teachers who listen attentively are better able to understand the academic and socio-emotional challenges faced by their learners, enabling classroom practices and school policies to respond meaningfully to those needs.

Greenleaf (1977) further conceptualises *empathy* as the capacity to understand and share others' feelings. Within disadvantaged schooling environments, empathetic teachers demonstrate a commitment to holistic care by fostering inclusive classrooms, offering emotional support, and cultivating trusting relationships with learners. Similarly, Greenleaf's notion of *healing* refers to the restorative role of the teacher-leader in repairing strained relationships and nurturing a sense of wholeness among learners, colleagues, and families, thereby strengthening cohesion and trust within the school community.

Self-reflective and situational *awareness*, as described by Greenleaf (1977), enhances moral and ethical decision-making and supports teachers in responding sensitively to the unique realities of socioeconomically marginalised contexts. In parallel, Greenleaf frames *persuasion* as a relational form of influence that relies on dialogue, modelling, and ethical engagement rather than coercive authority. Within this study, persuasion is interpreted as enabling teacher-leaders to encourage collaborative problem-solving and shared responsibility. Likewise, Greenleaf associates *foresight* with the ability to anticipate future consequences, which in educational settings can translate into proactive strategies that promote learner resilience and long-term development. Closely connected to foresight, *stewardship* underscores a responsibility to serve the wider community, safeguard institutional values, and prioritise collective well-being over individual gain.

Greenleaf (1977) also emphasises a *commitment to the growth of people*, which aligns with teachers' responsibility to nurture learners' holistic development while supporting colleagues through mentorship and professional collaboration. Finally, *building community* highlights the importance of cultivating inclusive and cooperative learning environments. This dimension is particularly significant in under-resourced schools, where collective solidarity can mitigate the effects of socioeconomic hardship. Taken together, these servant leadership dimensions inform the conceptual framework of this study by positioning primary school teachers as relational leaders whose practices of listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth, and community building sustain care-centred and learner-focused pedagogies.

Although these traits helped the conversation on servant leadership move past its infancy, it is crucial to remember that Greenleaf's articles from the 1970s and 1980s were still mostly philosophical. Instead of providing a methodical, testable framework, they provided guiding concepts. Greenleaf's work established the moral foundation but lacked factual clarity, according to Spears (1995), who eventually systematised these qualities. However, this growth phase remains important because it outlined a values-based leadership vision that continues to influence modern servant leadership implementations in nonprofits, businesses, and educational institutions.

3.2.3. Theoretical grounding – 1990s

A significant turning point in the evolution of servant leadership occurred in the 1990s, when the idea shifted from its primarily philosophical underpinnings to a more organised and comprehensible framework. Scholars of this era, such as Spears (1995), attempted to operationalise servant leadership by identifying quantifiable characteristics and contrasting the model with other well-established leadership theories, building on Greenleaf's initial insights and his later conceptual elaborations. Eva et al. (2019) argue that the legitimacy of servant leadership as a distinct theoretical paradigm within leadership studies was significantly enhanced by this shift.

Larry Spears (1995) was instrumental in establishing this theoretical foundation, drawing heavily on Greenleaf's works. Spears (1995) listed ten servant leadership characteristics consistent with Greenleaf's ethical philosophy that might be used to direct study and practice.

Listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, dedication to human development, and community building were among them. According to Eva et al. (2019), Spears' contribution transformed servant leadership from abstract principles into specific qualities that could be observed, used, and evaluated in empirical research.

Another aspect of this phase was the endeavour to place servant leadership in the larger context of leadership theory. Scholars, such as Graham (1991), compared servant leadership and other similar approaches, including transformational, ethical, and authentic leadership. For example and according to Graham (1991), servant leadership was more firmly grounded in moral obligation and service, yet it shared transformational leadership's concern for the growth of followers. Similarly, servant leadership was viewed as an adjunct to authentic leadership due to its focus on relational transparency and self-awareness (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). In contrast to frameworks that place more emphasis on vision, charisma, or performance outcomes, these comparisons are interpreted by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) as demonstrating the distinctiveness of servant leadership as a model that prioritises the needs of others over its own.

Thus, this period is widely described in the literature as a move away from philosophy and toward implementation. While Greenleaf's writings presented servant leadership as a moral philosophy, Spears (1995) presented it as an applied leadership framework that could direct empirical research, influence organisational practice, and be used with other leadership paradigms. Parris and Peachey (2013) suggest that the shift towards characteristic identification and comparative analysis laid the groundwork for later research and operational models in the 2000s, despite objections that it lacked thorough empirical validation.

3.2.4. Structuring into pillars – Sipe & Frick (2009)

James Sipe and Don Frick's efforts to convert Robert Greenleaf's ideas into a more organised, understandable, and helpful framework for organisational settings marked the next phase in the development of servant leadership theory. Sipe and Frick (2009) advanced the conversation by defining seven essential pillars that represent the core of servant leadership in their seminal book "Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership: Practising the Wisdom of Leading by Serving". According to Sipe and Frick (2009), their framework transformed servant leadership from a largely philosophical and ethical ideal into a quantifiable and implementable leadership style, representing a significant theoretical and practical advancement.

Sipe and Frick's (2009) contribution is significant since it demonstrates how to combine Greenleaf's principles with modern leadership techniques. Sipe and Frick operationalised these ideas into a logical framework, although previous research had highlighted servant leadership as a moral philosophy, and other studies (e.g., Spears, 1995) had identified important traits. Because it offers structure, clarity, and helpful guidance for implementing servant leadership across organisational contexts, research suggests this model has proven beneficial to researchers and practitioners alike.

The seven pillars are as follows:

According to Sipe and Frick (2009), servant leadership is operationalised through seven interconnected pillars, each of which offers a lens through which to view how primary school teachers can lead for support and care in disadvantaged environments. Honesty, integrity, and personal responsibility are highlighted in the first pillar, "Person of Character". Within the servant leadership framework, teachers who exhibit this quality are understood to set an example of moral responsibility and ethical behaviour, which builds credibility and trust among learners, coworkers, and the larger school community. Such moral authority, in the context of this study, enables teachers to influence students' learning outcomes and well-being without relying solely on positional power (Greenleaf, 1977).

The second pillar, "Put People First," emphasises putting the needs of others above one's own. Within this framework, teachers who follow this principle are positioned as providing for the academic and socio-emotional needs of their learners, support those who are at risk, and create environments that emphasise the holistic development of every learner. This supports Greenleaf's (1977) claim that the development and well-being of individuals serve as a gauge of leadership, which makes it especially pertinent in schools with limited resources where learners need extra help.

The third pillar, "Skilled Communicator", emphasises the value of dialogical, successful communication. In the context of this study, this is demonstrated by the teachers in this study through active listening to stakeholders and learners, offering helpful criticism, and encouraging group problem-solving. According to Spears (1995), this type of communication enhances relational engagement, fosters trust, and ensures that care-centred efforts are responsive to the lived experiences of learners. Likewise, teamwork based on sincere concern for others is emphasised by the fourth pillar, "Compassionate Collaborator". To foster inclusive

learning methods and provide care beyond the classroom, teachers meaningfully collaborate with parents, coworkers, and community partners.

“Foresight”, the fifth pillar, is about foreseeing problems and making plans for long-term results. In the servant leadership literature, visionary teachers in under-resourced schools are described as creating interventions that integrate academic instruction with socio-emotional support, addressing both learners’ short-term needs and their long-term developmental objectives. The sixth pillar, “System Thinker”, supports foresight by encouraging teachers to view the school as a networked system and recognise the impact that individual decisions have on learners, peers, and the broader community. Teachers can optimise care and support by coordinating resources, policies, and pedagogical practices with this holistic perspective.

Ultimately, "Moral Authority" is the culmination of the integration of the aforementioned pillars. Teachers acquire respect and authority with continuous moral behaviour, compassion, and helping others rather than through a structured hierarchy. The ability of teachers to lead for care and support is supported in this study by moral authority, which also ensures that educational leadership stays focused on the well-being of learners rather than individual interests and builds trust and respect among stakeholders, colleagues, and learners (Sipe & Frick, 2009; Greenleaf, 1977).

Through outlining these seven pillars, Sipe and Frick (2009) present their framework as a thorough, methodical, and practical model that makes a substantial contribution to the philosophy of servant leadership. Their work provides a model that organisations could use to train leaders and evaluate leadership behaviours, bridging the gap between abstract philosophy and real-world leadership practice. Additionally, the Seven Pillars paradigm reaffirms its timeless relevance by connecting servant leadership with contemporary organisational requirements, such as ethical governance, systems thinking, and collaboration. In this way, Greenleaf’s original idea is both carried forward and modernised by Sipe and Frick’s framework, guaranteeing that servant leadership will continue to be a dynamic and developing paradigm in current leadership studies.

3.2.5. Contemporary use – 2010s to present

Since the 2010s, servant leadership has evolved from a theoretical framework into a widely adopted leadership practice across various industries, including nonprofits, business, education, and healthcare (Eva et al., 2019). This change stems from a deeper understanding of the value of servant leadership in addressing today's leadership challenges, particularly in contexts where sustainability, ethics, and inclusivity are prioritised (Newman et al., 2017). Eva et al. (2019) suggest that its flexibility in various organisational contexts has reaffirmed its applicability as a philosophy and a practical leadership model.

Recent literature describes a significant shift in the focus on servant leadership to achieve moral and socially conscious leadership. According to Dul et al. (2024), academics have linked servant leadership in the corporate sector to advancing moral decision-making, stakeholder welfare, and long-term organisational sustainability. Similarly, servant leadership is considered crucial for creating cultures that emphasise cooperation, empathy, and consideration for others in healthcare and education (Chung & Lee, 2024). This trend emphasises how leaders today are held accountable for broader social and moral issues, in addition to organisational performance.

Contemporary scholarship highlights four critical aspects of servant leadership, foregrounding the principle that leadership is fundamentally understood as service to others. This viewpoint prioritises followers' welfare, progress, and development over the leader's goals or power (Pillay & Kikasu, 2024). Secondly, servant leadership scholars position the model as centred on empowering others. According to van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), servant leaders help followers realise their full potential by providing them with opportunities for autonomy, growth, and engagement. This, in turn, improves organisational effectiveness. Thirdly, integrity and humility are highlighted as characteristics of modern servant leaders. Servant leaders adopt a posture of humility and sincerity, eschewing hierarchical supremacy in favour of upholding moral and ethical standards (Greenleaf, 2002). Lastly, recent scholarship indicates that trust and community development have become more important in the conversation about servant leadership. According to recent research, servant leaders play a crucial role in creating unified, encouraging, and trustworthy corporate cultures, qualities that are more important in today's complicated and unpredictable circumstances (Sendjaya, 2015).

Contemporary research demonstrates the continued development from a philosophical concept into a practical leadership model that addresses the urgent organisational and societal demands of the twenty-first century. Scholars identify service, empowerment, humility, integrity, and community as key components of servant leadership, which has established itself as a moral and long-lasting leadership paradigm for the contemporary age.

3.2.6. The stage of servant leadership theory's evolution that best fits this study

The literature on servant leadership describes its development as a shift from philosophical and moral underpinnings to organised, practical frameworks. Identifying the optimal stage of the theory's development is crucial for a study examining leadership for care and support in teaching and learning within underprivileged school contexts. This ensures that the theory aligns with the reality of educational practice.

Greenleaf's (1977) original formulation established a moral-philosophical foundation for servant leadership, emphasising community building, empathy, service, and healing. While scholars recognise this early stage as highly influential and conceptually relevant to educational contexts, particularly those centred on care and support, it remains philosophical mainly in orientation. From this study's perspective, this abstraction limits its usefulness as an analytic framework for examining teachers' lived experiences. The model offers ethical guidance and motivational value, but it does not provide sufficiently operational categories for systematically interpreting narrative data. Similarly, the expansion phase of the 1970s and 1980s reinforced values such as stewardship, empathy, and listening (Greenleaf, 1977), yet its continued philosophical emphasis is frequently described in the literature as making it challenging to apply methodically when analysing situated teacher narratives. As a result, although this early phase is foundational to servant leadership theory, it does not offer the structural clarity required for empirical narrative inquiry in underprivileged school contexts.

Spears (1995) led the theoretical grounding phase in the 1990s, which was important in defining 10 quantifiable traits of servant leadership. This signalled the start of empirical application and methodical research (Eva et al., 2019). This stage is considered helpful for educational research because it provides a vocabulary for characterising relational and moral leadership qualities appealing to teacher-leaders. However, because it only lists characteristics without adequately expressing the structural, institutional, and contextual difficulties that

teachers encounter when providing care and support, it might still be restrictive for a study conducted in underprivileged environments.

The Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership by Sipe and Frick (2009) expanded on the notion by fusing Greenleaf's ethical philosophy with practical organisational applications. The seven pillars, which include being a person of character, prioritising others, and collaborating with compassion, provide a comprehensive framework that aligns with the study's emphasis on relational leadership, caring, and support in schools. This level is widely regarded as fundamental because it strikes a balance between morality and usefulness. Within servant leadership literature, teachers in underprivileged environments are described as finding focus on moral authority, systems thinking, and foresight resonates well with the difficulties of leadership in an environment of inequity and shortage. Teacher narratives regarding leadership practice can also be analysed using the categories provided by the Seven Pillars framework.

Lastly, servant leadership has been employed since the 2010s, making it a paradigm for moral, inclusive, and long-lasting leadership (Liden et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2017). This stage is particularly relevant in education, where servant leadership is increasingly recognised as essential for cultivating cultures of trust, empowerment, and care (Parris & Peachey, 2013). In underprivileged school environments, the contemporary focus on humility, community development, and empowering others reflects the leadership style that teachers practice daily to assist learners experiencing social and academic disadvantage. Broader societal issues, such as sustainability, equity, and moral accountability, are also reflected in the modern framing, and they are particularly pertinent to South African education and other underfunded educational environments.

From the perspective of this study, the contemporary stage of servant leadership theory (2010s to present) is best suited for this study, even though each stage offers insightful information. This is because, in addition to incorporating the operational characteristics and philosophical underpinnings established in previous phases, it contextualises servant leadership in terms of sustainability, empowerment, and inclusivity, aspects closely related to the challenges of teaching and leading in underprivileged environments. Furthermore, a strong interpretative lens for examining the stories of primary school teachers whose leadership is demonstrated via support and care is offered by the contemporary emphasis on service, humility, and community.

3.3. Servant leadership theory's relevance to this study

The investigation of teacher leadership, specifically in relation to care and support in teaching and learning, is at the core of this study. Research suggests that many primary school teachers, particularly those working in underprivileged environments, understand and practice leadership in ways closely aligned with Servant Leadership Theory, which places a strong focus on empathy, healing, stewardship, and dedication to the development of others (Spears, 1995).

Teachers in underprivileged environments frequently have to fulfil responsibilities and roles beyond teaching, serving as advocates, mentors, counsellors, and caregivers for learners who are dealing with structural obstacles, including trauma, poverty, neglect, and inadequate educational resources (Azano et al., 2019). Hence, this theory emphasises leadership's relational and moral aspects, making it a suitable foundation for comprehending how leadership is used in socially and emotionally complex contexts.

Scholar identify Servant Leadership Theory's acknowledgement of informal leadership is one of its main advantages. Servant leadership is considered constructive for researching classroom teachers who lead within the "middle space" of the school structure because it recognises that authentic leadership can be exercised by people who do not hold formal titles or authority, in contrast to conventional leadership models that emphasise hierarchy and managerial control. This is especially crucial for this study because it gives voice to ordinary teachers who are actively involved in fostering supportive learning environments but whose leadership is frequently overlooked. Consequently, by emphasising narratives, the research documents lived experiences, while the theory aids in interpreting those narratives via a prism of altruism and ethical intent.

Robert Greenleaf's fundamental theories were condensed by Larry Spears (1995) into ten essential characteristics of servant leadership: stewardship, listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, commitment to the growth of others, and community building, as depicted below:

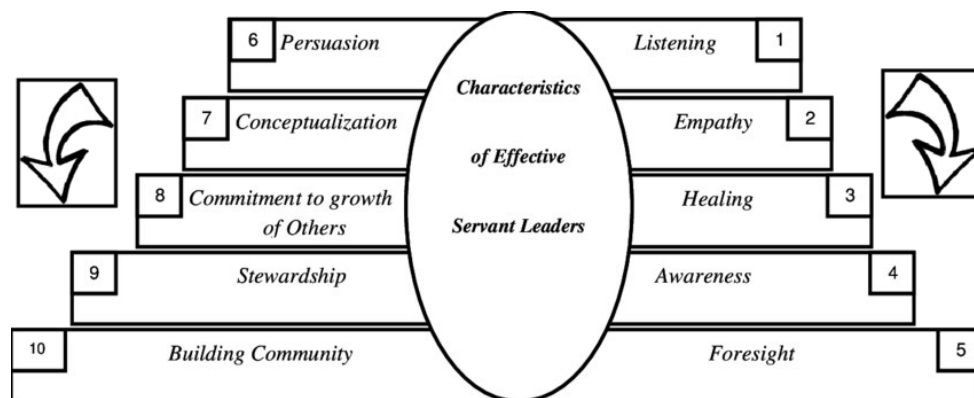


Figure 3.2. Characteristics of Servant Leadership

Note. From *Leaders and servants: Antonyms or synonyms? Investigating servant leadership in Lebanese schools* (p. 210), by N. Ghamrawi & K. Al-Jammal, 2014, *Asia Pacific Journal of Research*, 1(14), 207–221. Copyright 2014 by Asia Pacific Journal of Research.

These qualities (depicted above) align with the study’s objectives, which investigate how four primary school teachers guide instruction and learning for care and support in underprivileged South African environments. In servant leadership literature, “empathy and listening” are described as essential for understanding the many socio-emotional needs of learners, and “healing” is closely related to addressing the trauma and difficulties many learners encounter in underprivileged neighbourhoods. Notwithstanding institutional injustices, within this framework, teachers who possess “awareness and foresight” are positioned as better able to anticipate obstacles to learning and proactively establish supportive environments. While “commitment to the growth of others” speaks to fostering academic success and emotional resilience, “stewardship” represents the moral obligation of teachers to safeguard and promote the welfare of their learners. Lastly, “community building” is essential in underprivileged settings where working with families and community members is crucial to providing learners with comprehensive support. This study provides insights into how these servant leadership qualities are contextualised, modified, and maintained in demanding educational environments by documenting their lived experiences using narrative interviews and collage inquiry. Consequently, by doing this, the study contributes to existing scholarship on servant leadership as a framework for educational leadership in the Global South, one that is sensitive to structural and cultural differences.

3.4. Servant leadership theory in educational settings

Servant Leadership Theory has gained increasing popularity in education over recent decades as a paradigm that emphasises moral conduct, compassion, community development, and the personal growth of teachers and learners (Eva et al., 2019). Although Robert Greenleaf (1977) first developed the concept of servant leadership in a corporate setting, the core principles of the movement (empathy, stewardship, dedication to the development of others, and community building) are closely related to the ethical and relational aspects of educational leadership.

Since values, connections, and community building are key components of creating inclusive and supportive learning environments, research suggest that Servant Leadership Theory is highly relevant in educational settings. Based on Robert K. Greenleaf's (1977) claim that leaders should prioritise the needs of others, this notion aligns well with schools' moral and educational goals. Emphasising empathy, care, and the development of potential, servant leadership in education encourages teachers and school leaders to concentrate on the holistic development of learners (Spears, 1995; Makirmani & Naicker, 2025). Studies conducted by Eva et al. (2019) show that servant leadership improves teacher job satisfaction, trust, and organisational commitment, all of which boost learners' engagement and academic achievement. Servant educational leaders also establish psychologically safe spaces where diversity is valued and collaboration flourishes by setting an example of humility, stewardship, and moral behaviour (Liden et al., 2014).

Through the creation of growth-oriented, moral, and encouraging learning environments, Servant Leadership Theory is reported to contribute significant advantages for both teachers and learners. A culture of caring, empathy, and shared responsibility is fostered by servant leadership in schools, based on Greenleaf's (1977) claim that leaders should prioritise others' needs (Spears, 1995; Makirmani & Naicker, 2025). Since leaders show genuine concern for their team's well-being and professional development, teachers who adopt this leadership style report improved job satisfaction, increased organisational commitment, and greater trust in leadership (Eva et al., 2019). As a fundamental element of servant leadership, empowerment improves teachers' feelings of agency and ownership by empowering them to take charge, exercise professional autonomy, and participate in group decision-making (Liden et al., 2014; Makirmani & Naicker, 2025).

The advantages are just as significant for learners. According to Liden et al. (2014), servant leadership fosters inclusive, psychologically secure learning environments where learners feel appreciated and where diversity is valued and respected. Linden et al. (2014) further argue that, servant leaders encourage teachers to embrace relational and learner-centred pedagogies that foster academic engagement and socio-emotional development by setting an example of moral behaviour, empathy, and stewardship (Crippen & Willows, 2019). Because it promotes advocacy for fairness, mobilises community resources, and prioritises learner well-being more than academic accomplishment, servant leadership can have a particularly significant influence in resource-constrained or deprived situations (Pillay & Kikasu, 2024). Ultimately, research suggests that the servant leadership model may provide support by fostering an atmosphere where learners' achievement and professional fulfilment are mutually reinforcing, thus helping teachers and learners.

In educational settings, Servant Leadership Theory has unique emphases, while also sharing philosophical and practical parallels with several other leadership models in educational contexts. Like transformational leadership, servant leadership emphasises motivating followers, creating a common goal, and promoting individual development (Dul et al., 2024). However, whereas transformational leaders frequently use charisma and inspiration to prioritise organisational goals, servant leaders focus more on attending to followers' individual needs as the primary means of accomplishing group objectives (Eva et al., 2019). In particular, its dedication to empowerment and collaborative decision-making makes servant leadership similar to distributed leadership (Lu, 2022). In comparison, both frameworks support teachers' active involvement in leadership roles. Servant leadership bases this empowerment on a moral concept of service, stewardship, and caring (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 1995).

Additionally, while servant leadership and instructional leadership focus on promoting teaching and learning, they go beyond academic results to consider learners' socio-emotional health and overall growth (Makirimani & Naicker, 2025). Social justice leadership, which aims to redress unequal educational practices and outcomes, is complemented by servant leadership's focus on advocacy, empathy, and community building in areas characterised by deprivation or structural injustices (Gandolfi & Mills, 2022). The combination of these methods suggests that servant leadership can serve as a framework for bridging the gap between strategic and instructional priorities in schools, as well as moral and relational leadership traits. A multifaceted paradigm that is well-suited to the complex needs of modern

educational settings, servant leadership integrates aspects of transformational, distributed, instructional, and social justice leadership.

Servant Leadership Theory is particularly useful in educational settings, especially in disadvantaged contexts, as this theory equips leaders with the necessary knowledge and skills to facilitate effective teaching and learning for care and support. This ensures that all learners receive a fair and quality education, which helps redress past injustices, particularly in South Africa.

3.5. Considerations and limitations of the servant leadership theory

Although Servant Leadership Theory is considered a strong framework for this study due to its benefits, it is crucial to consider its limitations critically. According to Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership originated in a corporate setting in the West, rooted in Christian ethical and individualistic values. It might need careful contextual adaptation when used in non-Western or Global South contexts, such as South African schools. Some servant leadership principles may not translate seamlessly, as different societies have varying cultural norms regarding power, care, and leadership (Nsiah & Kutsyuruba, 2022). For example, relational leadership styles may already be present in collectivist countries; therefore, in such contexts, servant leadership may resemble existing cultural norms rather than representing a radical paradigm shift.

The foundation of servant leadership is the moral ideal of the leader as unselfish, altruistic, and others-focused. Although motivating, this framing may mask the structural realities of many teachers, including bureaucratic demands, inadequate school funding, policy restrictions, and emotional exhaustion (Nsiah & Kutsyuruba, 2022). Expecting teachers to “serve” all the time might encourage excessive demands in underprivileged educational situations, particularly without institutional and systemic support.

Additionally, some scholars caution that servant leadership may reinforce gendered presumptions, particularly the notion that nurturing, caring, and listening are characteristics stereotypically associated with females (Noddings, 2003; Reynolds, 2022). In the predominantly female field of education, particularly at the primary school level, servant leadership may inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes that portray care as a personal, maternal

responsibility rather than a professional practice worthy of institutional support and acknowledgement.

Although the Servant Leadership Theory provides insightful information on educational leadership, its limitations, especially in underprivileged, non-Western contexts, call for a critical and contextualised application. To explore these constraints, this study employs collage inquiry and narrative interviews to produce detailed, contextualised narratives of teachers' leadership practices. The research can reveal how servant leadership principles are modified, reinterpreted, or opposed within regional cultural frameworks that already place a high value on relational and community-based leadership by giving priority to teachers' lived experiences in South African schools (Makirimani & Naicker, 2025). This study's research design and methodology enable the examination of structural limitations that may hinder the mindless application of altruistic, service-oriented beliefs, such as a lack of funding, policy pressures, and emotional labour (Bundy, 2020). Additionally, by examining how gendered presumptions found in discourses about servant leadership interact with the predominantly female teaching workforce, the narrative and visual data can help determine whether care is presented as an individualised, feminised expectation or as a professional duty backed by institutions (Chung & Lee, 2024; Noddings, 2003). Consequently, this approach aims to enhance the theory's cultural relevance, structural awareness, and gender sensitivity, while also situating servant leadership within the realities of underprivileged educational contexts.

3.6. Chapter summary

This chapter critically examines the foundations of servant leadership theory. Derived from Robert Greenleaf's 1977 work, the theory offers a values-based leadership approach focused on empathy, service, and moral purpose. Spears' (1995) ten fundamental traits, which emphasise relational and ethical leadership qualities that resonate strongly within educational contexts, particularly those marked by hardship and adversity, were mentioned in the review along with the theory's historical roots and foundations.

The theory is relevant to this study because it suggests that many primary school teachers, particularly those working in under-resourced settings, exercise leadership through service, care, and a strong dedication to the welfare of their learners, rather than through official authority. It validates and provides theoretical support for teachers' frequently unseen

leadership roles in meeting learners' intellectual, social, and emotional requirements. Focusing on doing so, the theory serves as a powerful analytical tool for understanding and interpreting the real-world experiences of the four participating teachers in this study.

Moreover, the chapter examines how Servant Leadership has been applied in educational literature and demonstrates how it can contribute to creating welcoming, compassionate, and encouraging learning environments. Nonetheless, the theory's cultural presumptions, idealistic potential, and reinforcement of gendered norms in teaching were all recognised as key factors. These drawbacks underscore the need for a targeted and thoughtful application of the concept, particularly in Global South contexts such as South Africa, where social injustices and institutional limitations make it more challenging to practice leadership and caregiving.

Servant Leadership Theory offers a strong and morally sound framework for analysing teacher leadership in care and support. Telling teacher tales from a perspective that emphasises relational practice, moral responsibility, and transformative service in complex educational environments enhances the narrative inquiry of this study. In addition, the next chapter will also focus on the research design and methodology underpinning this study, critically discussing how each aspect will aid and influence the data generation stage.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter examined Servant Leadership Theory as the guiding framework for this study, highlighting its emphasis on moral responsibility, empathy, and service. Positioned as congruent with the relational leadership practices of primary school teachers in disadvantaged contexts, the theory was adopted for its interpretive value despite acknowledged limitations. These considerations informed the selection of a narrative inquiry design, supported by collage inquiry and narrative interviews, to explore teachers' lived experiences.

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology underpinning the study, grounded in the interpretive paradigm and a qualitative approach. It explains the rationale for the narrative inquiry design and details the sampling strategy, data generation methods, thematic analysis, ethical considerations, and measures to ensure trustworthiness.

In alignment with the study's aim of examining how teachers conceptualise and enact leadership for care and support in disadvantaged contexts, this chapter demonstrates how the chosen methodological framework was structured to generate rigorous, contextually grounded insights.

4.2. Research paradigm

A research paradigm provides the overarching philosophical framework that guides how a study is conceptualised, conducted, and interpreted (Pabel et al., 2021). It reflects the researcher's assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology), and the role of values in inquiry (axiology). This study is located within the interpretivist paradigm.

Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent rather than singular and objectively measurable (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020; Cohen et al., 2017). Consistent with this position, the study adopts a relativist ontology, recognising that multiple

realities exist and are shaped by individuals' social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Pervin & Mohtar, 2022). In this study, primary school teachers construct diverse understandings of leadership for care and support based on their lived experiences in deprived school environments. Reality is therefore understood as interpretive and co-constructed rather than externally fixed.

Aligned with this ontological stance is a constructivist epistemology, which holds that knowledge is generated through interaction, dialogue, and meaning-making (Costa et al., 2023). Knowledge is not treated as objective data to be extracted but as relationally produced through engagement between researcher and participants. Through narrative interviews and collage inquiry, participants articulated their experiences in ways that foregrounded emotional, contextual, and moral dimensions of leadership that cannot be reduced to measurable variables (Tracy, 2020).

The study also acknowledges an axiological position that recognises research as value-laden (Mahrool, 2020). The inquiry is informed by principles consistent with an ethics of care (Noddings, 2013) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 1995), which emphasise relational responsibility and moral purpose. These values shaped the selection of methods, participant engagement, and interpretive analysis.

Positioning the study within the interpretivist paradigm provided a coherent philosophical foundation for the use of narrative inquiry, collage inquiry, and qualitative interviewing. This alignment ensured that the research design remained consistent with the study's aim of understanding how primary school teachers in disadvantaged contexts conceptualise and enact leadership for care and support in teaching and learning as a relational and context-bound phenomenon.

4.3. Research approach

A research approach refers to the general plan or technique used to address a research problem or subject (Costa et al., 2023). It describes the methods and techniques employed in a research study for data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting. In other words, a research approach is the overarching strategy and reasoning that directs a researcher's work, connecting the methods of inquiry, data gathering, and analysis with the philosophical presumptions of a

research paradigm (Gretschel et al., 2023). Therefore, this study utilised the qualitative research approach.

According to Bertram and Christiansen (2020), qualitative research is an approach centred on exploring and comprehending the intricacies of human behaviour, experiences, and social phenomena through in-depth analysis of non-numerical data. This research approach is employed to uncover the deeper meanings, viewpoints, and contexts that shape people's lives and interactions (Creswell, 2020). Additionally, Creswell et al. (2023) state that qualitative research acknowledges the social construction of reality and the context-bound, subjective, and co-constructed nature of knowledge between participants and the researcher. Qualitative research investigates and comprehends the viewpoints, experiences, and meanings of people or groups in their natural environments (Lim, 2024). A qualitative research approach enables researchers to examine lived experiences, leadership practices, and relational dynamics in educational research, particularly in socially and contextually rich environments such as under-resourced schools (Cohen et al., 2018).

The qualitative research approach was well-suited to this study, as it supported the primary goal of examining the unique, illustrative experiences of four primary school teachers who lead for care and support in environments with limited resources. In contrast to quantitative methods that aim to measure variables or test hypotheses, qualitative research prioritises context, meaning, and depth (Creswell et al., 2023). This was crucial for a study focusing on leadership's relational, ethical, and emotional facets, which are best conveyed through the voices and stories of participants. According to Ahmed (2023), qualitative research enables the investigation of how individuals interpret their experiences, particularly in complex social contexts. Additionally, by adapting data generation techniques like collage inquiry and narrative interviews to the participants' surroundings, this approach honours their agency and lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In educational research, qualitative inquiry is essential for revealing the structural, emotional, and human aspects of teachers' work, especially in environments characterised by inequality or deprivation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Thus, the qualitative research strategy was ethically and culturally relevant to this study's goal and context and methodologically suitable.

4.4. Research design

Research design refers to the strategic framework that coherently links the research problem, objectives, philosophical assumptions, and methodological procedures to ensure that a study generates credible and meaningful findings (Creswell, 2020; Costa et al., 2023). In qualitative inquiry, the research design provides the logical structure that guides data generation, analysis, and interpretation while maintaining alignment between the study's purpose and its methodological orientation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Qualitative designs are typically flexible and context-sensitive, allowing the researcher to engage deeply with participants' lived realities and the complexity of social phenomena (Nieuwenhuis, 2020).

This study adopted a narrative inquiry research design as it provided a conceptually coherent and contextually appropriate framework for exploring teachers' lived experiences of leading for care and support in teaching and learning, specifically in deprived school contexts. Narrative inquiry is concerned with understanding experience through the stories individuals tell and the meanings they construct within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Clandinin, 2022). It positions participants' accounts as storied expressions of identity, practice, and interpretation, recognising that experience unfolds over time and is shaped by personal histories, present circumstances, and anticipated futures.

The selection of narrative inquiry was deliberate and closely aligned with the purpose of this study. Unlike phenomenology, which seeks to describe the essential structure of a shared lived experience (Creswell, 2020; Kazeroony, 2026), this study did not aim to reduce teachers' experiences to a universal essence. Grounded theory, by contrast, is intended to generate explanatory theory from systematically analysed data (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2020). The present study did not seek to construct a formalised theory of leadership for care and support. Instead, it aimed to explore how teachers interpret, construct, and situate their leadership practices within the complexities of deprived educational environments. Narrative inquiry was therefore the most appropriate research design, as it foregrounds temporality, context, and meaning-making, enabling an in-depth engagement with the continuity and richness of teachers' lived experiences.

Through this design, teachers' leadership for care and support was examined as embedded within broader organisational, cultural, and socio-economic contexts. Narrative inquiry enabled the study to preserve the integrity of participants' stories while illuminating how their

personal histories, professional trajectories, and contextual constraints shape their leadership practices and decision-making processes. This engagement with teachers' narratives as holistic accounts of experience facilitated a nuanced understanding of leadership that is both personally meaningful and socially situated.

4.5. Target population

According to Creswell and Creswell (2022), the target population is the entire set of people, things, or occurrences that share particular traits in common, pertinent to the study's topic, from which the researcher hopes to derive conclusions. According to Willie (2022), the target population in qualitative research is a conceptual construct that establishes the breadth and significance of the investigation rather than just a statistical metric. Hence, conceptualising the target population entails determining the contextual, professional, and social characteristics of people who may offer rich, insightful data in line with the study's goals.

The study's target population consisted of primary school teachers working in underprivileged environments. Primary school teachers have a crucial role in spearheading initiatives for care and support within the school setting, which is why this group was chosen for the exploration of leadership through personal narratives. Particularly in underprivileged environments where learners encounter numerous socioeconomic and emotional challenges, teachers often fulfil the roles of both academic instructors and pastoral caregivers (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Selecting the appropriate target population for a study is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it improves the validity of the study by ensuring that the data gathered is closely related to the research problem and objectives (Willie, 2024). Secondly, because depth of understanding is more important in narrative inquiry than breadth of representation, the researcher can concentrate on individuals with pertinent life experiences and viewpoints. Thirdly, sampling procedures are based on the target population, guaranteeing that participants are equipped with a wealth of information to provide light on the studied topic (Willie, 2024).

Theoretical issues and the research topic influence the decision to focus on primary school teachers in underprivileged environments. Teachers in these environments frequently face systemic injustices, a lack of resources, and increased emotional strain, which challenges their leadership positions in care and support (Rudolph et al., 2019). Because of this, it was

anticipated that their stories would offer sophisticated insights into how leadership is exercised under challenging situations and how professional and personal agency interact while providing care and support for learners. The study's selection of this cohort aimed to highlight viewpoints that are often marginalised in discussions of educational leadership, thereby advancing both academic understanding and practical actions.

4.6. Sampling

Sampling refers to the selection of participants who can provide meaningful insight into the research problem (Bell et al., 2022). This study employed purposive sampling, supported by convenience sampling, to ensure both conceptual alignment and practical feasibility.

Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich cases relevant to the study's focus on leadership for care and support in deprived primary school contexts (Palinkas et al., 2023). Participants were required to have a minimum of five years' teaching experience in underprivileged school environments. This criterion ensured that participants possessed sufficient contextual knowledge and professional experience to reflect critically on their leadership practices (Warren, 2021). Selecting teachers whose experience extended both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic further enabled reflection on continuity and change in leadership practices across shifting contextual demands (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Convenience sampling was subsequently applied to recruit participants who met these criteria and were accessible and willing to participate (Golzar et al., 2022). Given the practical constraints of conducting research in school settings, including institutional schedules and time limitations, this approach ensured logistical feasibility while maintaining alignment with the study's conceptual focus. Four teachers were selected from two primary schools in the Umlazi District (two per school). In narrative inquiry, small samples are appropriate, as depth of engagement is prioritised over breadth (Ngoei, 2024). The combination of purposive and convenience sampling, therefore, ensured methodological coherence, relevance to the research aim, and practical access to sustained participation.

4.6.1. Inclusionary and exclusionary criteria

Explicit inclusionary and exclusionary criteria were established to ensure transparency, relevance, and ethical integrity in participant selection (Palinkas et al., 2023). Participants were required to have a minimum of five years' teaching experience at the selected school to ensure sufficient contextual familiarity and professional insight. Only permanently employed Department of Basic Education teachers were included, as SGB-employed or temporary staff could not guarantee sustained participation. To minimise attrition, participants had to be under 60. In addition, teachers were selected from both the Foundation Phase and the Intermediate/Senior Phase to capture variation across developmental stages. Participants were also identified based on their demonstrated involvement in responsibilities beyond formal curriculum delivery, as confirmed in consultation with the school principal.

Teachers were excluded if they had fewer than five years' experience at the school, were temporarily or contractually employed, were nearing retirement, or were unable to commit to sustained participation due to scheduling constraints. Where more than two teachers met all criteria within a school, willingness and availability guided the final selection.

4.7. Data generation method

Data generation in qualitative research is a deliberate and participatory process through which researchers gather rich, comprehensive, and significant data from participants to understand their lived experiences, viewpoints, and social realities (Creswell et al., 2023). Muthiah et al. (2020) posit that data generation uses flexible, open-ended techniques, including focus groups, interviews, narratives, observations, and interactive exercises. Through in-depth self-expression, these techniques enable participants to provide contextually grounded and frequently emotionally nuanced views (Sanders & Lamm, 2022). For the context of this study, collage inquiry and a narrative interview were used as research methods to generate rich data.

4.7.1. Collage inquiry

Collage inquiry is an innovative qualitative data generation method that allows participants to create visual representations of their experiences, feelings, and perspectives related to the

phenomenon under study (Gullion, 2023). Rooted in arts-based and participatory research traditions, this approach values artistic expression as a tool to empower participants and elicit complex, often implicit aspects of experience that may not emerge through traditional verbal or textual methods (Leavy, 2020; Gullion, 2023).

Collages provide rich qualitative data, enabling the identification of nuanced interpretations, symbolic meanings, and patterns that extend beyond conventional interviews or surveys (Knowles & Cole, 2018; Rose, 2021). The tactile and visual qualities of collage-making can illuminate metaphors, emotional undertones, and subtleties in participants' lived experiences, making it particularly suitable when exploring complex, multifaceted social realities (Leavy, 2020; Rose, 2021).

During the collage-making process, participants were guided to select images that reflected their experiences, either from provided materials or from sources of their choice. Each participant received a detailed collage inquiry schedule that explained the process step by step, outlined the activity's objectives, and provided clear, open-ended prompts to stimulate reflection and storytelling. Participants were encouraged to select a sufficient number of images to represent their experiences comprehensively; typically, each participant used between 5 and 10 photographs or visual elements. The schedule allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to add personal images or adapt the prompts to reflect their unique experiences.

As participants created their collages, they were invited to narrate the meanings and stories associated with each image. This narrative component aligns with the theoretical foundations of narrative inquiry, which prioritise participants' voices, temporality, and context in understanding lived experiences (Clandinin, 2022). Storytelling during the collage-making process facilitates memory retrieval, encourages reflection, and enhances the depth and authenticity of the data (Kara, 2020).

The collage inquiry schedule also included guiding questions focused on teachers' roles in leading care and support, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they employ in their specific contexts. The prompts were deliberately broad to encourage creativity while remaining aligned with the study's research questions. The schedule was piloted informally to ensure clarity and accessibility, and minor adjustments were made to balance structure with participant agency.

Overall, collage inquiry was particularly well-suited for this study, as it enabled participants to represent their experiences visually and narratively, capturing subtle aspects of care and support leadership that might be overlooked in traditional interviews. By combining visual and narrative data, this method enhanced the richness, authenticity, and interpretive depth of the findings.

4.7.2. Narrative interview

A narrative interview is a qualitative research method that asks participants to share in-depth, personal stories or narratives about their experiences, viewpoints, and interpretations of a particular event or area of interest (McLeod, 2024). Ngoei (2024) argues that narrative interviews prioritise the participant's voice, perspective, and agency when constructing the story. Consequently, by attentively listening to participants' tales, acknowledging their experiences, and without imposing their own interpretations or judgments, interviewers employ a participant-centred approach. Hence, narrative interviews provided teachers, in this study, with the opportunity to discuss their leadership strategies for providing care and support in schools, as well as their personal experiences, challenges, and perspectives. Through eliciting narratives, I was able to capture the richness and depth of teachers' leadership responsibilities by gaining insight into the lived experiences and subjective viewpoints of teachers. Furthermore, narrative interviews offer contextually rich information that sheds light on the organisational, social, and cultural influences that mould teachers' leadership philosophies (Ngoei, 2024). Hence, teachers were able to explain the difficulties, opportunities and dynamics that exist in their particular school environments, providing intricate insights into the difficulties of providing care and support.

A narrative interview schedule was created as the secondary research tool to supplement the original data produced by the collage inquiry. To encourage participants to provide further details about their experiences and share narratives that contextualised and enhanced the insights gleaned from the collages, the schedule included broad, open-ended prompts. The guiding questions were on how teachers perceive their leadership responsibilities in care and support, what influences their practices, and how they overcome obstacles. Furthermore, participants were free to share their memories in their own terms without being restricted by my presumptions, thanks to the purposefully non-directive and flexible questions (McLeod, 2024). Following an informal pilot, the schedule was adjusted to ensure its appropriateness,

clarity, and capacity to produce in-depth, compelling narratives. This strategy ensured that the narrative interviews provided more context, depth, and interpretive insight into the participants' experiences, effectively complementing the core visual data (Ngoei, 2024).

4.8. Piloting

Piloting, which involves testing research tools before the full-scale data production procedure, is an essential step in qualitative research (Renuse, 2024). It enables the researcher to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and effectiveness of research instruments in generating the intended data (Creswell et al., 2023). By identifying ambiguities, procedural challenges, or weaknesses in the research design prior to the main study, piloting enhances the overall rigour and credibility of qualitative inquiry (Renuse, 2024). Importantly, pilot testing is not intended to produce data for analysis, but rather to refine instruments and procedures to ensure methodological coherence.

The piloting phase involved one voluntary female primary school teacher who met the general profile of the target population but was not among the four participants included in the main study. This separation was intentional to prevent contamination of the final dataset and preserve the integrity of the primary data generation process. Using an independent pilot participant ensured that feedback on the research instruments could be incorporated without influencing the narratives collected during the formal study.

The pilot session was conducted via Microsoft Teams, reflecting the practical realities of online qualitative engagement. Both the narrative interview schedule and the collage inquiry prompts were tested during this session. The process enabled the identification of grammatical errors, unclear phrasing, and sequencing issues within the instruments. It also provided an opportunity to refine prompts for clarity and alignment with the research objectives. Feedback from the pilot participant highlighted areas where additional explanation or restructuring was required, resulting in improved flow and comprehensibility of the data generation tools.

Overall, piloting strengthened the study's methodological rigour by ensuring that the primary (collage inquiry) and secondary (narrative interview) instruments were coherent, accessible, and capable of eliciting rich and meaningful accounts. The refinement process increased confidence that the instruments would accurately capture the complexity of teachers'

experiences of leadership for care and support in underprivileged contexts, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the research findings.

4.9. Data analysis

Data analysis refers to the systematic process of reviewing, organising, and interpreting raw data in order to identify patterns, generate meanings, and draw credible conclusions that address the research objectives (Islam, 2020). Within qualitative inquiry, this process extends beyond mere categorisation to include interpretive engagement with participants' accounts, with particular attention to how individuals construct and communicate meaning.

This study employed thematic analysis as the primary analytic strategy. Thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative method that involves the systematic coding, organisation, and interpretation of textual data to identify recurring patterns or themes relevant to a research question (Creswell, 2020). As noted by Braun and Clarke (2021), thematic analysis can be applied across diverse qualitative designs and data sources and is particularly suited to studies seeking to foreground participants' perspectives and lived experiences.

While thematic analysis guided the coding and theme development processes, the analysis was also informed by narrative analytic principles. Specifically, attention was given not only to what participants said, but to how they structured and storied their experiences. This involved considering elements such as temporality (how experiences unfolded over time), context (the social and institutional settings shaping experiences), and voice (how teachers positioned themselves within their accounts). Rather than fragmenting the data into decontextualised codes alone, the analysis preserved the coherence of participants' narratives, ensuring that themes remained grounded in the broader stories from which they emerged.

The analytic process followed an iterative approach. Interview transcripts were first read holistically to gain an overall sense of each participant's narrative. Initial codes were then generated inductively from the data, capturing significant statements, recurring ideas, and meaning-making processes. These codes were subsequently organised into broader themes that reflected patterned meanings across participants' accounts. Throughout this process, careful attention was paid to maintaining the integrity of individual narratives while identifying shared thematic patterns.

The integration of thematic and narrative analytic approaches strengthened the study's methodological coherence. Thematic analysis enabled systematic pattern identification across the data set, while narrative principles ensured that the teachers' voices, experiences, and contextualised stories remained central to the interpretation. Consequently, the data were represented in a structured, meaningful, and analytically rigorous manner, while authentically portraying the lived experiences of the participating primary school teachers.

4.10. Ethical issues

Ethical considerations in research concern the moral principles, rights, and responsibilities that guide studies involving human participants (Creswell, 2020; Pitt, 2022). Central to this study was the principle of informed consent. Participants were provided with a detailed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, potential risks and benefits, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Participants were allowed to seek clarification before providing written consent.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and schools in the presentation of findings to protect their identities (Kang & Hwang, 2023).

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC/00007746/2024) prior to data collection. All data — including audio-recorded interviews and photographs of collages — were securely stored on a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher, while hard-copy materials were kept in a locked cabinet. These measures ensured the protection of participant privacy and the ethical integrity of the research process.

4.11. Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the validity and reliability of the study, ensuring that the study's findings are authentic, meaningful, and accurately represent the lived experiences of participants without misrepresenting the data generated (Ahmed, 2023).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative researchers must ensure the study is trustworthy. To promote the trustworthiness of qualitative research, four main components must be considered: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

4.11.1. Credibility

According to Ahmed (2023), credibility refers to the degree to which study findings accurately and thoroughly reflect the experiences and viewpoints of participants. To ensure that findings are consistent and unaffected by a single viewpoint, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argue that using multiple data sources, methodologies, or researchers to cross-validate findings enhances credibility. This study is deemed credible because of its inclusion of four participants from two primary schools, with two participants from each school, thereby offering a range of perspectives in comparable contextual circumstances. Data triangulation was also facilitated by employing two distinct data generation techniques: collage inquiry and narrative interviews. I was able to record overt and covert facets of the participants' experiences by incorporating their narrative and visual expressions, ensuring that the findings accurately represented the teachers' conceptions of leadership for care and support. The study's credibility was enhanced by the use of several participants and complementary methodologies, which validated interpretations across various data types.

4.11.2. Dependability

Bertram and Christiansen (2020) assert that dependability refers to the stability and consistency of study findings across time and various contexts. Ahmed (2023) points out that making the research process open and repeatable, keeping an audit trail, and adhering to standard research methods improves dependability. Dependability was addressed in this study by carefully recording every step of the research procedure. Participant selection, collage inquiry, and narrative interview design, as well as data transcription, coding and analysis processes, were all well-documented. Additionally, to minimise researcher bias and provide outside criticism, I invited mentors and supervisors to assess the data analysis procedures. Ensuring that the research method was transparent, traceable, and consistent, these tactics enhanced the study's reliability and made it possible for others to understand how the findings were generated.

4.11.3. Confirmability

In qualitative research, confirmability refers to the extent to which participant voices, rather than researcher bias or preconceptions, influence the findings (Ahmed, 2023). Confirmability is especially important in narrative inquiry, where the researcher and participants co-create meaning (Johnson et al., 2020). Confirmability was fostered in this study through a reflexive strategy, in which I continually assessed my own presumptions, choices, and potential biases. Throughout the research process, I kept a reflective notebook in which I recorded my ideas, feelings, and analytical decisions. Additionally, genuine quotes from participants were included in the findings to ensure that their experiences were accurately and prominently depicted. These procedures ensured that interpretations were based on the participants' realities rather than my own opinions.

4.11.4. Transferability

Ahmed (2023) posits that transferability is the extent to which study findings can be applied or modified in different populations, settings, or contexts. According to Drisko (2024), providing readers with detailed, contextualised explanations enables them to assess the applicability of the findings to their own situations. This study aims at transferability by providing thorough descriptions of each teacher's story, including the distinctive features of their schools, local contexts, socioeconomic origins, leadership styles, and interpersonal dynamics. These contextualised descriptions enable readers to compare or contrast different learning settings, allowing the study's findings to contribute to a more comprehensive knowledge of primary school leadership for care and support.

4.11.5. Authenticity

In research, authenticity refers to the extent to which a study accurately captures participants' viewpoints and experiences while upholding the researcher's honesty and integrity (Ahmed et al., 2023; Creswell et al., 2023). It includes components such as reflexivity, descriptive and interpretative accuracy, and participant empowerment to understand their experiences (Ahmed,

2023). This study strove for authenticity by ensuring that participant voices were faithfully conveyed through direct quotations and narrative representations. Participants were allowed to elucidate and consider their contributions, and reflexive procedures were regularly used to track and correct any biases. The study accurately portrayed teachers' lived experiences by combining various methodologies and meticulously contextualising the findings. This allowed for the capture of both the teachers' explicit understandings and the finer points of leading for care and support in their particular school environments.

4.12. Chapter summary

A full explanation of the research strategy and methodological decisions that underpinned this study is provided in this chapter. The selected qualitative, narrative inquiry methodology, which is based on the interpretive paradigm and framed by the ideas of Servant Leadership Theory, has been presented as an effective method for capturing the richness and depth of teachers' leadership practices in underprivileged school environments.

This study examines the practices and experiences of teachers in identifying and reflecting on their leadership responsibilities in providing care and support. It does this by using purposive and convenience sampling, collage, and narrative interviews. While preserving the authenticity of each teacher's voice, I was able to spot trends and insights throughout the stories by using thematic analysis.

Furthermore, the research design incorporates robust ethical safeguards and reliability criteria to maximise the reliability, significance, and believability of the study. The next chapter will focus on data presentation and discussion.

CHAPTER FIVE

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Introduction

The qualitative research design that underpinned this study was described in the previous chapter. It was based on an interpretivist paradigm and examined teachers' lived experiences in underprivileged environments. Four primary school teachers, who were purposefully chosen, were able to portray and describe their duties, difficulties, and tactics in providing care and support through the use of collage inquiry and narrative interviews. Throughout, confidentiality was upheld, and ethical clearance was obtained. Using techniques such as triangulation and reflexivity to ensure the reliability of the findings, verbatim transcription and thematic analysis were employed to identify trends, similarities, and contrasts across participant testimonies.

Based on this methodological framework, the data is presented, examined, and discussed in this chapter. The three research aims that served as the study's compass are the focal point of the presentation of the findings:

- To explore primary school teachers' conceptualisations of their role as leaders of teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts.
- To identify the constraining and facilitating factors that influence primary school teachers' ability to provide care and support within their teaching and learning leadership in deprived contexts.
- To analyse the strategies employed by primary school teachers to navigate, mitigate, or overcome the challenges they face in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts.

Through direct quotes and selected collage photos, the voices of the participants are highlighted in each segment, offering deep, contextualised insights into their experiences. Following this, the analysis critically examines current research and theoretical viewpoints to identify areas of agreement, disagreement, and new insights. To set the stage for the implications and suggestions discussed in the final chapter, the chapter concludes by highlighting overarching themes that relate to all three research questions.

5.2. Profiling the research sites and participants

Setting the participants' stories within the larger context of their schools is essential for understanding how they lead for care and support in teaching and learning. Due to their location in underprivileged communities, the two chosen schools are both classified under Quintile 2. However, for teachers who work to provide care and support, their disparate socioeconomic and infrastructural circumstances present both unique opportunities and challenges.

Judah Academy is situated in a semi-rural region characterised by informal settlements, poverty, unemployment, and crime, with the school's physical environment reflecting the challenges of the surrounding community. With nearly 1,900 learners, overcrowding is a major concern, resulting in some classes being conducted in temporary structures, commonly referred to as "Wendy houses." Basic infrastructure is severely limited, many classrooms have no access to electricity, while water supply is inconsistent, relying on Jojo tanks that are periodically refilled by municipal water tankers. The school buildings are in a state of disrepair, with broken windows, deteriorating facilities, and no proper school grounds for recreation or assemblies. These conditions, compounded by the socioeconomic hardships faced by learners, place immense strain on teachers, whose efforts to provide care and support are often undermined by inadequate resources and stressful working conditions. Consequently, to be leaders of care and support in this context, teachers must extend their roles beyond traditional classroom instruction to address both the material deprivation and emotional well-being of learners, demonstrating compassion, resilience, and a deep commitment to creating a nurturing learning environment despite systemic challenges.

On the other hand, Levi Academy is located in a more developed neighbourhood that consists of both informal settlements and municipal housing. The school has more resources than Judah Academy, even though the neighbourhood still struggles with poverty, unemployment, and violence. With 950 learners, it is less congested, and although the infrastructure requires upkeep (as evidenced by broken windows and damaged ceilings), it remains generally operational. Water and power are also available at the school, though there are sporadic outages. These circumstances give teachers more stability in the classroom, which frees them up to concentrate more on helping learners with the psychological issues brought on by trauma, violence, and poverty in their homes and communities. In this situation, teachers' leadership for care is more closely linked to meeting the social and emotional needs of learners rather than being limited by significant infrastructure deficiencies.

Both schools benefit from the national feeding program, which is crucial in helping learners who frequently come from homes where food insecurity is a problem. The feeding program provides teachers with the opportunity to integrate care into the school's daily operations, while also addressing learners' immediate needs. The notion that care-leadership is multifaceted, addressing academic, emotional, and physical needs simultaneously, is further supported by this.

Teachers' leadership for care and support is situated within the distinct contexts of Judah Academy and Levi Academy. Although both schools experience significant resource constraints, the extent, nature, and impact of these challenges differ, shaping how teachers interpret and enact their leadership roles within both the classroom and the broader school community. At Judah Academy, severe infrastructural deficits and socioeconomic hardship amplify the need for teachers to assume caring leadership that extends beyond instructional duties, addressing learners' emotional and material needs. In contrast, while Levi Academy faces similar limitations, its relatively more stable environment allows teachers to exercise care-oriented leadership with greater consistency and collaboration. The experiences of the four participating teachers can therefore be examined against the backdrop of these contextual profiles, offering insight into how differing school conditions influence the opportunities, constraints, and practices of leadership for care and support in teaching and learning.

5.2.1. Background information of the participants

Four primary school teachers, two teachers from each school, participated in this study. To create rich and varied data, one Foundation Phase teacher and one Intermediate/Senior Phase teacher were chosen from each school. Pseudonyms were employed for both the participants and their individual schools to satisfy ethical research guidelines and guarantee confidentiality. This strategy was chosen to prevent any possible ethical issues with disclosure and to safeguard the identity of people engaged. The table on the next page provides a summary of all pertinent information about the participants:

Participant	Age	School	Phase	Years of experience
Miss Salvation	32	Judah Academy	Foundation	10
Mr Calvary	33	Judah Academy	Intermediate/ Senior	9
Miss Nazareth	35	Levi Academy	Foundation	11
Mr Kairos	30	Levi Academy	Intermediate/ Senior	6

Table 5.1. Background information of participants

5.3. Presentation and analysis of the data

The previously stated research questions provide the basis for the methodical presentation and discussion of the findings in this chapter. The findings are organised according to major themes that emerged during a thorough thematic analysis process. Special emphasis has been paid to highlighting the participants' genuine voices when presenting these issues. To achieve this, verbatim quotes from the interviews and collage inquiries have been carefully selected and included in the conversation, preserving the depth, complexity, and nuances of the participants' lived experiences while also highlighting the thematic patterns that emerge. This method ensures that the conclusions are both solidly grounded in the realities as expressed by the participants and analytically sound.

5.3.1. Teachers' understanding of their role in leading for care and support in teaching and learning

Teachers who work in underprivileged environments frequently describe their leadership role as encompassing the comprehensive care and support of learners in addition to academic delivery. According to the study's findings, participants recognised that their roles were complex and involved cooperation with different stakeholders, advocacy, nurturing, and ethical role modelling. This aligns with studies that emphasise the importance of teacher leadership in integrating the academic and socio-emotional aspects of learning, thereby creating environments where learners feel empowered, respected, and supported (Van der Vyver et al.,

2021; Aliu, 2023). The values of stewardship, empathy, and dedication to the development of others are reflected in teachers' self-perceptions from the standpoint of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010). This section, therefore, explores how teachers conceptualise their leadership roles, showing that their professional identity is deeply rooted in service, care ethics, and the pursuit of learner well-being alongside academic achievement.

5.3.1.1. Teachers as nurturers and caregivers

The findings reveal that teachers frequently view themselves as nurturers and caregivers, expanding their professional responsibilities beyond traditional classroom education to include providing their learners with holistic care. Since real learning cannot occur until learners feel loved, respected, and safe, many participants view teaching as inextricably linked to acts of compassion, protection, and practical assistance. This approach aligns with servant leadership, which prioritises the development and well-being of those it serves (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010), and care ethics theory, which views the teacher-learner relationship as essential to educational practice (Noddings, 2013). Teachers in this study demonstrated a caretaker persona that fosters not just academic but also emotional and social growth by offering resources, repairing clothing or furnishings, and even taking on parental tasks. These actions further complement Shen et al.'s (2024) research, which suggests that emotional support and care from teachers significantly enhance learners' resilience and school involvement, particularly during vulnerable times.

Miss Salvation explained:

"I personally provide my learners with essential resources such as stationery and books as well as classroom supplies... I have my own resource corner, which I have funded and maintained... For learners, I have always gone the extra mile. Like certain learners of mine have come with torn clothing or broken school bags. So generally, when that happens, I offer practical support by repairing it for them. However, I also preserve their dignity by not letting the whole class know. Within my classroom, I have also sourced and repaired broken furniture, restored storage spaces for learners and their materials, and invested in age-appropriate books... I believe that I am a caregiver, and I ensure that my learners feel loved and protected... Sometimes I help them to find their direction and

purpose, you know, when they are feeling lost or confused. Ma'am, I do not know what to do. You know, certain things like that and sometimes I'm even a parent figure. You know, generally when you are in the classroom, you look at your learners, and they are not just your learners, they are your kids. So, on a personal note, I see them all as my little babies. So most importantly, I feel like I create a classroom that feels like a second home to my children. When I say my children, I mean my learners. That is how close I get with them.” – Miss Salvation

According to Miss Salvation’s observations, the classroom is a "second home," and learners are her "little babies," highlighting the teaching ethic of caring (Noddings, 2013). Providing learners with access to basic resources and respecting their dignity is an example of servant leadership, which prioritises the needs of others (Makirimani & Naicker, 2025). The literature emphasises that belonging is the cornerstone of learner engagement and success, and such actions of caring foster a sense of belonging (Muniroh, 2021; Zhou, 2023).

Miss Nazareth reaffirmed this responsibility of providing care by clearly identifying as a nurturer:

“I am a nurturer. I am a mother first and foremost. I start my day with that mindset, knowing that these children, someone else's children, are in my care... If it comes from a nurturer perspective, a child is going to remember you not for what you have taught them, but for how you treated them. So, with that mindset of a nurturer, a child knows that as soon as they come into the classroom, they are entering a second home, a safe environment...

The one that sticks with me is a learner I taught who was diagnosed with ADHD. He was in Grade 2 at that time. This child was constantly picked on and had very extreme behavioural issues. He was very aggressive and displayed violent behaviour towards other learners and educators. He was on a high dosage of Ritalin, and because of his behaviour, he was constantly berated by peers and educators, to the point where he thought he did not belong in a mainstream school. However, I did not see it that way. Even when he threw sand in my eyes, I still responded with love, respect, and patience.

After constant one-on-one attention, personal time, and positive reinforcement were invested in his life, he began to thrive. He had such great enthusiasm. It just started with one word of encouragement.” – Miss Nazareth

This testimonial exemplifies the application of servant leadership qualities, including empathy, patience, and respect (Spears, 2010). Miss Nazareth modelled the "prosocial classroom," where teacher social-emotional competency directly improves learner performance, by responding to violence with unconditional compassion rather than with punitive measures (Li et al., 2022). According to Ansari et al. (2020), the change in the learner's self-perception highlights how supportive relationships can spur academic drive and perseverance.

According to Mr Kairos, the function of a nurturer also encompasses the learners' material and emotional well-being:



Figure 5.1. Collage Inquiry - Hot Dog Roll Sponsorship

“.....So, the first one that I have here, you would see that I have a picture of Hot dog rolls. So, this is actually a sponsorship that I received from one of my family members. As I said, we have learners who are indigent, many of whom are indigent. In fact, the photo that you see there is just a small part of the mini rolls that I had made that day... there is one thing that I have learned, which is the importance of being a bit compassionate towards learners, showing them love, attention, and making sure they know they are valued, cared for, and loved. Because learners, just like adults, we all go through our own difficulties in life. Most of them are not known to our professional workplace or to our friends. You

know, we have strong, brave people. It is just like these children. They are young, they are pure, they are innocent, they do not even understand what life is, and they are challenged and faced with all the difficulties of life. One of the approaches I have used over the years is simply showing children a bit of love and attention, making it known to them that they are worthy of every space they occupy... So, this picture actually represents so much. It represents love. It represents passion, caring, being a diligent teacher, caring for the learners in all aspects of their lives.” – Mr Kairos

In Mr Kiaros’ case, giving food is a symbolic act that conveys dignity, worth and concern, in addition to being a tangible one. Higher-order learning is predicated on addressing learners' basic needs, as Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs reminds us. This action aligns with the stewardship principle of servant leadership. It reflects Noddings' (2013) ethic of caring, which prioritises the value of interpersonal relationships and a receptive attitude toward the needs of others.

In a similar vein, Mr Calvary explained how he helped a learner who was struggling with material and familial issues:

“I had a learner — let’s call him Sipo — who became withdrawn and aggressive towards the middle of the year, about two years ago. Prior to this, he was a good learner in terms of behaviour and discipline. I asked him to stay behind after school to help tidy the classroom so I could find out what was going on. While he was helping, he shared what he was experiencing at home. His father had lost his job, his mother had moved to another province and he had no communication with her. There were talks of him moving to live with his grandmother. Because of the situation at home, he was not bringing a meal to school, had no one helping him with homework, and lacked the necessary stationery.

I spoke to a friend who was part of an NGO, and we tried to include him in the school’s scheme as well. This helped the family and allowed us to assist them at home. Whatever he was experiencing at home was affecting his behaviour and ultimately his academics. It did not change overnight, but slowly he became less aggressive, especially towards other learners. He felt seen again, and when things started to change at home, things started to change at school as well. In that

moment, I realised that we are not just educators or teachers; we are also caregivers. Sometimes we have to look beyond the curriculum, find where the problems are, and go a little extra to be part of the solution.” – Mr Calvary

This story demonstrates the relationship between activism and caregiving. Mr Calvary embodied what AlAjmi and Alsaleh (2023) refer to as teachers' duty as "agents of social resilience" by working with an NGO to provide help outside of the school setting. His acknowledgement that teachers need to “look beyond the curriculum” is consistent with servant leadership, which emphasises service before self and holds that a teacher leader's job is to foster both the individual and the community (Spears, 2010).

Collectively, these narratives demonstrate how the study’s participants view their work as essentially relational, with a foundation in compassion, caring, and service. Both the ethic of caring (Noddings, 2013) and the principles of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) are reflected in their activities, highlighting the idea that good teaching leadership encompasses learners' complete wellness in addition to information transmission.

5.3.1.2. Teachers as advocates for learner well-being

In this study, teachers continuously positioned themselves as active promoters of their learners’ overall well-being in addition to being nurturers. Beyond just offering resources for the classroom, advocacy also involved establishing safe spaces, providing emotional support, and addressing the social and psychological challenges faced by learners. This subtheme emphasises the understanding that good teaching entails more than just imparting knowledge; it also entails preserving learners’ rights, upholding their dignity, and making sure they succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. Norman and Eslami (2022) emphasise that trauma-informed and advocacy-based approaches promote resilience and inclusiveness, while Noddings (2013) claims that caring in education entails listening to and meeting learners’ expressed needs. As they actively intervene to address challenges like poverty, emotional difficulties, and institutional neglect, the teachers' stories here also demonstrate important aspects of servant leadership, namely empathy, stewardship, and dedication to the development of others (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010).

Miss Salvation expressed that:

“...listening to them, sometimes you never know what a child is actually carrying on them, you know? And when I see someone, whether it is one of my children or someone who is feeling down, I often go to them and talk to them. So, I reassure them that they're not behind. I also encourage them to use their voices, and I remind them that school is a place where they should feel safe and valued. When I also notice a child struggling emotionally, I take it upon myself to take them aside during the course of the day and offer comfort and remind them that school is a safe place because at the heart of every teaching should be the belief that every child deserves that dignity, that joy and the chance to thrive, no matter what background or challenges they may face at home or in the community. So I would say that the most important thing to me as a teacher is to go beyond limitations, is to create that environment where every learner is cared for, is valued and is given the chance to prove themselves.” – Miss Salvation

Miss Salvation’s focus on safety, dignity, and the opportunity to flourish aligns with the UN rights-based approach to education, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Additionally, it aligns with the focus on empathy and healing in servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010), in which teachers serve as guardians and supporters of learners’ overall well-being, rather than just imparting academic knowledge. Through confirming that learners’ emotional stability is fundamental to learning, advocacy takes centre stage in what Nodding (2013) refers to as relational care.

Likewise, Miss Nazareth encapsulated her role by using the metaphor of an open doorway:

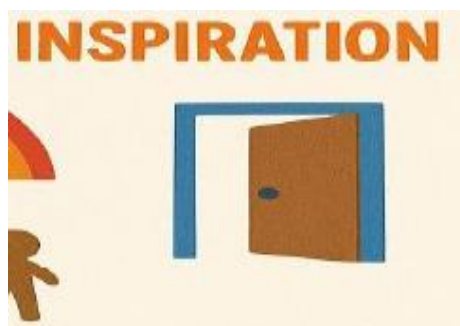


Figure 5.2. Collage Inquiry – Metaphor of an Opened Doorway

“As you can see, the picture of the doorway talks about how we must be an open door for the learners. We need to maintain an open door for learners. The learner needs to have an allowance for their feelings; they need to feel protected. They need to feel safe. They need to feel motivated. A child is supposed to feel safe when they walk into the classroom. So that is what teaching means for me... A child leaves their home knowing that they are going to a safe environment when they leave home... There is no intimidation when the child sees me; they do not feel intimidated. A child must not feel any judgment. They must not feel as if their opinions are berated. It must not feel as if a child does not have a sense of comfort. They must have a sense of comfort and peace, knowing that when they leave for school in the morning. That they are in a safe environment.”

– Miss Nazareth

According to Brunzell et al. (2022), trauma-informed teaching concepts, which prioritise safety and trust at the core of learning, are reflected in the imagery of the “open doorway,” representing accessibility and belonging. According to Miss Nazareth, the absence of fear or condemnation encourages learners to engage freely and self-assuredly, a characteristic of servant leadership that emphasises individual development and the growth of inclusive communities (Eva et al., 2019).

Mr Kairos reaffirmed this theme by considering how he has used the SIAS policy process to comprehend the backgrounds of his learners:



Figure 5.3. Collage Inquiry – Building Relationships with Learners Through the Heart

“So, you can see a heart and the hands holding the heart. For me, I managed to get close to these learners and understand them through screening and

identification, reading the documents, and understanding their backgrounds. One learner's house had burned down two years ago, and he was living on the roadsides with his mom; his dad was not present. He was new in the school and, though troubled, also a bully. Through screening, guidance, and working with the counsellor, I saw so much change in this child. He had adopted the behaviour of people living on the streets, causing harm, theft, and burglary, but over a few months, he transformed into a beautiful learner—attending school regularly, arriving on time, and improving his grades. This experience taught me the importance of being inclusive and prioritising learners' holistic development, catering to all their needs.” – Mr Kairos

In this case, advocacy takes the form of both the servant leadership quality of dedication to people's development (Spears, 2010) and the systematic intervention directed by SIAS (DBE, 2014). Mr Kairos's efforts to address behavioural issues as well as socioeconomic constraints are aligned with Dasoo (2020), who contends that teacher advocacy frequently makes up for structural injustices in South African education. His narrative also demonstrates the transforming power of advocacy: learners are empowered to alter their academic and personal paths when they feel heard and encouraged.

Lastly, Mr Calvary explained his role as an "architect" who finds gaps in learners' lives and fills them with bridges:



Figure 5.4. Collage Inquiry –Being an Architect to Overcome the Cracks in Life

“I would say teachers are some sort of creator or architect of a safe learning space for learners. If I am still keeping to the architect context, it is about looking for the cracks or the weak spots where the learner may fall through. So, it could

be things like poverty, which may cause a learner to come to school on an empty stomach, a lack of school supplies, issues stemming from the home, behavioural issues due to what's happening at home and trying to work towards solving those issues, like building a bridge over those cracks, trying to support the learner. I feel this way because I do not think leadership is just about being on the side, from the front, or from behind. You are leading when you are amongst the learners, and the learner has to feel that comfort and that ability to learn in a safe space. It's not just feeding in terms of academics; they are not just being fed knowledge and learning skills. It's also about emotional security and safety that will promote academic growth... we sort of become a teacher, counsellor, social worker, even advocate sometimes, you know, because some learners are bullied and they may need you to represent them in some way or the other.” – Mr Calvary

The advocacy aspect of servant leadership, in which leaders walk “amongst” those they serve rather than giving orders from a distance, is aptly captured by Mr Calvary's metaphor (Greenleaf, 1977). Mr Calvary's story illustrates how advocacy necessitates that teachers take on several responsibilities in order to protect learners' academic and emotional well-being: teacher, counsellor, social worker, and advocate. This supports Zhou's (2023) research, which shows that teachers who proactively promote learners' well-being increase resilience and engagement, particularly for those affected by poverty or unstable family situations.

When taken as a whole, these stories demonstrate that teachers view advocacy as an essential component of their moral and professional obligations, rather than an additional burden. They demonstrate care ethics (Noddings, 2013) and servant leadership values of empathy, stewardship, and healing (Eva et al., 2019; Spears, 2010) by creating secure and welcoming environments and attending to learners' material, emotional, and social needs. As a result, advocacy becomes both a teaching tool and a moral requirement, ensuring that learners' dignity and overall well-being are given equal weight alongside their academic performance.

5.3.1.3. Teachers as servant-leaders

The findings of this study indicate that teachers view their role in leading for care and support in teaching and learning as service-oriented, with a focus on ethical behaviour, role modelling, and helping learners overcome obstacles in their academic and personal lives. According to the

servant leadership theory, a leader should serve others, promote development, and set an example of moral and relational values (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010). More recently, studies have shown that servant-leaders in education foster learners' agency, resilience, and holistic development, particularly in underprivileged environments (Eva et al., 2019; Nsiah et al., 2022; Shula, 2023). Teachers' practical implementation of these ideas is demonstrated by the stories that follow.

Miss Salvation described her approach:

“I also have tried to lead by example by not only teaching content, but by teaching resilience and adaptability and kindness... For me, I feel like leading in a school, rural school. I do not think it's about teaching lessons from a textbook. It is about being present, guiding my learners through all the challenges, and showing them that even though they may come from difficult circumstances, they can still achieve greatness. I mean that leading means being a role model to them and showing them my actions, which demonstrate how to be respectful, kind, determined, and hopeful. I think it's about showing them my actions and setting the tone of the classroom, so my learners all feel inspired.”
– Miss Salvation

The servant leadership qualities of stewardship, dedication to development, and moral modelling are all evident in Miss Salvation's story (Spears, 2010). She supports agency and flexibility, which recent studies indicate are essential for learner empowerment in rural and resource-constrained schools, by exhibiting kindness and resilience, and providing learners with real-world examples of how to overcome obstacles (Nsiah et al., 2022). Like Eva et al. (2019), who highlight the transformative and relational dimensions of servant leadership in education, Miss Salvation believes that leadership is inextricably linked to ethical behaviour and relational involvement.

Miss Nazareth highlighted fairness and moral modelling:

“My respect and my behaviour as well are something that a child mimics. They watch me. I am the one they emulate because I am with them most of the day. So I need to have good behaviour. I need to be worthy of emulation, and then I also need to encourage learners when they make mistakes. I need to be fair. I must

not put a child at a disadvantage or discriminate against a child.” – Miss Nazareth

According to Miss Nazareth's perspective, servant leadership in education necessitates deliberate moral and ethical behaviour, with teachers serving as role models for justice, honesty, and equality. This finding is consistent with the literature on ethical teacher leadership, which links learners' social-emotional development to relational integrity and role modelling (Spears, 2010; Shula, 2023). Miss Nazareth's methodology also demonstrates care ethics (Noddings, 2013), showing that leadership is relational and based on accountability for the welfare of learners.

Mr Calvary emphasised the value of setting an example in an environment where there are not many male teachers:



Figure 5.5. Collage Inquiry – Male Teachers Leading by Example

“...the collage shows the educator as a protector and foundation layer for learners in a context where many of the learners lack positive role models and I do believe that leadership is about demonstrating strength and care and showing learners that a role model or a person can be both strong and caring... being a male educator in a primary school setting as well, where there are fewer male educators, sometimes it's necessary for the learners to see a male teacher as a role model that can be strong, resilient, but also empathetic, gentle and nurturing towards the learners.” – Mr Calvary

Mr Calvary's story serves as an example of context-sensitive servant leadership, demonstrating how teachers adapt their leadership style to meet the social and emotional needs of their

learners. Mr Calvary provides learners with an example of striking a balance between empathy and resilience by being both strong and caring, which is an essential aspect of servant leadership in schools (Eva et al., 2019; Nsiah et al., 2022). Mr Calvary's viewpoint is also in line with studies on teacher role-modelling, which demonstrate that learners imitate the actions of dependable, moral, and caring leaders (Gui et al., 2020).

Together, these stories show that ethical modelling, setting an example, and encouraging learners' hope and resilience are all components of teachers' servant-leadership activities. Being present, interacting with others, and serving others are ways in which leadership is demonstrated, reflecting both ethical and pragmatic aspects. Teachers act as pillars of stability and inspiration by helping learners overcome obstacles, setting an example of moral behaviour, and exhibiting compassion in addition to authority. This aligns with the servant-leadership values of healing, stewardship, and dedication to the development of others (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010).

5.3.1.4. Teachers as collaborators with stakeholders

According to the findings, teachers believe that co-operation amongst peers, learners, and parents is crucial to fostering successful teaching, learning, and the welfare of learners. According to studies, collaborative methods in education improve learner achievements, fortify support networks, and foster inclusive learning environments (Mweli & Gcelu, 2022; Adebola & Tsotetsi, 2022). The concepts of stewardship, dedication to development, and community building are reflected in co-operation within the framework of servant leadership, as leaders actively endeavour to incorporate the knowledge and viewpoints of others in order to serve their constituents better (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010).

Mr Calvary demonstrated teamwork using a graphic metaphor:

P.T.O



Figure 5.6. Collage Inquiry - Interlocking Gears to Represent Collaboration

“...so, for support, I used a few pictures there of the interlocking gears. Sort of grouped together to symbolise support from colleagues, from learners and from family as well... The whole process of teaching and learning becomes easier when you collaborate with other stakeholders.” – Mr Calvary

Emphasising that teaching is not a solitary endeavour, the concept of interlocking gears represents the interconnectedness of educational actors. Colleague collaboration facilitates professional support and resource sharing, while learner involvement fosters agency and accountability. Families’ involvement also ensures that learners receive consistent support in various settings. This co-operative strategy aligns with the servant-leadership philosophy, which emphasises that successful leaders foster communities where teamwork promotes both individual and group development (Eva et al., 2019).

Mr Kairos underlined how crucial parent involvement is:

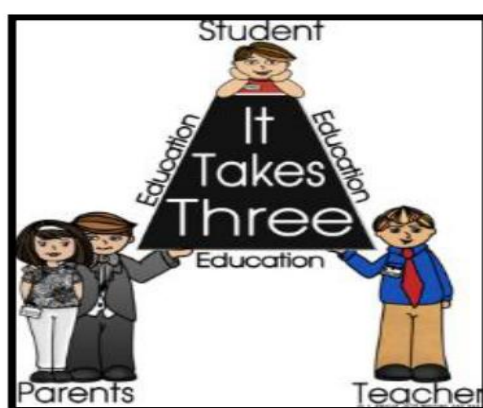


Figure 5.7. Collage Inquiry – Relationships for Effective Education

“But also, parent involvement is crucial in the education of a child because what we know at school is not the exact same thing as the behaviours, the challenges or the patterns that the child displays at home. Being involved with the parent you know shows the child that it's not just the teacher who's caring, but the parent is also caring because they attend meetings and we speak to them as well. As I speak to them and say, 'You know, your parent cares about you so much, especially those who come from situations of broken homes.' So, I speak to the child and tell the child, you know, your parent cares for you so much because they still need the time to come to school and try to help you.” – Mr Kairos

Mr Kairos's reflection highlights the teacher's role as a liaison between the home and school settings, demonstrating that teamwork extends beyond the classroom. This approach reinforces the positive effects of parent-school collaborations by promoting learners' social-emotional growth and creating a sense of continuity and security across contexts (Elshanum, 2024). The servant-leadership concept of stewardship is further reinforced by collaboration, as teachers work to integrate relationships, resources, and expertise from multiple stakeholders to support learners' holistic development (Spears, 2010).

When taken as a whole, these stories demonstrate that teachers believe cooperation is essential for effective teaching, where shared accountability and well-coordinated assistance enhances learning and well-being. In line with the relational and comprehensive orientation of both servant leadership and current educational research, teachers establish a network of care and support by involving parents, learners, and colleagues. In addition to enhancing learner performance in the classroom, collaborative practices show a moral and ethical dedication to creating welcoming and supportive learning environments.

5.3.1.5. Teachers' role conceptions: patterns, tensions and theoretical extensions

Across the four subthemes, a coherent pattern emerges: teachers conceptualise leadership for care and support as relational, morally grounded, and materially responsive. Whether positioning themselves as nurturers, advocates, servant-leaders, or collaborators, participants consistently frame their professional identity as extending beyond curriculum delivery into holistic learner development. Leadership is therefore not understood as positional authority, but as ethical presence, emotional responsiveness, and contextual intervention.

Collectively, the findings indicate that in under-resourced schooling environments, teacher leadership becomes compensatory in nature. Participants repeatedly describe actions that fill systemic gaps, providing food, sourcing resources, engaging NGOs, counselling learners, liaising with families, and modelling resilience. These practices suggest that leadership for care operates as a form of micro-level social justice, in which teachers buffer learners from socio-economic instability. In this sense, care is not supplementary to teaching; it is foundational to enabling learning.

However, this expansive understanding of the role also reveals significant tensions. The repeated use of personal resources, time, and emotional labour suggests that care is frequently individualised rather than structurally supported. Teachers assume responsibilities typically associated with social workers, counsellors, and welfare agents. While participants narrate these actions as moral commitments, the cumulative effect raises questions about sustainability and professional boundaries. Leadership, as enacted here, risks becoming dependent on personal sacrifice rather than institutional design.

Furthermore, the strong moral framing of care, particularly through maternal and protector metaphors, may inadvertently naturalise caregiving as an inherent obligation rather than a negotiated professional practice. While such framing reinforces relational commitment, it may also obscure structural accountability by positioning systemic insufficiencies as personal challenges to overcome. The data thus reveals both empowerment and vulnerability within teachers' self-understandings.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings strongly resonate with the principles articulated by Robert K. Greenleaf. Participants embody core servant-leader characteristics, including empathy, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and community building. Leadership is enacted "amongst" learners rather than from hierarchical distance, reflecting a decentralised and relational orientation. However, the data also extend and complicate servant leadership theory. While the theory assumes voluntary service grounded in moral choice, participants' narratives suggest that service is often compelled by contextual deprivation. Teachers serve not only because they choose to, but because structural realities demand intervention. Servant leadership, in this context, becomes both an ethical orientation and an adaptive necessity.

Similarly, the findings deepen the application of Nel Noddings' ethic of care. While Noddings foregrounds attentiveness and relational responsiveness, participants' experiences illustrate that care within deprived environments must also be materially enacted and structurally negotiated. Care moves beyond interpersonal attentiveness into advocacy, resource mobilisation, and community engagement. Thus, the ethic of care becomes embedded within socio-economic realities rather than confined to relational intention.

Notably, the subsection also reveals that teachers do not perceive advocacy, modelling, or collaboration as additional burdens, but as integral to their professional identity. This suggests that leadership for care and support is internalised as moral vocation rather than institutional mandate. While this orientation fosters deep relational commitment and learner transformation, it simultaneously risks normalising overextension and shifting systemic responsibility onto individual teachers..

Overall, teachers' understanding of their role reflects a holistic, service-oriented, and relationally anchored model of leadership that both affirms and critically extends existing theoretical frameworks. Leadership for care and support, as conceptualised by participants, is not peripheral to teaching and learning; it is the enabling condition that makes meaningful learning possible in contexts marked by deprivation.

5.3.2. Factors influencing teachers' leadership in teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts

A complex interaction of constraining and facilitating factors shapes teachers' leadership in underprivileged environments, directly affecting their ability to care for and support learners while upholding high standards of teaching and learning. According to the study's findings, teachers' agency and efficacy are severely constrained by structural issues, including inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, systemic inequities, and toxic school cultures. However, facilitating factors that maintain motivation and professional dedication include supportive environments, such as positive school cultures, collegial teamwork, parental and community involvement, and teachers' personal agency and resilience. According to servant leadership, these relationships highlight how teachers both withstand and overcome systemic limitations by prioritising learners' overall well-being, fighting for justice, and setting an example of perseverance in the face of hardship (Greenleaf, 1977; Eva et al.,

2019). This section, therefore, examines both the constraining and facilitating factors that influence teachers' ability to exercise leadership in contexts of deprivation, providing a nuanced understanding of the systemic and relational dynamics that shape their work.

5.3.2.1. Constraining factors in leading teaching and learning for care and support

In deprived educational contexts, teachers' leadership is often undermined by systemic and contextual barriers that restrict their ability to provide meaningful care and support. According to the study's findings, teachers' workloads and emotional strain are exacerbated by several factors, including a lack of resources, poor infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, toxic school cultures, systemic injustices, and the socioeconomic challenges faced by the learners' communities. These difficulties impair academic performance as well as attempts to address the holistic needs of learners, which lowers morale and limits professional agency (De Clercq, 2020; Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025). From the perspective of servant leadership, these circumstances underscore the challenges of practising empowerment, empathy, and stewardship in the face of systemic inequalities that persist (Greenleaf, 1977; Eva et al., 2019). Therefore, this section examines the limiting variables that influence teachers' leadership in providing care and support, highlighting the relationship between professional duty and structural deprivation.

5.3.2.1.1. Limited resources and poor infrastructure

The teachers' stories illustrate how inadequate infrastructure and limited resources significantly limit their ability to deliver quality teaching and learning, while also hindering initiatives to support and care for learners. This problem is especially severe in underprivileged areas, where structural injustices result in inadequate resources, subpar infrastructure, and hazardous surroundings for both teachers and learners.

Miss Salvation explained how serious the infrastructure problems are:



Figure 5.8. Collage Inquiry – Water Deprivation (Jojo Tank)

“As you can see, there is an image there about water storage and sanitation that reflects the challenges that we have, the infrastructure and the basic needs, which directly affect teaching and learning in our school...The limited resources and teaching aids sometimes hinder my progress in teaching...We have experienced numerous water shortages for several days. It can go on for several days without end, and we have about 1,700 learners and very, very few bathrooms. It becomes very difficult to ensure their health and safety sometimes. I believe that sometimes the policy, certain policies in the school, prevent us from closing school early, which means that the learner spends the entire day without access to water.” – Miss Salvation

This story demonstrates how poor infrastructure and learner wellbeing are intertwined, with even basic water and sanitation becoming obstacles to teaching and learning. As the literature indicates, schools in underprivileged areas often operate in ways that necessitate "care" to exceed meeting basic requirements before instruction can commence (West & Meier, 2020). From the standpoint of servant leadership, Miss Salvation's worries reflect the concept of stewardship and dedication to the development of others (Greenleaf, 1977), as she acknowledges her duty to protect learners' health and dignity despite structural barriers.

Miss Nazareth provided more details about the resource limitations, emphasising how they interfere with teaching procedures:



Figure 5.9. Collage Inquiry - Effects of Limited Resources

“In an under-resourced school, I am unable to stick to the plan that I have for the day, and that hinders teaching and learning in the classroom. It also hinders my plan for the day. You feel as if you have not achieved much, especially without enough books and stationery, which really makes it challenging. There are a lot of negative factors when it comes to not having enough books and stationery, because that takes up time. When it comes to executing a lesson, I would have to find a book, make provision for a new book or stationery, or find other ways to teach that child, which doubles the teaching time... I think that not having worksheets in a school makes it difficult because, in a school that offers more worksheets compared to one that does not, you can tell that learners who have worksheets are able to take them home and reinforce what they've learned, and those learners tend to have a greater understanding. They have more creativity when it comes to learning. So not being able to create more worksheets due to lack of resources also has created a challenge as well when it comes to teaching.” – Miss Nazareth

Miss Nazareth’s annoyance highlights the detrimental effects of deprivation on education, where the lack of fundamental Learning and Teaching Support Materials (LTSM) immediately lowers the standard of teaching and learning. Material disadvantage in South African schools exacerbates achievement inequalities and sustains unequal learning chances, as argued by Muyambi and Ahiaku (2025). Teachers must utilise creativity and extra time in these situations, demonstrating adaptive servant leadership, where resilience and ingenuity are crucial for maintaining learner engagement and academic progress.

Similarly, Mr Kairos pointed out the gap between appearances and reality, challenging assumptions about resource provision in schools:

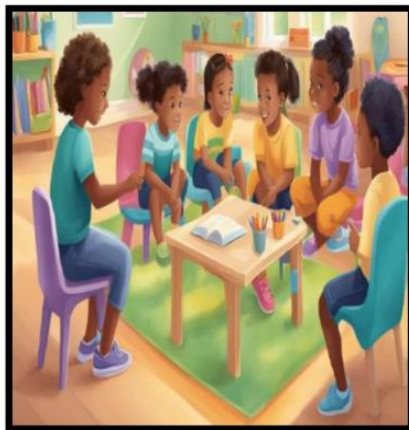


Figure 5.10. Collage Inquiry - False perceptions of Teaching and Learning

“If you look at the photo, it looks like a very happy scene. The children are sitting around each other and it appears that the learning and teaching environment is very conducive. However, this is actually the opposite of what we are facing at school. Based on my experience and our current situation, it is not that easy. We are so under-resourced that we do not even have paper for printing learning and teaching support materials, and sometimes you have to look for alternative methods. As a teacher, it becomes trial and error.

According to curriculum requirements — listening and speaking, reading and viewing, writing and presenting — it becomes very difficult to fulfil these departmental expectations because we do not have the funds or materials to facilitate the lessons properly. I know how I want to conduct a good lesson and how to follow up with informal and formative assessments, but it is a disadvantage to the teacher because you cannot produce your best due to limited resources. It is also disadvantaging the children because they are already coming from backgrounds that are not in their favour.” – Mr Kairos

This observation highlights the disparity between the aspirations of policies and the realities of the classroom, supporting claims in the literature that teachers in underprivileged environments must use their own initiative and creativity to overcome systemic shortcomings (Roffey &

Quinlan, 2021). Since Mr Kairos acknowledges the exacerbated disadvantage learners experience when resource limitations collide with already unstable family situations, his story aligns with the servant leadership characteristic of empathy.

When combined, these stories demonstrate how inadequate infrastructure and limited resources not only hinder instruction but also compromise leadership for care and support, thereby increasing the workload of teachers who must compensate for structural flaws. The findings are consistent with research showing that teachers' leadership in underprivileged environments is significantly hampered by material hardship (Van der Vyver et al., 2021). In addition, the teachers' responses demonstrate servant-leadership values, including empathy, stewardship, and dedication to learners' development, as they persist in pursuing learners' academic success and well-being despite systemic obstacles.

5.3.2.1.2. Lack of professional development

Maintaining teacher effectiveness and well-being requires professional development, but participants pointed out serious gaps in access to organised instruction and assistance. It was believed that the lack of frequent workshops, wellness programs, and focused skill development hampered professional development and the capacity to provide learners with holistic care. This finding is consistent with research indicating that inconsistent or fragmented professional development can lower resilience and morale (Shakimova et al., 2024). From the standpoint of servant leadership, teachers' ability to serve, empathise, and create community must be fostered by continual professional development (Greenleaf, 1977; Shula, 2023).

Miss Salvation emphasised how professional development may fuel her teaching practice creativity and serve as a source of inspiration:

“...with more structured workshops and training, I think that as well can support and give me motivation to be both caring and innovative within the classroom as well as outside the classroom.” – Miss Salvation

Miss Salvation's assertion suggests that professional development enhances teachers' ability to demonstrate compassion and creativity, in addition to technical and pedagogical advancements. This aligns with the tenets of servant leadership, which include a dedication to fostering

personal development and promoting creativity for the benefit of others (Spears, 2010). This is supported by the literature, which demonstrates that ongoing training increases teacher motivation and prepares them to adapt to the evolving requirements of learners (Shakimova et al., 2024). Thus, the lack of these opportunities run the risk of restricting teachers' ability to thrive as servant leaders in their classrooms.

Echoing these concerns, Miss Nazareth reflected on her earlier years in teaching, when she had access to regular workshops, and contrasted that with the current lack of opportunities:

“There was a point where I attended quite a few workshops. However, that hasn't been the case for a while. In my earlier years, I attended workshops, which have not only upskilled me but also developed me professionally and personally, contributing to my growth as a teacher... Employee Wellness initiatives need to be compulsory for educators. I know team building is part of it, but they need to make it compulsory so that we can boost the morale of a teacher.” – Miss Nazareth

According to this story, professional development can enhance both professional knowledge and promote personal growth, a finding also noted in the literature (Shiri et al., 2023). Miss Nazareth's demand for mandatory wellness programs underscores the importance of considering teacher well-being as a crucial component of professional development, rather than an add-on activity. This viewpoint aligns with the all-encompassing concern for the welfare of followers, characteristic of servant leadership (Eva et al., 2019). Her critique highlights the systemic undervaluation of teacher morale, which is crucial for maintaining resilience and commitment in stressful educational situations, by presenting wellbeing as a necessity rather than a choice.

The need for more consistent emotional support was also underscored by Mr Kairos, who argued for professional development that extends beyond the school level to include external partnerships:

“I would say it is important to have more regular emotional support sessions for teachers as well, because some teachers are really finding it difficult within the team, and they have expressed it. As I said, we do have support for them as well, but I feel it would be easier if we have support coming from out of the school as well, not only in the school, someone who can understand and acknowledge the

struggle that we have and try and support us at large... and I wish we had a stronger collaboration with the department for them to understand exactly what we are going through.” – Mr Kairos

Mr Kairos highlights a gap between schools and larger educational systems in his reflection. Even while there is support within schools, it is often seen as inadequate, and teachers turn to other parties, such as the Department of Education, for acknowledgement and organised help. This relates to the servant leadership quality of community building, which emphasises cooperation and shared accountability for development (Wolhuter & Van der Walt, 2020). Lack of systematic collaboration reduces teachers' sense of support and value, which in turn limits their ability to show learners empathy and concern.

Finally, the issue of targeted training emerged in the reflections of Mr Calvary, who highlighted the need for more specialised preparation in handling learners' socio-emotional challenges:

“...and also, if teachers could be trained and developed, like although teachers do a bit of educational psychology, more in-depth training on how to deal with children who experience certain things, like unfortunate circumstances at home. If teachers or most teachers, if not all, are better equipped to deal with these things through professional development, then it will also make it easier for the staff at the school level.” – Mr Calvary

This realisation highlights the shortcomings of existing training programs, which often provide cursory introductions to complex subjects like educational psychology. Mr Calvary's demand for comprehensive training aligns with broader discussions on trauma-informed education and the need to equip teachers with the necessary tools to support learners who are struggling (Garrity, 2022). Such training enhances teachers' capacity to exhibit empathy, healing, and foresight, qualities that are critical for assisting vulnerable learners, according to the perspective of servant leadership (Spears, 2010). Without these chances, teachers could feel unprepared to address the comprehensive needs of their pupils, which would compromise their effectiveness as professionals and the welfare of their learners.

When taken as a whole, these stories critically portray professional development as disjointed, uneven, and inadequately sensitive to the emotional and professional needs of teachers. International criticism that professional development is too frequently event-based rather than ongoing and integrated into practice is echoed by the findings (Kumar, 2023). In addition to

undermining resilience and morale, a lack of funding for comprehensive and ongoing development also restricts teachers' capacity to exercise servant leadership by providing learners with empathetic, creative, and dedicated instruction. To close this gap, leaders must rethink professional development as an ongoing, team-based, servant-centred process that gives equal weight to competence, care, and wellness.

5.3.2.1.3. Toxic school culture

The culture of a school has a significant impact on teachers' professional efficacy and well-being. While a toxic culture characterised by poor communication, a lack of empathy, and excessive micromanagement can lower morale and reduce productivity, a positive, supportive culture can boost motivation, teamwork, and resilience. The stories elicited by the participants reveal that teachers are concerned about the unfavourable aspects of their school culture, which manifest as a sense of being ignored, undervalued, and unsupported. These factors jeopardise their ability to provide learners with comprehensive care, in addition to hindering their potential for professional success. These findings are consistent with research showing how unsupportive workplaces negatively impact teachers' performance, agency, and well-being (Boen et al., 2020; Yengkopiong, 2024). According to the viewpoint of servant leadership, these stories also highlight a crucial lack of servant-leader behaviours, such as stewardship, empathy, and listening, elements that are necessary for developing a positive organisational culture (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010).

Miss Salvation reflected on her experiences of school management, describing how the lack of communication and guidance left her feeling neglected and at times even victimised:

“I feel like the lack of communication and guidance from my management during these times has sometimes made me feel unsupported and sometimes even victimised by the system, as it seems like our real needs for our children are somehow overlooked.” – Miss Salvation

Miss Salvation's remarks highlight a leadership failing to prioritise the actual needs of teachers and learners. Ineffective communication and a lack of clear direction create an atmosphere in which teachers feel alone, powerless, and disengaged from their primary responsibility of nurturing learners. This is consistent with study findings that indicate teachers may experience stress, disillusionment, and disengagement as a result of unsupportive leadership behaviours

(Roope, 2025). On the other hand, servant leadership places a strong emphasis on empathy and active listening, which may help to improve relational trust within the school community and combat feelings of neglect (Eva et al., 2019). A more comprehensive criticism of systems that prioritise bureaucratic procedures over relational and human-centred methods is also raised by the seeming "overlooking" of learner demands.

Similarly, Miss Nazareth described her struggle with the lack of empathy from school leadership, highlighting the demoralising effects of constant micromanagement:

"I do believe that, personally, I need more support from leadership in terms of them being more empathetic. I believe that if leadership is more empathetic towards educators, the school's employees, and treats them with greater dignity, considering the human factor, it would be beneficial. It would make coming to work more enjoyable, and it would make it easier. It would make me, as an educator, more productive during the day. However, I feel overwhelmed, stressed, and constantly reminded of what I am not doing... I'm constantly micromanaged instead of being workshopped." – Miss Nazareth

This story demonstrates the significant impact that toxic leadership practices have on teacher morale. Miss Nazareth draws a comparison between the realities of micromanagement, stress, and criticism and the possible advantages of compassionate, dignity-driven leadership. Miss Nazareth's experience is representative of what Kay and Scholcoff (2025) refer to as the "erosion of professional identity," in which teachers' intrinsic motivation and productivity are reduced when they are not respected and acknowledged. A very different approach is provided by servant leadership, which is based on empowerment, empathy, and healing (Spears, 2010). Servant-leaders prioritise capacity-building via professional growth, teamwork, and dignity affirmation rather than micromanaging. Miss Nazareth's demand to be "workshopped" rather than "micromanaged" is particularly telling since it highlights the need for leadership that places more emphasis on empowerment and growth than on control and monitoring.

According to these stories, the school culture undercuts teachers' agency and well-being through controlling management techniques, poor communication, and a lack of empathy. Because unsupported and demotivated teachers are less able to provide the comprehensive care and creativity required for learning, a toxic culture has an impact on both teachers' morale and learners. These findings are consistent with research that emphasises how school culture shapes

teachers' effectiveness and dedication (Mannix-McNamara et al., 2021). The research highlights the critical need for leaders who treat teachers with dignity, communicate openly, and actively listen, as seen through the perspective of servant leadership. Consequently, by doing so, toxic cultures could be changed into caring communities where teachers can flourish and better serve their learners.

5.3.2.1.4. Overcrowded classrooms

One issue that participants frequently mentioned was overcrowded classrooms, which seriously compromised their ability to give learners individualised attention and high-quality teaching. High learner-teacher ratios and a lack of resources make it challenging for teachers to fulfil their pastoral and educational responsibilities effectively. Large class sizes have been associated with lower learner engagement, increased disciplinary problems, and higher teacher stress, as this challenge is well-documented in the research (West & Meier, 2020). According to a servant leadership viewpoint, overcrowding impairs teachers' capacity to provide individualised, compassionate, and empathetic instruction, all of which are essential for promoting learners' development and well-being (Greenleaf, 1977; Makirimani & Naicker, 2025).

Miss Salvation highlighted how class size often prevents her from offering individualised attention:

“Sometimes it is the large classes, which means that I cannot often get to all of them... Sometimes one child cannot get my whole attention because there are so many learners in the classroom, and because of the limited resources in my actual school, it makes it more difficult” – Miss Salvation

Miss Salvation's observations highlight how packed classrooms hinder one-on-one assistance and responsiveness to the needs of each learner. This is consistent with research showing that bigger class sizes weaken relationships between teachers and learners, limiting opportunities for formative assessment and individualised instruction (Gqwabaza, 2025). Because teachers are structurally unable to provide proper care, such circumstances undermine the servant leadership principle of prioritising each person's progress.

Miss Nazareth further underscored the behavioural and instructional challenges arising from overcrowding:

“...having an overcrowded classroom, really makes discipline a factor because if a child knows that they are caught between the other, they sort of feel like they can get away with their behaviour, with their misbehaviour, and it's hard to give that one-on-one attention. It is hard to offer feedback to a learner and mark their books on a daily basis.” – Miss Nazareth

Miss Nazareth’s reflections demonstrate how crowded classrooms erode classroom discipline and provide opportunities for learners to take advantage of anonymity. This supports the findings of Likuru and Mwila (2022), who found that packed classrooms frequently result in more disruptive behaviours, which cuts down on teaching time and quality. According to servant leadership, the development of a cooperative, courteous, and compassionate classroom community is hampered by the breakdown of discipline.

Similarly, Mr Kairos emphasised the difficulty of meeting diverse academic needs in oversized classrooms:

“Large classes as well, like the classes are oversized. The learner-to-teacher ratio is not ideal. It is difficult for us to care academically for the learner because we have learners who have needs, such as academic needs. They do not learn by standardised instruction or testing, or LTSM worksheets, and having a large class makes it difficult to cater to a child's needs in a large class because it is not feasible. It is difficult for you to create just one worksheet. Imagine making worksheets like five different types of worksheets for a class of like 45 or 50 learners.” – Mr Kairo

Mr Kairos’s story illustrates the incompatibility between large class sizes and differentiated instruction, particularly for learners who require additional academic support. This resonates with research emphasising that large classes constrain teachers’ ability to adapt teaching strategies to diverse learner needs (West & Meier, 2020). According to Robinson and Magnusen (2024), servant leadership theory emphasises the significance of acknowledging individual differences and fostering environments that allow all learners to succeed. However,

teachers encounter systemic obstacles that impede this individualised service in congested classrooms.

Finally, Mr Calvary reflected on the compounded impact of overcrowding in under-resourced contexts:

“...the number of students in a class is a constant struggle, especially if you are teaching in a school, where the community that the school serves is an underprivileged community with poverty and lack of resources... It does become a challenge. There are approximately 45 learners in my class, and I would say at least 20 of them have socioeconomic issues at home, while the other half have families that are just barely managing. So as much as I try, it is impossible to give each child the same amount of attention, and although I try to give some attention to everyone, I feel like on some days, certain learners may need attention more than others...” – Mr Calvary

Mr Calvary’s analysis emphasises how financial disadvantage and overcrowding overlap, with learners’ demands extending beyond the classroom into the social and emotional spheres. This multifaceted issue reflects research that indicates that in underprivileged neighbourhoods, big class sizes worsen disparities by reducing a teacher’s ability to offer individualised support (Hoadley, 2018). With its emphasis on empathy and comprehensive care, servant leadership is especially taxing in these situations since teachers may find it difficult to adequately nurture each learner because of the excessive demands placed on them.

Overall, the findings show that teachers' ability to demonstrate servant leadership values, such as individualised care, empathy, and empowerment, is severely hampered by packed classrooms. According to the literature, these kinds of settings impair equity, worsen behavioural problems, and lower the quality of education (West & Meier, 2020). For teachers to successfully fulfil their professional and servant leadership duties, these findings highlight the urgent need for systemic adjustments, such as improved learner-teacher ratios, increased funding, and targeted support for underprivileged schools.

5.3.2.1.5. Systemic inequities

Participants expressed grave concern about systemic inequities in education, which represent structural injustices that limit teachers' ability to provide learners with high-quality instruction and comprehensive care. The findings reveal that teachers face significant challenges, particularly in under-resourced schools, due to a lack of resources, inadequate personnel, and an overly burdensome curriculum. These problems reflect larger injustices in the South African educational system, as schools serving marginalised groups are disproportionately impacted by historical inequalities and current policy gaps (Bundy, 2020; Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025). A helpful perspective for examining these issues is provided by servant leadership theory, which emphasises the significance of leaders promoting justice, equity, and the development of both teachers and learners (Greenleaf, 1977; Nsiah et al., 2022).

Miss Nazareth highlighted the complexity of navigating a highly prescriptive curriculum while coping with resource shortages:

“The curriculum is very overwhelming. There is a certain number of hours to teach, a certain amount of content, and with the system asking us to teach that specific number of hours of content, considering the numerous other factors involved, it has created more challenges. Sometimes, the system has not taken these factors into account. That really makes it challenging for me as an educator... I think that I really need more provision of resources from the department. If the department had offered more resources to our school or if the department had employed more educators and created more infrastructure, then it would make teaching and learning less overwhelming.” – Miss Nazareth

Miss Nazareth's reflection illustrates the conflict between contextual reality and policy expectations. The curriculum enforces rigorous timetables and topic coverage, but it overlooks structural obstacles, including inadequate facilities, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of support materials. This aligns with the literature reviewed, which highlights how structural disparities in infrastructure and resources impair teacher effectiveness and have a detrimental effect on learner outcomes (Mokgwathi et al., 2023). Insufficient support limits leaders' ability to empower teachers, which in turn limits their ability to effectively serve learners according to the perspective of servant leadership (Spears, 2010; Eva et al., 2019). Addressing systemic

hurdles to ensure fair chances for learning and growth is a pillar of servant leadership, which is reflected in the request for additional teachers and resources.

Similarly, Mr Kairos described the material and financial constraints facing his school, which exacerbate the pressures imposed by departmental policies:

“...we are under-resourced as we do not have much funding from the state. They actually have not even given us our state funds yet for the year. So, our school is really struggling... the issue now is that when it comes to food for indigent learners, we, the school, have absolutely no funds to cater to these learners, so it's difficult for us... We do not have enough funds for food, stationery, safe spaces, or security. So, considering the pressure from the department, which is where they are focusing so much on academic results, makes it so much difficult for us because we don't even have the resources, we're not even sent the funds for us to make teaching and learning more enhanced and more conducive. So, there is a lot of pressure from the department as well.” – Mr Kairos

Mr Kairos's story highlights how systemic inequities are multifaceted and tied to infrastructure, legislation, and finances. The absence of prompt funding for basic supplies, such as stationery and food for learners in need, as well as secure learning spaces, highlights how structural injustices have a direct impact on the classroom experience and teachers' ability to fulfil their duties. The literature reviewed emphasises that systematic underfunding and policy neglect sustain educational imbalances, especially in schools serving low-income populations (Chikoko & Mthembu, 2021). A structural contradiction that undermines teachers' agency and morale is evident in the conflict between departmental pressure for academic success and the scarcity of basic resources.

Critically, these structural impediments prevent teachers from demonstrating the three central tenets of servant leadership: stewardship, empathy, and growth-fostering (Greenleaf, 1977; Makirimani & Naicker, 2025). Teachers' ability to facilitate holistic development, respond to the unique needs of each learner, and act as change agents is severely hindered when systemic pressures and resource shortages impede them. Through addressing systemic injustices, these stories highlight the moral imperative for educational leadership to provide teachers and learners with the resources, opportunities, and support they need to succeed.

Consequently, the findings indicate that systemic inequities may manifest as structural or policy-related issues, placing teachers in under-resourced schools under considerable strain. Teachers' capacity to deliver high-quality, egalitarian instruction and to exercise servant leadership is jeopardised by these issues.

5.3.2.1.6. Socioeconomic challenge in the community

Socioeconomic issues significantly hamper teaching and learning in the communities that schools serve. Participants emphasised how learners' involvement, performance, and behaviour are adversely affected by poverty, a lack of family support, unemployment, and restricted access to basic resources. Teachers, who frequently feel pressured to compensate for structural injustices, are also burdened with additional emotional and professional responsibilities because of these challenges. This supports the evidence that highlights how socioeconomic disadvantage, especially in under-resourced schools, is a significant driver of learner outcomes and teacher burden (Tibane et al., 2024). The theory of servant leadership offers a valuable framework for interpreting these results, as it emphasises the significance of empathy, stewardship, and comprehensive care in addressing the challenges faced by both learners and teachers (Greenleaf, 1977; Eva et al., 2019).

Miss Salvation reflected on the weight of poverty and resource scarcity on both learners and teachers:

"...because many of my learners come to school without the basic needs, such as, you know, stationery as I mentioned before, or books and sometimes some of them don't come with a proper meal... Many of my learners also face struggles with poverty, and they do not bring lunch to school, so they lack family support. I felt like the weight of power of poverty... and lack of opportunities pressing on my learners are also on me as well, because to lead with the heart in the long run, we must also build a stronger support system." – Miss Salvation

Miss Salvation's story emphasises how teachers' emotional labour and learners' socioeconomic realities are intertwined. Teachers frequently take on additional responsibilities when learners arrive lacking in necessities, by offering advocacy, resources, and emotional support. The idea

that teachers in underprivileged environments often face increased stress and burnout due to compensating for structural injustices is supported by the literature (Shikalepo, 2020). From the standpoint of servant leadership, Miss Salvation's focus on creating a "stronger support system" embodies the idea of nourishing and encouraging development in the broader community, and providing care outside the classroom to mitigate the impact of poverty (Qarooni, 2023).

Miss Nazareth provided a more detailed account of how socioeconomic disadvantage impacts learners' academic engagement and discipline:



Figure 5.11. Collage Inquiry - Socioeconomic Challenges Experienced by Learners

“...It talks about the socio-economic challenges of learners, which is one of the huge factors in an under-resourced school. We are teaching children who do not have the necessary resources. If I send homework meant to reinforce a concept I have taught and it is not completed, it means the child has not learned that concept. That makes me feel as if I have not achieved much or been as productive as I want to be, and it lowers my teacher morale because I have goals for my learners.

There are many parents who do not meet me halfway in helping their child, and often these are the parents of learners who are already struggling academically. When it comes to finalising marks and reviewing low scores, it is disheartening. We need parental support; a teacher cannot teach alone. It takes a community to teach one child, and without that support, teaching becomes very challenging.

One of the greatest challenges is discipline. Many learners come from environments where there is no supervision, no monitoring, and no one to care

for them. As a result, they are brought up without discipline. They do not know the boundaries or how to offer and receive respect.” – Miss Nazareth

This reflection highlights the combined impact of parental disengagement and poverty on teacher morale and student learning outcomes. Insufficient parental guidance and supervision at home hinders learners’ ability to finish tasks, cultivate self-discipline, and succeed academically, adding to the workload for teachers. Parental support and engagement are important mediators of learner progress, according to research, and their absence makes teaching more difficult and emotionally draining (Motshusi et al., 2024). As teachers, families, and other stakeholders share responsibility for learners’ development, servant leadership concepts emphasise the importance of collaborative community participation (Spears, 2010; Amoako et al., 2021).

Mr Kairos similarly illustrated the material and social challenges learners face as a result of community poverty and unemployment:

“The learners that we have are not from a very fortunate community, so it becomes difficult for them to even be involved in school events. When I started at the school, there was a learner who was actually crying, crying out in the classroom. Then I asked her, What is going on? Are you OK? She said yes. Then when I spoke to her, I asked her why she was crying, and she said she had not eaten since last night, and this was like around 10 am, just before the break could start... so there's not much work or employment as well in the community, so parents are struggling to cater for their children's food... We had seen learners who were actually on drugs that we had found, where, of course, we had informed the relevant authorities in the department. All these children are basically this way because they are coming from these underprivileged homes, you know, their background is affected so badly that it takes a toll on the child... I would say the poverty and unemployment in the community are extremely high. Many, many parents are not working... and like we have some parents that are so disengaged, due to personal struggles stemming from unemployment and poverty as well.” – Mr Kairos

Mr Kairos’s story highlights how learners’ capacity to engage in class activities and stay focused entirely is directly impacted by systemic issues at the community level, such as

poverty, unemployment, and social instability. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that socioeconomic disadvantage is associated with an increased risk of dropping out, reduced academic involvement, and psychosocial challenges (Motshusi et al., 2024). Servant leadership emphasises the moral obligation of teachers and school leaders to promote and lessen these disparities, creating settings where learners' needs are recognised and met (Greenleaf, 1977; Eva et al., 2019).

Finally, Mr Calvary described the pervasive and persistent nature of poverty as an overarching challenge:

“Some learners experience burnout, especially if they're coming from a home that's affected by poverty, and they are doing a lot of things at home, so they cannot really work in school. I think poverty in the community, which sort of links to the school and not having enough resources, becomes, if I can describe it, an overarching shadow. It is always there. It is always present. So, I'm at this particular school for seven years, and poverty seems to be the challenge that, you know, we just can't get away from, and because children can't focus when they're hungry, when they're traumatised by violence at home, lack of resources. It makes the job feel like a constant uphill battle...” – Mr Calvary

This striking analogy of poverty as an “overarching shadow” encapsulates how deeply it affects education. Long-term exposure to trauma, deprivation, and a lack of resources impairs learners' focus, engagement, and academic development while also making teachers more stressed and burned out. According to research on educational inequality, persistent socioeconomic disadvantage poses obstacles to teacher effectiveness and learner outcomes (De Clercq, 2020). According to Spears (2010), servant leadership in this environment requires teachers to be advocates, caregivers, and builders of resilience despite systemic obstacles.

Together, these stories illustrate how socioeconomic issues within the community restrict learners' educational opportunities, exacerbate systemic injustices, and impose a practical and emotional burden on teachers. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted strategy that incorporates active community involvement, targeted social support for learners, and school leadership that embodies servant leadership values by fostering empathy, equity, and shared accountability for learners' growth.

5.3.2.2. Facilitating factors in leading teaching and learning for care and support

Although teachers in underprivileged environments encounter numerous obstacles, a variety of supporting factors that foster resilience, drive, and a sense of purpose in their work also enable them to exercise leadership. According to this study, collegial cooperation, supportive leadership styles, positive school cultures, community collaborations, and teachers' moral commitment and agency all play a crucial role in fostering care-oriented leadership. According to Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2020), these factors not only enhance teaching and learning but also create environments that promote empathy, collaboration, and comprehensive support for learners. Such circumstances enable teachers to demonstrate stewardship, promote group accountability, and put learners' and colleagues' development and well-being first, all in accordance with the principles of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010). This section thus examines the facilitating factors that strengthen teachers' leadership in deprived settings, offering insight into how relational and organisational support mitigates contextual hardships.

5.3.2.2.1. Positive school culture

In situations where socioeconomic deprivation can increase stress and limit resources, a positive school culture is generally considered a fundamental enabler of teacher leadership for care and support. To maintain their professional and personal well-being in such settings, teachers not only depend on their own fortitude but also on the group support of leaders, coworkers, and even families. According to research, collaborative efforts, empathy, and collegial support are hallmarks of a positive school culture. These traits foster psychologically secure settings where teachers feel appreciated and inspired (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020; Roffey & Quinlan, 2021). This is highly consistent with the tenets of servant leadership, which emphasise the development and welfare of others by fostering shared responsibility, trust, and teamwork (Greenleaf, 1977; Eva et al., 2019).

The participants' narratives vividly illustrate how such a culture is operationalised in practice. As Miss Salvation explained

“In our staff, there is teamwork and collaboration with our colleagues, they show encouragement for management and spaces to reflect and rest because we do not want our teachers to feel burnt out.” – Miss Salvation

Miss Salvation's story highlights the value of teamwork in preventing teacher burnout, which supports Bentsalo et al.'s (2025) claim that a positive school culture fosters psychological safety in underprivileged settings. The durability of teachers' care-oriented leadership responsibilities is strongly impacted by staff connections, which offer a space for introspection and mutual support.

Similarly, Miss Nazareth highlighted how collegial support lightens the burdens of both administrative and emotional responsibilities:



Figure 5.12. Collage Inquiry – Teamwork Promotes Positive School Culture

“...what really helps and supports me is my peers offering me support. Sometimes I feel unable to carry the weight and burden on my own. So I do ask for support from my peers and a lot of them lend a helping hand when it comes to assisting me with anything if I need time to help with my filing, my administration or if it just means me taking a breather during the course of the day, that helps me feel refreshed so that I can be productive in the workplace.”
– Miss Nazareth

Miss Nazareth's narrative illustrates how peer networks support teachers in maintaining productivity and managing workload pressures. This bolsters the findings of Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2020), who found that collegial interactions increase teacher resilience and act as a buffer against burnout. According to servant leadership, these cooperative activities demonstrate how encouragement and support are integrated into everyday school life, enabling individuals to thrive while enhancing group outcomes (Eva et al., 2019).

The establishment of structured initiatives also reinforces the value of positive school culture. Mr Kairos described how he introduced a formal care and support team:

“...I actually spoke to the principal about commencing a care and support team, and he was very happy with having an active care and support team. So, what I did was we actually had a staff meeting and we discussed how we can go forward with future and active care and support activities. So, what we did was that all the teachers got together in a staff meeting, and we discussed ideas. We came up with a plan that is very active at our school. So, every Wednesday, we have a care and support team where we discuss catering for indigent learners, learners who need emotional support, and all the kinds of support that a child would need in a school environment... I would say the support of colleagues is vital because they have really been very supportive, and that is what actually drives me, considering that.” – Mr Kairos

This story illustrates how distributed leadership and teamwork facilitate the integration of care and support into the school's culture. This is consistent with Modeste's (2022) concept of distributed leadership, which posits that institutional capacity is enhanced through collective responsibility. Furthermore, it supports Shula's (2023) findings that learner support networks are strengthened. Teacher motivation is enhanced by servant leadership approaches, such as empathy, teamwork, and shared decision-making.

In addition, Mr Calvary broadened the discussion of support beyond the school itself, drawing attention to both workplace and familial systems:

“My support system, I would say is my colleagues, which I sometimes refer to as teammates and also my family, because when you're a teacher, a lot of your work comes home with you and sometimes the challenges that you experience at school, your family can assist you to deal with some of those challenges and your colleagues in the workplace are basically the ones who can understand firsthand what you're experiencing and they can help you to overcome some of those challenges... they share their feedback and their knowledge as well, especially with more seasoned or more experienced educators, conversation with them seems never to fail...” – Mr Calvary

Mr Calvary's assertion emphasises the relational and multifaceted character of support, where families foster emotional resilience and coworkers offer guidance. According to Adams et al. (2023), teachers who work in supportive networks are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs

and stay in them. It also links to Noddings' (2013) ethic of care, which sees caring as a sustaining and reciprocal relationship.

When combined, these narratives demonstrate that a positive school culture is a lived reality rather than an abstract ideal, manifesting as a shared responsibility, with teamwork, mentorship, and support networks that extend beyond the school's boundaries. Despite structural limitations, these cultures enable teachers to meet learners' academic and socio-emotional needs. According to the principles of servant leadership, a positive school culture positions leaders and instructors as co-creators of an atmosphere that fosters the growth of both teachers and learners by embodying the ethic of service, collaboration, and empowerment (Greenleaf, 1977; Eva et al., 2019).

5.3.2.2.2. Supportive school leadership

Fostering conditions where teachers can flourish and provide care and support to their learners requires supportive leadership. Leadership characterised by empowerment, trust, and resource advocacy enhances collective accountability, reduces stress, and improves teacher well-being. According to Leithwood et al. (2020), classroom education has the most significant impact on learner progress, followed by competent school leadership. In environments with limited resources and heavy workloads, supportive leadership techniques not only foster creativity and resilience but also maintain teacher motivation. These behaviours are highly compatible with the tenets of servant leadership, which emphasise the development and independence of individuals under their direction (Greenleaf, 1977; Eva et al., 2019).

Mr Kairos illustrated this by explaining:

“So, what we managed to do is I actually managed to speak to the principal, who motivated to the Department of Education that we should actually have a school guidance counsellor within the school, and this is very successful.” – Mr Kairos

Mr Kairos's story demonstrates the principal's advocacy work in securing a school counsellor by enlisting systemic support. This exemplifies a servant-leadership approach since the principal prioritised the needs of teachers and learners by offering psychosocial support, which is particularly important in situations with limited resources. According to research, leaders

who support and get resources improve teachers' ability to care for learners, lower stress levels, and foster holistic well-being (Shula, 2023; Noddings, 2013). In this sense, supportive leadership actively addresses the socio-emotional needs of the school community, in addition to its administrative responsibilities.

Similarly, Mr Calvary shared that:

“...the principal who is very trusting, trusting of the staff, he trusts us, gives us autonomy to handle our classes... he also gives us a bit of freedom so that we can work to our best and full potential, and that sort of flexibility and allowance is invaluable.” – Mr Calvary

This story illustrates how relational trust and professional autonomy are also manifestations of supportive leadership. Teachers are empowered to exercise professional judgment and creativity when the principal trusts them and gives them flexibility in their classrooms, which promotes teacher agency (AlAjmi & Alsaleh, 2023). According to Mestry (2020), trust-based leadership increases motivation and accountability. Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2020) note that this type of empowerment enhances resilience and reduces burnout. From the standpoint of servant leadership, giving teachers autonomy demonstrates that the leader is dedicated to helping them succeed, supporting the assertion made by Eva et al. (2019) that servant leaders create conditions that allow people to realise their most significant potential.

These testimonies collectively demonstrate that relational empowerment (establishing trust and allowing autonomy) and structural advocacy (obtaining resources, such as guidance counsellors) are both components of supportive school leadership. In both ways, teachers are less stressed and are better equipped to lead with compassion and support in their classrooms when they are part of a leadership culture that empowers and serves others. This demonstrates the importance of servant leadership techniques in maintaining school communities where teachers and learners can thrive despite structural obstacles.

5.3.2.2.3. Teacher agency and resilience

Effective teaching and comprehensive learner support are frequently hampered by poverty, a lack of resources, and systematic injustices. In these situations, teacher agency and resilience are crucial. While resilience enables teachers to face hardship and continue serving their

learners with hope and determination, agency allows teachers to use professional judgment and innovate in challenging settings. Mohammad Nezhad and Stolz (2024) argue that when teachers are empowered by their own sense of professional purpose and supportive surroundings, they develop teacher agency. This concept is an ecological construct. Similarly, resilience has been defined as a dynamic process that involves adaptive reactions to hardship, often sustained by supportive connections and a strong sense of moral obligation (Waugh & Sali, 2023). According to the framework of servant leadership, these qualities show a dedication to helping, encouraging, and empowering learners despite structural obstacles (Greenleaf, 1977; Eva et al., 2019).

Miss Salvation captured this spirit when she reflected:

“So, I would say in a holistic way, my narrative is a story of hope, resilience and leadership. It shows that, despite the barriers of poverty and under-resourcing, a teacher leader can still create spaces of care and inclusion. As well as innovation, by staying motivated and being different and inspiring, I think I lead with the belief that education is the most powerful tool that can transform their lives.” – Miss Salvation

Miss Salvation’s remarks demonstrate how, even in trying circumstances, individual autonomy and tenacity foster creativity and inclusivity. Echoing Noddings’ (2013) ethic of caring, which posits that it is morally required to nurture learners despite external constraints, she exemplifies the servant leadership concept of leading with hope and faith in the transformative potential of education. This viewpoint is supported by the literature, which emphasises that resilient teachers often derive a strong sense of vocation and faith in the transformative power of education (Phillips, 2021).

This commitment to resilience and agency is further illustrated by Mr Kairos, who stated:



Figure 5.13. Collage Inquiry – Food Hampers Given to Learners

“My main one was when I started the feeding scheme at our school and was involved with getting the sponsorships for the school. There have been numerous sponsorships at the school, and whenever one comes in, I'm like, ‘Yes, I am excited.’ I'm like so excited because I know it's feeding so many learners. There is a huge smile that stretches from cheek to cheek, considering that I know the learners who have difficulty with their parents providing meals for them. They are going to go home with a hamper and have something to cook as well. So, for me, that makes me very happy. It makes me very proud to know that my learners appreciate me as well, and they're also changing, you know, like when you show them care and support.” – Mr Kairos

Mr Kairos's initiative in starting a feeding program demonstrates how teacher agency is translated into concrete measures that alleviate the socioeconomic difficulties faced by learners. This is consistent with a study by Versfeld (2022), which shows how South African teachers frequently take on the role of community leaders by utilising sponsorships and partnerships to provide for the fundamental requirements of their learners. His joy in seeing learners succeed demonstrates resilience and servant leadership principles, which prioritise the needs of others over one's own, as he turns structural shortcomings into chances for support and empowerment.

Similarly, Mr Calvary observed:

“...the pride that we feel as educators after we make a difference in the learner's life is basically a great experience... resilience tends to come in and you have to

continue to try and sort of view that the children's best interest even when things seem to be too difficult.” – Mr Calvary

This narrative underscores the significance of resilience in sustaining teachers’ motivation. Echoing Phillips’ (2021) assertion that resilience is closely linked to a teacher’s sense of identity and moral responsibility, the pride that comes from changing the lives of learners illustrates the interlinkage between resilience and moral purpose. According to Eva et al. (2019), servant leadership is characterised by an emphasis on learners’ transformation and well-being, especially in the face of personally and professionally demanding labour.

Collectively, these stories demonstrate how teachers can establish innovative and caring spaces in complex settings by utilising their agency and resilience. Teachers demonstrate agency not only in the classroom but also in larger community-focused projects, such as food programs, and resilience keeps them dedicated to learners in the face of hardship. As teachers exhibit service, optimism, and empowerment, these behaviours exemplify servant leadership in action, ultimately converting schools into places where the holistic needs of learners are given priority.

5.3.2.2.4. Community and family support

The participation of families and the broader community often enhance teachers’ ability to lead with compassion and provide learners with comprehensive support in under-resourced primary schools. Effective leadership in teaching and learning extends beyond the classroom and relies on collaborative networks that support learner development, as illustrated by the experiences of the study participants. This subtheme highlights how family support and community involvement help teachers cope with demanding workloads, gain access to more resources, and maintain emotional fortitude, all of which improve their ability to exercise leadership that prioritises caring, inclusivity, and learner achievement.

Miss Nazareth reflects on the support she receives by stating:

“...there is a small community of parents that wants to build and develop their child and that helps support me as a teacher, because if they meet me halfway and all of the topics that I bring up or aspects that I bring up to reinforce their child's learning is reinforced at home and in the classroom then it benefits the

child in the long run... my family also offers help and support. There are days when I cannot mark where I'm overburdened with marking or I need assistance with resources, and they offer me support during their personal time, and that really has been one of the factors that has built and helped me and kept my sanity after work during my own personal work, my personal hours.” – Miss Nazareth

The narrative of Miss Nazareth illustrates how a cooperative relationship between teachers and parents enhances learners' academic performance, supporting Yusof and Mohamed's (2021) assertion that parental participation promotes cognitive and socio-emotional growth. Additionally, instrumental support, such as offering resources or helping with marking, demonstrates that helpful assistance from family and community members can reduce teachers' workload and stress, thereby maintaining their professional commitment (Granziera et al., 2022).

Similarly, Mr Calvary emphasises the role of familial collaboration in navigating professional challenges:

“...the biggest support structure would be my family, especially since my spouse is also an educator. She also teaches at an underprivileged school, so we may not necessarily share the names of learners or a specific context. However, we get to share information that becomes a valuable resource. We experience similar things, and if we were, if one of us was successful at even making a good attempt at solving a problem, then sharing that helps the other to try to solve it as well.” – Mr Calvary

In this case, family support extends beyond emotional comfort to encompass professional development, where sharing knowledge fosters resilience and enhances problem-solving skills. This finding is consistent with Ventista and Brown's (2023) research on informal professional learning networks, which suggests that peer-like support networks enhance teachers' abilities, particularly in demanding educational environments.

The above experiences demonstrate the connections that are at the heart of the servant leadership paradigm (Greenleaf, 2002). Both participants demonstrate how support systems, whether peer, parental, or family, serve as extensions of their leadership style and exemplify the values of empathy, stewardship, and community building as outlined by Spears (2010). These networks support teachers' emotional resilience, as well as the practical performance of

their teaching duties, enabling them to maintain motivation and agency in the classroom. This, in turn, allows them to lead for care and support (Beltman & Poulton, 2025).

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of family and community involvement in promoting teacher leadership in schools with limited resources. The lived experiences of the participants demonstrate that these support networks provide helpful advice, encourage career advancement, and enhance mental health, empowering teachers to behave as servant leaders and remain resilient in challenging circumstances.

5.3.2.3. Constraining and facilitating factors: patterns, tensions and structural dynamics

Across the findings, teachers' leadership for care and support emerges as situated within a persistent tension between structural constraint and relational agency. The data reveal that leadership in deprived contexts is not exercised within enabling systems but rather in environments marked by material scarcity, policy pressure, socioeconomic instability, and uneven institutional support. Teachers, therefore, led not from positions of structural strength, but from spaces of systemic fragility.

A central pattern across the constraining factors is the cumulative burden of deprivation. Limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, toxic school cultures, inadequate professional development, and systemic inequities do not operate independently; instead, they intersect to compound teachers' workload and emotional labour. Notably, the findings show that structural deficiencies are frequently absorbed at the classroom level. Teachers compensate for missing infrastructure, inadequate psychosocial support, curriculum overload, and community poverty through personal sacrifice, extended hours, and emotional investment. Leadership thus becomes compensatory and reactive, rather than strategically supported.

This compensatory leadership raises important analytical concerns. While participants consistently demonstrate resilience and agency, their narratives also reveal strain, frustration, and diminished morale. Feelings of being “overwhelmed,” “micromanaged,” or “unsupported” complicate the otherwise intense portrayal of servant-oriented commitment. The data, therefore, challenge any simplistic interpretation that resilience alone can offset structural inequity. Instead, resilience appears as a survival mechanism within constrained systems, rather than evidence of systemic adequacy.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings both affirm and problematise the assumptions of Robert K. Greenleaf's servant leadership theory. The teachers strongly embody servant-leader characteristics: empathy, stewardship, advocacy, commitment to growth, and community-building. However, servant leadership theory assumes that leaders operate in environments that foster service. In contrast, the present findings indicate that service is frequently enacted despite institutional barriers. Teachers serve not because systems empower them, but because deprivation demands intervention. This suggests that in deprived contexts, servant leadership is less an organisational philosophy and more an ethical necessity imposed by structural injustice.

Similarly, the application of Nel Noddings' ethic of care is both confirmed and extended. While participants clearly practice relational attentiveness and responsiveness, care within these contexts becomes materially burdensome and emotionally taxing. Care extends beyond relational presence to include food provision, counselling, administrative navigation, and resource mobilisation. This expands care into what might be termed structural caregiving, a form of care that attempts to mitigate systemic failure. However, without institutional reinforcement, such care risks becoming unsustainable.

The facilitating factors provide an important counterbalance. Positive school culture, supportive leadership, teacher agency, resilience, and community collaboration function as protective buffers. Notably, these enabling factors are relational rather than structural. Supportive principals, collegial networks, family encouragement, and internal motivation sustain teachers' commitment. However, the reliance on relational supports rather than systemic reform suggests that leadership for care and support remains vulnerable to contextual shifts. Where supportive leadership is absent or cultures become toxic, teachers' capacity to lead for care may be significantly weakened.

Another critical tension lies in the normalisation of overextension. Teachers narrate agency and resilience as sources of pride, but the data simultaneously reveal fatigue, emotional strain, and policy frustration. The celebration of resilience may inadvertently mask the urgency of systemic reform. If resilience becomes the primary solution to deprivation, structural inequities risk remaining unaddressed.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that teachers' leadership for care and support in deprived contexts is characterised by moral commitment enacted within structural constraints. While

servant leadership and care ethics provide useful interpretive lenses, the study suggests that these frameworks require contextual grounding. Leadership for care in deprived settings is not simply relational or voluntary; it is shaped by historical inequities, policy pressures, and socioeconomic realities that redistribute systemic responsibility onto individual teachers.

Thus, teachers' leadership emerges as both transformative and fragile, transformative in its relational and moral power, but fragile in its dependence on personal resilience and informal support systems rather than sustained structural investment.

5.3.3. Strategies employed by teachers to overcome challenges in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts

Teachers in this study demonstrated remarkable endurance and ingenuity in devising solutions to meet the demands of care and support, despite the structural, cultural, and socioeconomic constraints they faced. According to their narratives, adaptive behaviours include collaborating with peers and external stakeholders, improvising with limited funding, fostering learner resilience, and leveraging one's own beliefs and values to stay motivated. Through exerting agency and exhibiting servant leadership traits such as empathy, inventiveness, and advocacy, these tactics demonstrate how teachers can overcome limitations (Eva et al., 2019; Zhu, 2023). Crucially, these methods emphasise the moral and relational aspects of teacher leadership, where compassion, service, and hope emerge as tenets in the midst of hardship. This section, therefore, explores the diverse strategies employed by teachers to overcome challenges, demonstrating how professional ingenuity and servant leadership practices transform limitations into opportunities for learner growth and holistic support.

5.3.3.1. Trauma-informed teaching

A vital component of leadership for care and support in under-resourced primary school settings, where learners frequently encounter challenging life situations that affect their participation and learning, is trauma-informed teaching. This method places a strong emphasis on recognising and supporting learners' emotional and social needs, establishing secure and nurturing learning environments, and building resilience. The study participants show how

academic and socio-emotional development can be fostered by recognising little accomplishments, giving access to resources, and incorporating positive reinforcement into everyday activities. This subtheme examines these stories to demonstrate how trauma-informed approaches empower teachers to exercise leadership that is aware of, sympathetic to, and responsive to learners' overall needs, even in demanding educational environments.

Miss Salvation reflects on her strategies to create an environment that celebrates learners' progress, stating:



Figure 5.14. Collage Inquiry – Promoting Positive Reinforcements in the Classroom

“Where you see the picture of the learners receiving recognition also highlights the value that I have in celebrating the progress, even in very small steps, to uplift their spirits. So, I reward them for doing well. Because when a learner doesn't have stationery or books, I create a resource corner. In my classroom, every time they don't have certain items, such as crayons or books, they can go to this resource corner, and I always stock it up. Every single term it's stocked up. If they do not have crayons, they can always go to the front and get some or use a pencil, so none of my children get left behind when my class feels too large... I put movies on for them. So, in order for them to get a ticket or a token to the movie, they have to complete a bit of homework or a bit of work, and they do that to get a ticket. When they get their tickets, I get them some cupcakes, popcorn and a cold drink. It's sort of a way to reward their efforts and for making school a place of happiness for them, when even though there is a lack of resources, sometimes I try to build a classroom for my learners that they deserve.” – Miss Salvation

The story of Miss Salvation illustrates how trauma-informed education in her setting extends beyond academic instruction to encompass resources, emotional support, and acknowledgement. She creates a disciplined and supportive environment that lessens the detrimental impacts of poverty and congestion in the classroom by setting up a resource corner and recognising learners for their efforts. This aligns with research on trauma-informed education, which emphasises that to enhance their engagement and wellness, learners facing hardship require regular support, predictability, and opportunities to succeed (Avery et al., 2020).

Miss Nazareth also emphasises the impact of positive reinforcement on learner development:



Figure 5.15. Collage Inquiry – Effects of Teachers’ Mindset and Attitude

“I have noticed that if I lead in that manner whereby I manage the classroom with positive reinforcement and words of motivation, the learners thrive academically in that classroom compared to a classroom where they are constantly disciplined and reprimanded for anything negative that they have done. So, I believe that in a school where resources are limited, if a child is rewarded, they will remember and retain that experience for a longer period than in a class where discipline is emphasised more. I enjoy celebrating small achievements with children. When a child succeeds, it's one of the greatest rewards as a teacher. So, I celebrate the achievements of a child, even if it means offering a reward from my own personal resources. So that a child feels motivated as well because we are there for the learners and not for ourselves.”

– Miss Nazareth

Miss Nazareth's statement highlights the value of fostering a school environment that prioritises support over harsh punishment, particularly in settings with limited resources. The concept of trauma-informed teaching, which posits that fostering teacher-learner interactions and acknowledging small accomplishments promotes self-efficacy and motivation in learners, aligns with this approach (Brunzell et al., 2022).

Similarly, Mr Calvary highlights practical strategies to integrate care and motivation into teaching:

"...you have to try sometimes to celebrate the small wins and teach learners to do this as well. You know, sometimes just getting a smile from a child that's withdrawn, or a correct answer from a learner. I also have a drawer in a classroom where I try to accumulate small tokens to say well done for certain things. Sometimes it is a sticker, sometimes it may be a snack in lessons as well. I try to use the learners' names in stories or situations. Also, I make lessons contextual for them, things that they can relate to, so they feel like they are represented in the classroom." – Mr Calvary

The importance of acknowledgement and personalisation in fostering an inclusive and inspiring learning environment is highlighted in this story. Mr Calvary demonstrates a relational approach that is consistent with the ideal of servant leadership, which emphasises empathy, stewardship, and prioritising others' development and well-being by using learners' names, contextualising teachings, and acknowledging minor accomplishments (Greenleaf, 2002; Spears, 2010).

The stories shared by the participants collectively demonstrate the crucial role trauma-informed teaching plays in providing care and support in both teaching and learning. Their tactics, which include offering resources, recognising hard work, and cultivating strong connections, demonstrate an awareness that learners in underfunded schools frequently have major obstacles outside of the classroom. These teachers demonstrate leadership by fostering supportive and caring settings that promote resilience, a sense of belonging, and socio-emotional growth, in addition to academic success. This strategy aligns with research on teacher agency and resilience, which suggests that teachers who actively address the holistic needs of their learners demonstrate both a moral commitment to care and professional leadership (Ampomah, 2021).

5.3.3.2. Differentiated instruction

A key tactic used by teachers in primary schools with limited funding to exercise leadership for care and support is differentiated instruction, which ensures that all learners' needs are met despite differences in ability and resource constraints. This strategy involves modifying instructional techniques, grouping tactics, and course materials to provide equal opportunities for participation, comprehension, and achievement. The study's participants serve as examples of how varied learning relies heavily on creativity, resourcefulness, and peer collaboration to help learners succeed both academically and socially.

Miss Salvation explains her approach to grouping learners:



Figure 5.16. Collage Inquiry – Encouraging Arts-Based Learning

“...they have the art activities in which my class does, and the children's group work shows the importance of resourcefulness, collaborations and the joy which they experience in learning. Sometimes I feel like individual attention is a bit lost, so I group my learners together and encourage peer support. So, I put a gifted learner. There is a gifted learner in each group, an average learner, and then one of the weaker learners. By being together, they get inspired by each other and start to open up better. So that is why I group them with the gifted learner or an average learner.” – Miss Salvation

This strategy aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist viewpoint, which emphasises learning through interaction and scaffolding, and represents the idea that diverse grouping can promote peer learning, motivation, and engagement. Through matching learners with varying

skill levels, Miss Salvation fosters a collaborative and inclusive learning environment, giving weaker learners the chance to receive encouragement and assistance from their classmates, while also challenging brilliant learners to synthesise and express their knowledge.

Miss Nazareth further emphasises the use of creative, resourceful strategies to cater to large classes and limited materials:

“I'm a foundation phase teacher and we learnt that we need to be creative with recyclable materials. So, it's nothing unfamiliar to me in terms of improvising and making use of things that I already have to teach... I have resources that allow me to reuse and teach the learners... I have to find different ways to teach those learners. I cannot teach different children using the same method of teaching, so I have to use different methods of teaching, creating group learning, having different methods for the week, maybe rotational teaching whereby I teach different groups in different manners for the week as well, and that works in the foundation phase in terms of small group teaching, especially in a large class of learners... I had to teach a class of 50 learners, and in the foundation phase, we have readers. I had to teach a class of 40 learners, and I only had a few readers to use. Usually, reading works on rotation, but I created a plan of action to teach in small groups and conduct peer tutoring. I used audio and visual methods to teach reading, and it took me many days to just read one story, but at the end, it was done.” – Miss Nazareth

This story showcases the participants' ingenuity, flexibility, and dedication to ensuring fair educational opportunities despite financial limitations. According to AlAjmi and Alsaleh (2023), the focus on the use of recyclable materials, audio-visual aids, and rotating small-group instruction shows a capacity for problem-solving that represents teacher agency. Additionally, it is consistent with the concepts of differentiated education proposed by Tomlinson (2014), which support adaptable teaching methods based on learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles.

Both teachers are excellent examples of servant leadership, which emphasises the growth and well-being of learners. Regardless of aptitude or financial means, their varied approaches demonstrate care and a dedication to fostering all learners, ensuring that every child has access to worthwhile educational opportunities (Greenleaf, 2002; Spears, 2010). The teachers

demonstrate leadership that prioritises empathy, responsiveness, and the holistic support of learners, key concepts in this study on leadership for care and support in teaching and learning, by developing inclusive, resourceful, and collaborative learning opportunities.

5.3.3.3. Community collaboration

One of the most important aspects of leadership for care and support in teaching and learning is community collaboration, especially in primary schools with limited resources. To overcome resource limitations, improve learner engagement, and provide comprehensive support, teachers often rely on collaborations with parents, colleagues, and community stakeholders. Teachers may access more resources, exchange tactics, and design learning environments that demonstrate shared accountability for learners' achievement by working together. The relational and collaborative components of teacher leadership are demonstrated by this subtheme, which examines how study participants utilise community collaboration to develop teaching techniques, meet learners' needs, and maintain their resilience.

Miss Salvation reflects on her approach to resourcefulness through partnerships:



Figure 5.17. Collage Inquiry – Lesson Improvisation



Figure 5.18. Collage Inquiry - Results of Collaboration

“How I have overcome these challenges is by innovating what I have, by using recycled materials and creative activities and showing peer learning. I also build partnerships with parents, collaborating with them and my colleagues to assist me in creating activities, such as filling a yoghurt tin with crayons. So, our classroom has all different types of recycled materials. I have overcome all my challenges through my teamwork with my colleagues as well. We do this by sharing strategies during our PLC meeting. So, we share our ideas, we find creative ways and make the little that we have go further.” – Miss Salvation

This story illustrates how teachers can collaborate to utilise scarce resources and creatively foster opportunities for peer learning. This finding is consistent with research that highlights the value of collaborative networks and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in enhancing teacher effectiveness, particularly in challenging learning environments (Khasawneh et al., 2023).

Miss Nazareth similarly emphasises the role of parental and community engagement in supporting learners:



Figure 5.19. Collage Inquiry - Encouragement of Collaboration

“...collaboration and support whereby I need the support of my colleagues, I need the support of my peers, I need the involvement of the parent and the community to assist me in helping teach the learners. So, I constantly communicate with parents through the message book, and if there's a parent meeting I need to have, I will. I won't hesitate to speak to a parent, and that helps the child receive support at home, and the parent needs to be aware of the child, the child is standing in terms of their academics.” – Miss Nazareth

Miss Nazareth's story emphasises how teacher leadership transcends the classroom and calls for proactive stakeholder engagement and communication to guarantee that learning is reinforced at home. This aligns with the school-family-community partnerships model proposed by Epstein (2018), which emphasises the significance of shared accountability for learner outcomes.

Mr Kairos provides an example of leveraging broader community resources to meet learners' basic needs:

"...I actually go out to the community, to family members, and I'm not ashamed of it for asking them for sponsors in order to sustain our learners' needs of food... We also have one of the stores in the nearby area, it's called Pick 'n Pay, they usually give us some of these charts." – Mr Kairos

Similarly, Mr Calvary describes collaboration as a support system for navigating professional challenges:

"I do not see asking for assistance from colleagues or teammates, or community members as a weakness. So, sometimes I may go to my direct supervisor or even the principal, community members, NGOs to try and assist... the person that's challenged... there's a small group of friends from the school that I am in and others from neighbouring schools and also schools in other areas, but all who are faced with similar challenges. So, we share ideas and strategies, as well as the challenges we are experiencing, and we give each other new ideas or strategies. We brainstorm together, and this helps me cope. It helps me to deal with the tough challenges, the ones that are not easy to deal with alone, so that group that we created helps me to know as well that we are not alone in the fight." – Mr Calvary

Together, Mr Kairos's and Mr Calvary's stories demonstrate how cooperation may be used for a variety of tasks, including problem-solving, professional development, resource mobilisation, and emotional support. These cooperative methods reflect servant leadership values, including stewardship, community building, and prioritising others' development (Greenleaf, 2002; Spears, 2010). Consequently, by actively involving parents, coworkers, and community stakeholders, the teachers demonstrate relational, proactive, and learner-centred leadership.

Additionally, the data shows that community collaboration increases teacher resilience, enabling teachers to manage obstacles that are hard for them to handle alone. Teachers can maintain their dedication to care, support, and learner growth by collaborating and sharing knowledge, which provides both practical solutions and emotional support (Adebola & Tsotetsi, 2022).

In summary, the participants' experiences demonstrate that collaborative leadership is essential for effective leadership in teaching and learning for care and support. Teachers can overcome contextual constraints, foster inclusive and engaging learning experiences, and maintain personal and professional resilience in demanding school contexts by leveraging the knowledge, resources, and goodwill of their peers, parents, and community members.

5.3.3.4. Personal faith

One important source of fortitude and resilience for teachers overcoming the difficulties of underfunded primary schools was their personal faith. For many teachers, faith provides moral guidance, emotional support, and advice that informs their leadership in delivering care and support in the teaching and learning process. This subtheme examines how the participants use their spiritual beliefs to stay motivated, show tenacity, and set an example of values that favourably impact the growth of learners. Consequently, by examining their stories, the conversation illustrates how individual religion, teacher well-being, and the application of servant leadership intersect in situations involving resource and systemic issues.

Miss Nazareth reflects on how her belief in God underpins her resilience and commitment to learners:

“...I think it also comes with faith. I believe in God and I think that is one of the foundational aspects that has kept me sane in a very chaotic sort of system, because the education system, I feel personally, is a bit convoluted... and through that it builds character and from that it leads to me having a sort of self-discipline for me to show up for those learners... it comes from me having a sort resilience and a strength... having a relationship with God, it really helps build character and it offers something different to a child. After all, if I do not have any direction or character, I am essentially leading children who will grow up

with little backbone when they're older because they're mimicking my behaviour... Even if it means me just taking my device out and playing worship songs with the learners there, I do that, and that keeps me going for the day.” – Miss Nazareth

This reflection shows how faith serves as a guiding concept for professional behaviour as well as a personal coping technique. Miss Nazareth's spiritually based approach fosters self-control, fortitude, and moral leadership, elements that have a direct impact on learners' experiences and the classroom setting. Her behaviour, such as sharing worship songs, emphasises the moral and relational aspects of leadership while also serving as an example of value and character development for learners.

Similarly, Mr Kairos emphasises the sustaining power of prayer in navigating the demands of teaching:

“Prayer and personal faith have really kept me strong. It's unbelievable that I get all my strength from prayer, so I have to acknowledge God on this note.” – Mr Kairos

Mr Kairos's story emphasises how having a personal faith gives teachers emotional strength and a sense of direction, allowing them to stay focused and dedicated in situations when obstacles may otherwise jeopardise their motivation and well-being.

The participants' dependence on their own faith serves as an example of how to incorporate moral purpose, empathy, and stewardship into their leadership practice from the standpoint of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002; Spears, 2010). Their ability to provide learners with holistic care is strengthened by their faith-informed approach, which models resilience and moral behaviour while encouraging academic and socio-emotional development. Furthermore, this is consistent with studies that emphasise the importance of spirituality in teacher resilience, which postulate that teachers who utilise their personal belief systems are more capable of stress management, motivation maintenance, and professional engagement (Phillips, 2021).

To sum up, teachers' personal religious beliefs are an essential tool for exercising leadership in providing care and support in demanding educational environments. Through the provision of moral guidance, ethical foundation, and emotional resilience, faith empowers teachers to

uphold their dedication to learners, set an example of constructive conduct, and foster nurturing and principled learning environments.

5.3.3.5. Adaptive leadership strategies: patterns, tensions and contextual adaptation

Across the four subthemes, teachers' strategies reveal that leadership for care and support in deprived contexts is adaptive, relational, and morally sustained. Trauma-informed teaching, differentiated instruction, community collaboration, and personal faith do not function as isolated techniques but as interconnected responses to structural inadequacy. Collectively, these strategies illustrate how teachers exercise agency within constraint, transforming scarcity into sites of creativity and relational engagement.

A central analytical pattern emerging from the data is that teachers' strategies are compensatory rather than supplementary. Trauma-informed practices address the emotional consequences of poverty and instability. Differentiated instruction mitigates overcrowding and limited materials. Community collaboration offsets institutional resource shortages. Personal faith sustains teachers emotionally in systems described as chaotic and under-resourced. These strategies therefore operate as adaptive mechanisms that buffer learners from structural inequities while simultaneously preserving teachers' professional commitment.

However, this adaptive leadership also reveals important tensions. First, many of the strategies rely heavily on personal sacrifice: financial contributions, extended working hours, emotional labour, and spiritual self-regulation. While participants narrate these efforts as moral commitment, the cumulative pattern suggests that systemic shortcomings are routinely absorbed at the classroom level. The transformation of deprivation into opportunity is achieved through individual resilience rather than institutional reform. This raises critical questions about sustainability: to what extent can leadership for care and support remain viable if it depends primarily on personal endurance?

Second, trauma-informed teaching and positive reinforcement approaches challenge punitive and compliance-driven school cultures. While participants describe success in fostering belonging and motivation, such approaches may sit in tension with broader accountability systems that emphasise performance metrics and behavioural control. The data, therefore,

suggests that teachers' relational leadership practices sometimes operate in quiet resistance to technocratic schooling models.

Third, the reliance on personal faith introduces both strength and complexity. Faith serves as a stabilising resource, reinforcing moral purpose, self-discipline, and resilience. In this sense, spirituality functions as an internal leadership resource. However, it also shifts the burden of coping inward, positioning resilience as an individual spiritual responsibility rather than a shared organisational concern. Leadership is thus sustained privately even when public systems falter.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings affirm and extend Robert K. Greenleaf's work. Teachers clearly embody servant leadership characteristics: empathy, stewardship, commitment to growth, and community building. However, servant leadership theory presumes environments where service is a conscious philosophical choice. In contrast, this study suggests that in deprived contexts, service becomes structurally compelled. Teachers do not merely choose to serve; they adapt because deprivation leaves little alternative if learning is to occur. Servant leadership, therefore, emerges not only as a moral philosophy but also as a contextual necessity.

Similarly, the findings deepen the relevance of Nel Noddings' ethic of care. Participants demonstrate attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational commitment. However, care in this context extends beyond relational presence into material provision, instructional redesign, and community mobilisation. Care becomes infrastructural, embedded within classroom systems, partnerships, and pedagogical adjustments. This suggests that in deprived settings, the ethic of care must be operationalised through strategic innovation rather than remaining solely relational.

Notably, the strategies also reveal teacher agency as a dynamic force. Agency here is not autonomy from constraint, but action within constraint. Teachers negotiate scarcity, policy pressures, and emotional demands while sustaining learner-centred priorities. However, celebrating ingenuity and resilience should not obscure the structural inequities that necessitate such adaptation. When innovation becomes the primary solution to deprivation, systemic accountability risks being diluted.

Overall, the strategies employed by teachers demonstrate leadership that is morally anchored, relationally enacted, and contextually adaptive. However, this leadership remains structurally vulnerable, dependent on personal resilience, collaborative goodwill, and internal belief systems rather than guaranteed institutional support. The findings, therefore, present leadership for care and support as both transformative and precarious, decisive in its immediate relational impact, but fragile in its reliance on individual endurance within inequitable systems.

5.4. Chapter summary

This chapter presented and analysed the findings on how teachers in deprived primary school contexts conceptualise and enact leadership for care and support in teaching and learning. Three interrelated dimensions emerged: teachers' role conceptions, the constraining and facilitating factors shaping their leadership, and the adaptive strategies they employ to sustain care-centred practice.

The findings show that teachers view their roles as relational and morally grounded, extending beyond curriculum delivery to encompass learners' emotional, social, and material well-being. Participants positioned themselves as nurturers, advocates, and collaborators, enacting leadership through service, responsiveness, and ethical commitment. However, critical analysis revealed that these role conceptions are often compensatory, arising in response to systemic gaps and socio-economic deprivation. While transformative in impact, such practices risk normalising personal sacrifice and emotional overextension.

The chapter further demonstrated that leadership for care is exercised within environments characterised by resource scarcity, policy pressures, and community hardship. Although collegial support, positive school culture, and community partnerships function as enabling factors, structural constraints frequently shift responsibility onto individual teachers. Leadership, therefore, emerges within a tension between relational agency and systemic fragility.

Finally, teachers employ adaptive strategies, including trauma-informed teaching, differentiated instruction, community collaboration, and personal faith, to navigate contextual challenges. These strategies reflect ingenuity and moral purpose, but their sustainability largely depends on personal resilience rather than institutional support.

Overall, the findings indicate that leadership for care and support in deprived contexts is relational, adaptive, and ethically driven, but structurally vulnerable. The next chapter, which synthesises these findings to provide a thorough summary, draws conclusions, and offers valuable suggestions for enhancing teacher leadership for care and support in similarly deprived educational situations, is built upon the insights gained here.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Introduction

The preceding chapter, titled ‘Data Presentation, Discussion, and Analysis,’ offered a thorough examination of the narratives of the four primary school teachers who served as the study’s central participants. The chapter shared their personal narratives and lived experiences in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts. The chapter’s analysis of themes shed light on how these teachers demonstrated compassion, resilience, and moral purpose in their everyday encounters with learners, thus exhibiting leadership beyond their official roles. The chapter discussed how their leadership style was influenced by circumstances such as poverty, limited resources, and emotional stress. However, it was grounded in a strong dedication to the academic achievement and well-being of learners. The chapter also made connections between these findings and other research, demonstrating that leadership for care and support is a relational and context-responsive process that significantly aids in the development of welcoming and supportive learning environments.

Building on these discoveries, this final chapter concludes the study by providing a thorough synthesis and reflection on the findings and methodology. It begins with a ‘Summary of the Study’, which provides a concise overview of the study’s accomplishments by revisiting the research topic, purpose, methodology, and key findings. A scholarly and personal reflection on the research process is provided in ‘My Reflections on Doing This Study,’ which highlights the growth, difficulties, and lessons learned during the process. The key points and arguments are condensed into logical conclusions in the ‘Conclusion of the Study,’ which immediately responds to the study’s goals and questions.

The chapter then proceeds to ‘Recommendations’, which offers practical recommendations for teachers, school leaders, and legislators on how to improve leadership for care and support in underprivileged educational settings. These suggestions are based on the study’s findings as well as the experiences of teachers who work under challenging situations. ‘Conclusion’ wraps up the chapter by outlining and summarising the discussion in this chapter.

6.2. Summary of the study

Chapter One established the critical foundation for this study by situating it within the context of persistent socioeconomic disparities in South African education, where teachers in deprived schools are compelled to assume complex roles that extend far beyond academic instruction. The chapter highlighted a specific knowledge gap regarding how primary school teachers perceive and implement leadership for care and support in the context of systemic issues, including learner trauma and resource scarcity. Three main research questions and objectives were articulated as a result of the study's justification, which was based on the theoretical foundations of Servant Leadership and further supported by its potential to influence professional practice and policy. These questions were intended to frame a qualitative investigation of the lived experiences of teacher leadership in deprivation situations by examining teachers' understandings of their role, the factors impacting their practice, and the tools they use to overcome adversity.

Chapter Two provided a comprehensive analysis of the research on leadership for care and support in teaching and learning, with a focus on primary school teachers working in underprivileged environments. Through theoretical and empirical perspectives, it explored the interrelated ideas of teacher leadership, care, and support, emphasising the diverse roles that teachers play as continuous learners, advocates, nurturers, collaborators, and facilitators of socio-emotional development. The chapter demonstrated how empathy, moral purpose, and relational practice are the driving forces behind successful leadership for care and support. However, contextual limitations, including poverty, a lack of resources, and systematic injustices, limit this leadership. Despite these obstacles, teachers demonstrated agency and resilience by utilising adaptive techniques, including trauma-informed pedagogy and community collaboration. To illustrate the necessity of the current study, the chapter concludes by highlighting important gaps in the literature, including the lack of longitudinal and context-specific research, limited intersectional analysis, and a lack of focus on culturally grounded frameworks such as Ubuntu.

Chapter Three introduced and contextualised *Servant Leadership Theory* as the guiding theoretical framework for the study. It followed the theory's evolution from Robert Greenleaf's seminal work, highlighting its moral, relational, and service-oriented aspects as well as its applicability to comprehending how teachers lead for care and support in settings with limited resources. The chapter examined the essential qualities of servant leadership, including

empathy, stewardship, healing, awareness, and dedication to the development of others. It made a connection between these qualities and the leadership techniques that teachers employ daily in classrooms. Although the chapter acknowledged the theory's flaws, including possible cultural and gendered presumptions, it defended its inclusion in this study by pointing out that it is consistent with the moral and relational aspects of teacher leadership for care and support in underprivileged South African contexts. Ultimately, this paradigm offered the ethical and critical prism through which teachers' accounts of care-centred leadership might be interpreted.

Chapter Four outlined the research design and methodology underpinning the study. Supported by collage inquiry and narrative interviews, the study used a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach grounded in the interpretivist paradigm and driven by a constructivist epistemology to document the lived experiences of four primary school teachers in under-resourced environments. The chapter provided detailed explanations of the reasoning behind methodological decisions, including convenience and purposive sampling, data generation, and thematic analysis. It also covered piloting procedures, ethical issues, and ways to guarantee reliability, authenticity, credibility, and dependability. A thorough grasp of how teachers conceptualise and implement leadership for care and support in the face of socioeconomic hardship was made possible by the methodology's emphasis on participant voices and contextual realities. The chapter concluded by highlighting the rigour and ethical awareness that enhanced the validity and relevance of the research, while also noting the study's limitations, including the small sample size and the contextual nature of the findings.

Chapter Five presented, analysed, and discussed the data generated from the narratives and collage inquiries of four primary school teachers working in deprived contexts, guided by the study's three research questions. Through their roles as nurturers, caretakers, advocates, servant-leaders, and partners with stakeholders, the chapter shed light on how teachers viewed and implemented leadership for care and support in teaching and learning. In accordance with the ethics of care and servant leadership tenets, participants viewed their leadership as moral and relational, grounded in empathy, compassion, and service. The findings showed that teachers provided material, emotional, and social support for learners dealing with trauma, poverty, and instability, in addition to academic education. Contextual factor analysis revealed that community involvement, professional development, and school culture both supported and limited leadership for care and support. While enabling factors included collegial collaboration, a positive school culture, supportive leadership, and teachers' moral commitment and personal

resilience, constriction factors included overcrowded classrooms, a lack of professional development, toxic management practices, and systemic inequities. Teacher leadership in underprivileged environments is incredibly context-dependent, relational, and transformative, as the conversation demonstrated by integrating participants' experiences with existing knowledge. Chapter Five concluded by emphasising that teachers lead for care and support via everyday acts of service and empathy that foster learners' holistic well-being and help create more equitable, humane teaching and learning environments, rather than through formal authority.

6.3. Limitations of the study

The research design and methodological decisions employed in this study have several inherent limitations. Through its very nature, narrative inquiry concentrates on a limited number of participants in certain circumstances (Ntinda, 2020). Because this study only included four primary school teachers, the findings were contextually limited and could not be applied to other primary school teachers or learning environments. Another possible drawback was the dependence on participants' memories. Individual memory and subjective interpretation, which may be selective, rebuilt, or impacted by current events, are crucial to narrative research (Chand, 2024). Therefore, the completeness and quality of the data may have been compromised by selective recollection or memory lapses among the four participants, which could have limited the authenticity and profundity of the findings.

Furthermore, it took a considerable amount of time and effort to gather, transcribe, analyse, and provide rich narrative material (Ntinda, 2020). It is possible that the study's schedule's time restrictions made it difficult to create and convey intricate and thorough narratives. Additionally, the researcher-participant relationship may have influenced the stories told, as comfort levels or perceived power dynamics may have affected participants' willingness to share personal experiences.

Several tactics were employed to mitigate these restrictions. Peer review by colleagues and specialists was employed to foster the validity of the research process through their offering crucial feedback. To improve the precision and reliability of the findings, participants were also allowed to review and confirm the interpretations of their stories. To maximise data collection and provide sufficient time for creating rich, significant narratives, a strategic calendar with

precise timeframes was also created. Notwithstanding these steps, the study's scope was nevertheless constrained, reflecting the unique circumstances and experiences of the four participants rather than drawing conclusions that could be applied generally.

6.4. My reflections on doing this study

This research journey has been an intellectual and personal expedition, akin to navigating a river whose course is both revealing and surprising. Throughout the course of the study, I found myself alternating between the positions of co-traveller, observer, and listener as I heard the narratives of teachers who provide compassionate and caring leadership in times of deprivation. The conceptual, contextual, and methodological phases of the study all prompted periods of in-depth contemplation on the ethical, affective, and academic aspects of research.

Theoretically, operating within the framework of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) was like holding a lantern that illuminated the moral and relational centre of teaching. This theory evolved into an interpretive lens that enabled me to perceive how leadership in underprivileged circumstances transcends formal hierarchies and manifests itself in routine acts of service, extending beyond simple intellectual moorings. While servant leadership idealises selfless service, the teachers' stories reminded me that such care frequently comes at a personal cost, such as emotional exhaustion, moral discomfort, and burnout. At times, I struggled with the conflict between theory and lived reality. This supports the claim made by Gui et al. (2020) that the moral mission of teachers is both fulfilling and demanding, as it necessitates ongoing emotional commitment in the face of structural limitations. However, these difficulties strengthened my conviction that theory cannot be restricted to academic abstraction; instead, it must breathe, that is, it must be alive in the heart of real experience.

Considering the contextual factor, it was like entering resilient microcosms when I entered the schools. The schools were both places of hardship and havens of hope because they were located in socioeconomically underprivileged areas. The teachers I interacted with were more than just teachers; they were care architects, filling in the gaps caused by ignorance, poverty, and structural injustices. Frequently lacking resources, their schools evolved into places where compassion and warmth took the place of what infrastructure was unable to provide. Their stories made me think of Freire's (1998) idea of "education as an act of love and courage," in which teaching turns into a moral endeavour to humanise people. These situations forced me

to reevaluate the definition of leadership, which is moral behaviour and relational presence rather than power (Giurge et al., 2021). Amid underprivileged environments, I realised that leadership is more about “staying afloat in rough waters while ensuring others do not drown” than it is about giving instructions.

In terms of methodology, this study changed my perspective on what it means to conduct research with people as opposed to on them. Through the use of collage and narrative inquiry, teachers were able to create spaces where they could discuss, reflect, and convey their experiences through words and images. Entering into participants’ “storied lives” is how Mills (2021) defines narrative inquiry, and I found this to be really accurate. In addition to providing a glimpse into the souls of the teachers, each narrative served as a mirror reflecting my own presumptions, beliefs, and positionality as a researcher. I occasionally had the impression of a gardener tending to a delicate landscape, making sure that the participants’ words developed into accurate depictions of their daily situations. The necessity of ethical reflexivity prompted me to consider Olmos-Vega et al.’s (2022) assertion that self-awareness in qualitative research should be a practice of accountability rather than self-indulgence. This required patience, humility, and the guts to admit that meaning-making is always a collaborative process.

Conducting this study was both transforming and humbling on an emotional level. It frequently made me reflect on the very goal of education after hearing tales of adversity, kindness, and moral bravery. “Care is not an additional act in teaching; it is the act itself,” according to McCormack et al. (2024), and the process confirmed the importance of empathy in educational leadership. I discovered that at schools where scarcity is the norm, compassionate leadership is a lifeline, not a luxury of well-resourced institutions. Like the teachers in my research, I also had to learn to be resilient by striking a balance between the emotional weight of their stories and the expectations of academic rigour.

Ultimately, my research experience served as a poignant reminder that academic research entails an ethical and emotional engagement with human experience, rather than a dispassionate pursuit of knowledge. This study, to use a metaphor, was a tapestry composed of strands of theory, context, and narrative, each unique yet interconnected to form the whole. I learned from the teachers’ narratives that providing care and support through leadership is not only an educational act but also a moral stance; it is a silent revolution carried out every day in the recesses of classrooms, where hope often appears to be at its most fragile.

6.5. Findings of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of primary school teachers leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts. Drawing directly from the narratives analysed in Chapter 5, the findings reveal a morally driven and relationally grounded conception of leadership. However, they also expose tensions, sustainability concerns, and contradictions that complicate an uncritical celebration of servant-oriented practice.

Rather than simply confirming the value of care-based leadership, the findings demonstrate that a dynamic interplay between moral commitment, systemic constraint, and adaptive agency shapes teachers' practices.

6.5.1. Teachers' understanding of their role

According to the study's findings, teachers in underprivileged environments view their work through the lens of servant leadership, in which their professional identities are essentially relational and morally grounded. This idea has developed into a complex duty of holistic stewardship, going beyond the conventional transmission of curriculum content. The following are the main ideas that support this understanding:

6.5.1.1. Relational-moral conceptions of leadership

The findings show that participants predominantly understood their leadership role as relational and ethically grounded. Teachers described themselves as nurturers, caregivers, advocates, and moral role models. These identities were not peripheral but central to how they understood effective teaching in deprived contexts.

This supports Servant Leadership Theory, which positions service to others as foundational to leadership, and aligns with the Ethic of Care, which foregrounds relational responsiveness as essential to education. Participants' emphasis on dignity, belonging, and protection demonstrates that academic instruction was viewed as inseparable from emotional and material care.

However, analytically, this finding extends beyond theoretical confirmation. Teachers did not merely “apply” servant leadership; they reinterpreted it in materially deprived contexts where care often required tangible intervention (food, clothing, NGO referrals). Leadership thus became embodied and materially enacted, rather than abstractly relational.

6.5.1.2. Expansive professional identity

Teachers’ narratives reveal an expanded professional identity that includes counselling, social mediation, advocacy, and resource mobilisation. This reflects stewardship in practice. However, the findings also indicate a blurring of professional boundaries. Several participants assumed roles traditionally associated with social workers or psychologists.

While this reflects agency and commitment, it also raises critical questions about role overload and systemic displacement of responsibility. The data suggest that teachers’ moral commitment may compensate for institutional inadequacies, potentially normalising state or systemic failure.

6.5.2. Factors influencing leadership for care and support

The study concludes that a dynamic tension exists between a crucial network of enablers and a widespread ecology of limitations, shaping teacher leadership for care and support. Teachers’ ability to care is either maintained or undermined by a system of interrelated influencing factors.

6.5.2.1. Structural constraints as active mediators

The findings clearly demonstrate that leadership for care and support does not occur in a neutral environment. Overcrowding, poverty, inadequate infrastructure, delayed funding, and policy pressure significantly shaped what teachers could realistically achieve.

Rather than merely “hindering” leadership, these systemic conditions redefined it. Teachers often shifted energy from curriculum delivery to crisis management. This complicates the

assumption that servant leadership automatically produces optimal outcomes; context mediates capacity.

In this sense, the findings challenge idealised portrayals of moral leadership by revealing its dependence on material and institutional conditions.

6.5.2.2. Relational and cultural enablers

Conversely, collegial trust, distributed responsibility, and supportive leadership cultures acted as protective factors. Where teachers experienced psychological safety and shared moral purpose, care practices were more sustainable.

This finding strengthens the theoretical proposition that servant leadership is inherently relational and communal. However, the data also reveal uneven institutional support. Not all teachers experienced collaborative cultures, suggesting that care leadership can become individualised rather than systemically embedded.

6.5.2.3. The dual nature of socioeconomic context

Poverty, violence, and family instability emerged as both barriers and catalysts. These conditions increased emotional labour and instructional difficulty. At the same time, they intensified teachers' sense of vocation and moral urgency.

This duality complicates simplistic narratives. Deprivation does not only constrain; it reshapes leadership into advocacy. However, the findings also show that persistent exposure to trauma risks emotional exhaustion, an issue not fully resolved by moral commitment alone.

6.5.3. Strategies for navigating constraints

The study concludes that ethical and moral teachers employ a combination of intentional pedagogical adaptation and agentic resilience to overcome obstacles. Their methods are

proactive and creative, grounded in a strong dedication to their learners rather than reactive coping techniques.

6.5.3.1. Adaptive pedagogical leadership

Teachers demonstrated intentional pedagogical reorientation, including differentiated instruction and trauma-informed approaches. These were not abstract strategies, but context-responsive adaptations aimed at restoring learner dignity and engagement.

This reflects servant leadership enacted instructionally. However, the data indicate that such adaptations required significant emotional labour and additional time investment, raising questions about long-term sustainability.

6.5.3.2. Leveraging social and relational capital

Participants actively built support networks, including NGOs, families, and informal community partnerships. This demonstrates distributed leadership in action and challenges deficit views of under-resourced schools.

However, reliance on informal networks also suggests institutional gaps. External partnerships often compensated for systemic shortcomings rather than supplementing well-functioning structures.

6.5.3.3. Personal faith and moral vocation

Many participants drew on their faith and a sense of calling for resilience. This internal compass sustained perseverance in adverse conditions and reinforced servant-oriented practice.

While this finding affirms the sustaining role of moral purpose, it also introduces complexity. Leadership endurance became heavily dependent on individual belief systems rather than systemic professional support. This individualisation of resilience may obscure the need for structural reform.

6.5.4. Integrated conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that leadership for care and support in deprived primary schools is fundamentally ethically driven and relationally oriented; however, it is also intensely mediated by contextual realities. Servant leadership principles, while providing a conceptual foundation, are reinterpreted and materially embodied in these challenging environments, demonstrating that leadership in practice extends beyond theoretical ideals. Teachers' moral commitment frequently compensates for systemic inadequacies, enabling care and advocacy to persist despite limited resources and institutional constraints. However, this moral engagement often comes at the cost of role overload and significant emotional strain, illustrating the demanding nature of such leadership.

The study further reveals that care practices often blur conventional professional boundaries, as teachers assume roles traditionally associated with social work, counselling, or community advocacy. This tension between ethical commitment and institutional expectations underscores the complex negotiation required to enact servant leadership in contexts of deprivation. Sustainability of leadership for care is therefore contingent not only on personal moral values but also on relational culture, supportive institutional frameworks, and individual resilience. The interplay of these factors highlights the duality of agency and vulnerability: teachers navigate the demands of emotional labour and personal risk while exercising adaptive pedagogical strategies and relational stewardship.

Importantly, the findings challenge simplistic or heroic portrayals of teacher-leaders, presenting leadership as neither purely inspirational nor entirely constrained. Instead, it emerges as a dynamic and negotiated practice, shaped by moral conviction, systemic limitations, relational networks, and contextual adversity. Leadership for care and support in these schools exemplifies the practical enactment of servant leadership. However, it also exposes the precarity and complexity inherent in ethically motivated practice under conditions of deprivation.

6.6. Recommendations

The findings mentioned above have led me to provide several recommendations for enhancing teachers' leadership in leading for care and support in teaching and learning. These recommendations are based on the participants' actual experiences and the contextual realities of underprivileged educational settings. Consequently, by offering doable, long-term solutions that improve teachers' ability to lead with empathy, agency, and resilience, they aim to close the gap between policy goals and classroom practice. Given the complex socioeconomic, cultural, and political circumstances of the South African educational system, the following recommendations are meant to be practical in order to improve primary school teachers' capacity to lead teaching and learning for care and support in impoverished environments.

6.6.1. Recommendations for understanding teachers' roles

Most teachers already view themselves as moral role models, advocates, and nurturers, which aligns with the principles of care ethics and servant leadership. However, rather than being a professionally acknowledged and endorsed skill set, this is frequently an intuitive practice. Therefore, I recommend that the ethics of caring (Noddings, 2013) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) should be the main topics of in-service workshops and beginning teacher education modules that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) creates and requires in collaboration with higher education institutions. These programs should go beyond theory and incorporate practical strategies for establishing trauma-informed classrooms, modelling ethical behaviour, and striking a balance between academic instruction and socio-emotional support. This acknowledges their diverse role, formalises their intuitive behaviours, and offers a theoretical basis for their work.

Teachers already work as architects of safe spaces and collaborators with stakeholders (parents, NGOs, and coworkers), but they frequently do so in an isolated and ad hoc manner. Therefore, I recommend that district-based support teams collaborate with experienced teachers from similar circumstances to develop a practical, digital "Portfolio of Relational Practice." With case studies, community partnership agreement templates, low-cost classroom transformation initiatives, and manuals for positive parental involvement, this portfolio would be an evolving publication. This resource would empower teachers, reduce the need for reinventing the wheel,

and provide concrete examples for carrying out their care-oriented leadership role by compiling and disseminating effective, context-specific strategies.

6.6.2. Recommendations for addressing constraining and facilitating factors

Teachers in this study expressed a need for structured emotional support to fight burnout and a severe shortage of professional development, particularly in trauma-informed approaches. At the same time, they recognised collegial and peer support as a crucial enabling element. Therefore, I recommend that districts and schools implement a tiered support model. Create structured, weekly Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at the school level, allowing teachers to collaborate on addressing problems, share differentiated teaching methods, and offer peer support. Deploy mobile “Wellness and Pedagogy Units” at the district level that move between school clusters and offer focused training on subjects like managing huge classes and diagnosing learner trauma. These units should also offer group counselling sessions for teachers. This method is economical, leverages existing relationships, and addresses emotional stress and skill shortages.

Teachers’ workload is increased as a result of the substantial personal time and effort they invest in forming community partnerships (such as obtaining sponsorships and interacting with parents) to address resource scarcity and learner indigence. Therefore, I recommend that establishing a specific “Community Liaison Teacher” position would be a formal way for school management and School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to acknowledge the importance of this role. A few hours of non-teaching time each week would be allocated to this position, which may be rotated annually, to facilitate methodical collaboration with parents, NGOs, and local companies. Securing resource donations, planning feeding system sponsorships, and streamlining parental involvement initiatives would be their mission. This formalisation gives the activity legitimacy, prevents individual teachers from taking on the entire workload, and establishes a more strategic and long-term approach to utilising community support.

6.6.3. Recommendations for enhancing strategies to overcome challenges

Teachers generally lack a centralised method to exchange and retain their innovative ideas, despite showcasing their extraordinary ingenuity through diversified instruction and

improvisation with discarded resources. Therefore, I recommend that every school set aside a small area as a “Resource Innovation Hub.” This centre, run by a group of teachers, would house and categorise practical teaching tools, lesson plans for groups with varying needs, and collections of repurposed resources. A small starter package of basic, multipurpose goods (such as glue, paint, and cardboard) might be provided by the district office or DBE to help this. This hub would scale up individual innovation to a whole-school level by institutionalising teacher creativity, reducing preparation time, and ensuring that all staff have access to efficient, reasonably priced teaching tools.

To maintain their resilience, teachers mostly rely on their own faith and internal motivation. Despite its strength, this resource can be erratic and individualised, perhaps not supporting all teachers equally. Therefore, I recommend that the DBE should update its incentive programs, including the QMS (Quality Management System) or the service requirement for the Funza Lushaka Bursary Programme, to recognise leadership in care and support. For evaluation, teachers should create a portfolio that showcases their resource innovation, trauma-informed practices, and community collaboration. Additionally, boundaries and action on proactive resilience-building should be provided, emphasising the use of personal agency, establishing long-lasting boundaries, and creating networks of professional support. This strategy goes beyond wishing for personal resilience to actively cultivate and reward it as a fundamental professional skill in trying situations.

6.7. Conclusion

This chapter achieves its goal by bringing together the main themes of the research, including a summary of the key conclusions, an analysis of my theoretical, contextual, and methodological journey, and practical recommendations. The chapter reiterated the study’s goal of investigating how primary school teachers lead for care and support in teaching and learning in disadvantaged settings through this synthesis. Despite systemic limitations, it illustrated how the teachers’ moral purpose, relational integrity, and servant-leadership ideals come together to create caring and resilient learning environments.

Three key takeaways emerge from this chapter. Firstly, providing care and support as a leader is a morally righteous and relational activity that is based on service, empathy, and a strong feeling of duty to the overall development of learners. Beyond just teaching, teachers’

leadership entails moral stewardship and support for those in need. Secondly, context is crucial because, although structural deprivation makes practice more difficult, it also fosters a particular kind of flexible, human-centred leadership. This emphasises how important it is for teachers in these kinds of settings to get institutional support and systemic recognition. Thirdly, the resilience and agency of teachers, fuelled by their own vocation, community engagement, and the transformative power of empathy, are essential to maintaining care-oriented leadership.

Ultimately, this chapter, as well as the entire study, emphasises that care is not an afterthought in limited resources, but rather the core of education. Teachers who lead with compassion are the moral beating heart of education, reminding us that real learning starts in every classroom when humanity is respected, dignity is restored, and hope is maintained.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Approval - UKZN



18 November 2024

Kaylin Govender (217048656)
School of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear K Govender,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00007746/2024

Project title: Leadership for care and support in teaching and learning: Stories of four primary school teachers in deprived school contexts

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 19 September 2024 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 18 November 2025.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)
/nng

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix B: Permission to Conduct Research in KZN DOE Institutions



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X 9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Email: buyi.ntuli@kzndoe.gov.za Tel: 033 392 1051

Ref No.: 2/4/8/224

Enquiries: Mrs B. T. Ntuli

Mr Kaylin Govender



Dear Mr Govender

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **“LEADERSHIP FOR CARE AND SUPPORT IN TEACHING AND LEARNING: STORIES OF FOUR PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS:”**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from **23rd July 2024 to 31st December 2027**.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Mrs Buyi Ntuli at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.



Mr G.N. Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 23/07/2024

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

Appendix C: Sample Letter to Request Permission from School Principals

The Principal

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Dear [REDACTED] (Principal) – [REDACTED]

I hope this letter finds you well.

My name is Kaylin Govender. I am currently pursuing my studies towards a Master of Education Degree at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education, Edgewood campus. My specialisation is in the discipline, Educational Leadership, Management and Policy (ELMP). As part of the requirements for the degree, I will be conducting a research study titled: *Leadership for care and support in teaching and learning: Stories of four primary school teachers in deprived contexts*.

The purpose of this research is to explore the lived experiences of four primary school teachers in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts. The study uses narrative inquiry to explore the various viewpoints, difficulties, and approaches that teachers have or encounter when trying to create a supportive and caring environment in their classrooms and school communities. Through exploring the distinct experiences of individual teachers, the study aims to provide refined viewpoints on the complexities of leadership for care and support in primary education, thereby guiding efforts to enhance the accomplishments and welfare of learners.

The research questions involved in this study are:

1. What understandings do primary school teachers have about their role in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?
2. What factors affect primary school teachers in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?
3. How do primary school teachers deal with or overcome negative factors (if any) when leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?

As this study uses narrative inquiry as a research method, I will be looking at past and present practices. I hereby request your approval to conduct a study with two Level One (PL1) teachers from your school as participants in this study. The data production process will involve the generation of the primary school teachers' stories of personal experiences using collage inquiry followed by a narrative interview. All data that will be collected will be used for my research project report. Permission is also requested from you for the publication of the findings in the form of research reports and publication in research journals. You will be informed if such publications take place.

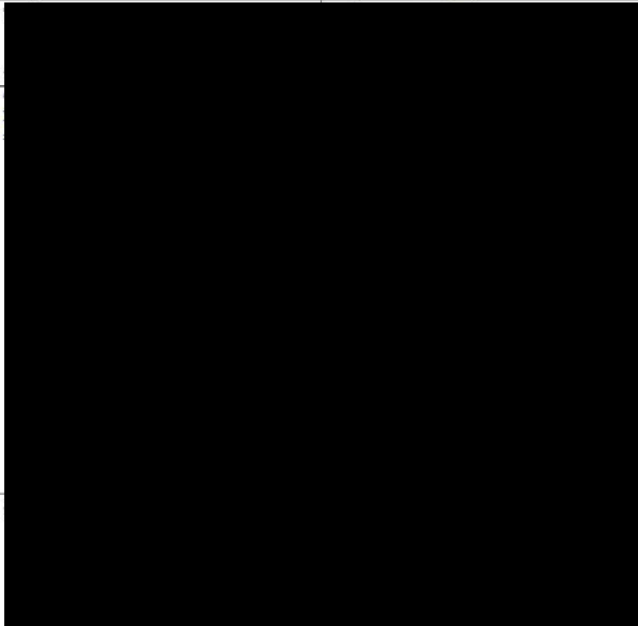
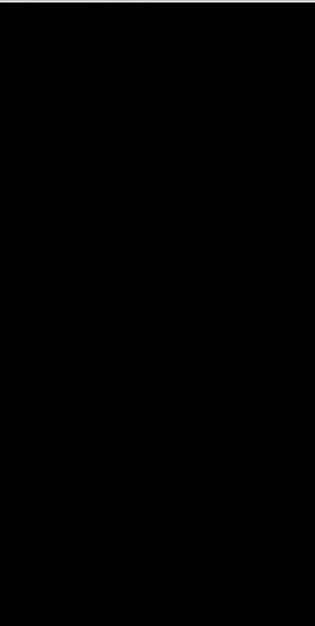
Given that the study is drawing on the individual's memories of particular nodal moments and critical experiences of their personal/lived experiences of primary school teachers leading for care and support, I assure you that the study will not compromise teaching and learning time as it will be conducted after school hours using online platforms such as WhatsApp/ Zoom and/or in-person interactions which will take place at a time convenient to the PL1 Teacher, whom is a participant.

The data collection and production will start from July 2024 and will take place at a time convenient to the PL1 Teacher as a participant. The participant will be apprised of the research process, his/her participation, and his/her rights in the research processes, through the informed consent form. His/her permission will be sought prior to his/her participation in the data collection process. The research is scheduled to take place once you have granted permission and after ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal has been obtained. Permission is also going to be sought from the KZN Department of Education to conduct the study ethically and successfully.

Please note that:

- Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- The choice to participate, not participate or stop participating in the research is left on to the participant. He/she will not be penalised for taking such an action.
- All confidentiality will be guaranteed by using the pseudonyms to protect the school and the participant's anonymity.
- Any information given by the participant cannot be used against him/her, and the collected data will be used for purposes of this research only.
- The participant's involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and there are no financial benefits involved.
- If you require any information about this study upon its completion, I will be most willing to provide you with this at the end of my study.

For any enquiries regarding this study please feel free to contact me or my supervisor Dr Nokukhanya Ndlovu. You may also contact the UKZN Humanities & Social Science Research Ethics Committee. Contact details are as follows:

Name	Contact Number	Email address
Dr Nokukhanya Ndlovu (Supervisor - UKZN)		
HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION Research Office, Westville Campus Govan Mbeki Building Private Bag X54001 Durban 4000 KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA		
Mr Kaylin Govender (Researcher)		

Thank you



Mr Kaylin Govender

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

PRINCIPAL'S DECLARATION OF CONSENT

The title of the research dissertation: *Leadership for care and support in teaching and learning: Stories of four primary school teachers in deprived context*

I, _____ (Full name/s of Principal) have been informed about the study entitled: *Leadership for care and support in teaching and learning: Stories of four primary school teachers in deprived context* by Kaylin Govender. I hereby grant permission to the researcher to conduct research using two participants from my school. I understand that the participants have willingly agreed to participate in this research study and that she/he is at liberty to withdraw from the research study at any time, should they so desire.

I also understand that the name of the school, names of the participants and their responses will be kept confidential. If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher or the supervisor. I am aware that if I have any questions or concerns about my rights as the Principal of the study participants, or if I am concerned about any aspect of the study or the researcher then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27312604557 -Fax: 27312604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

I hereby **provide/do not provide** consent to:

		Do consent	Do not consent
1.	Consent to Kaylin Govender for conducting research.		
2.	Consent to Kaylin Govender to use photographs/ pictures/ writings/ stories provided by the participant.		

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL: _____

DATE: ____/____/____

Appendix D: Permission Letters from Chosen Schools



14 November 2024

To whom it may concern

On behalf of [REDACTED], I [REDACTED] am pleased to grant permission to Kaylin Govender to conduct his research titled "Leadership for Care and Support in teaching and learning: Stories of four primary school teachers", within our school facilities from January 2025 to February 2025. After reviewing the research proposal, I trust this study will bring valuable perspectives that aligns with our commitment to enhancing educational outcomes for our learners.

The study has my full support, contingent on adherence to the following guidelines to ensure the safety, privacy, and well-being of our students and staff:

- All data collected must maintain the confidentiality of our students and staff.
- The study should be conducted in a way that minimizes disruption to our regular classroom and school activities.
- The researcher must coordinate with teachers and school staff to schedule any necessary activities or observations.
- We would appreciate receiving a copy of the final report or a summary of findings once the research is complete.

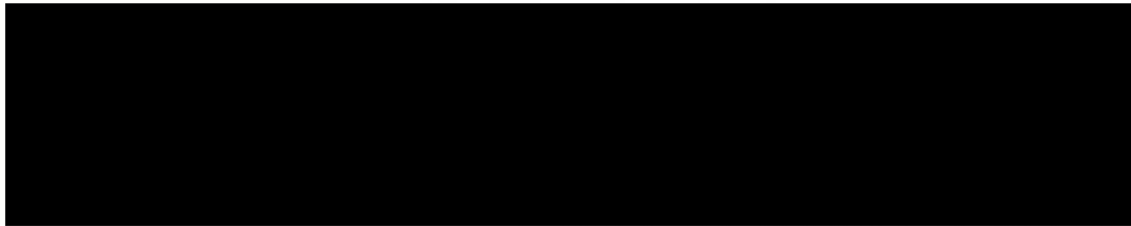
All necessary arrangements and communication must be made through [REDACTED] (Head of Department) – Contact Number: [REDACTED]. Should there be any concerns, you may also contact [REDACTED] (Acting Principal) on [REDACTED].

Your faithfully,

A black rectangular box redacting the signature of the Acting Principal.

[REDACTED] Acting Principal)

A black rectangular box redacting a stamp or official seal.



13 November 2024

To: University of KwaZulu-Natal, College of Humanities

Dear Sir/Madam

I, [REDACTED] (Acting Principal) of [REDACTED] hereby give permission to Kaylin Govender to conduct his research, titled Leadership for Care and Support in teaching and learning: Stories of four primary school teachers, at our school for the duration of his study.

I am aware that Kaylin Govender will be using two educators from our school as participants in his study and that any form of interviews will take place anytime between January 2025 to February 2025. [REDACTED] fully supports Kaylin Govender in his study, ensuring that this study will not disrupt teaching and learning. We believe that any study in field on education could elicit new insight into our daily tasks which may provide solutions to our challenges faced as an educational institute.

For further information or confirmation, contact [REDACTED]

Yours in education,

[REDACTED] (Acting Principal)

Appendix E: Participant Consent Form

LETTER TO THE PARTICIPANT

Dear Sir/Madam

I, Kaylin Govender, am a Master's degree student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education, Edgewood Campus. My specialization is in the discipline Educational Leadership, Management and Policy (ELMP). As part of the requirements for the degree, I will be conducting a research study titled: *Leadership for care and support in teaching and learning: Stories of four primary school teachers in deprived contexts*.

The purpose of this research is to explore the lived experiences of four primary school teachers in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts. The study uses narrative inquiry to explore the various viewpoints, difficulties, and approaches that teachers have or encounter when trying to create a supportive and caring environment in their classrooms and school communities. Through exploring the distinct experiences of individual teachers, the study aims to provide refined viewpoints on the complexities of leadership for care and support in primary education, thereby guiding efforts to enhance the accomplishments and welfare of learners.

The research questions involved in this study are:

1. What understandings do primary school teachers have about their role in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?
2. What factors affect primary school teachers in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?
3. How do primary school teachers deal with or overcome negative factors (if any) when leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?

I selected you as one of my participants because you meet the selection criteria of:

- Being a primary school teacher.
- Having a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience.
- Being employed within the Umlazi school district as a permanent educator.

I would like for you to share your experiences concerning your leadership of teaching and learning for care and support, as a primary school teacher. As this study is using narrative inquiry as a research method, I will be looking at past and present practices. I aim to use online platforms or face-to-face methods (as per your preference), to meet with you and have discussions to generate data which will only be used for the purpose of this study. The data production process will involve the generation of the primary school teachers' stories of personal experiences using collage inquiry followed by a narrative interview. This study will consist of two 1-hour sessions, one session for the collage inquiry and discussion and another session for the narrative interview; this process will begin in January 2025 and end in February 2025.

Given that the study is drawing on the individual's memories of particular nodal moments and critical experiences of their personal/lived experiences of primary school teachers leading for care and support, I assure you that the study will not compromise teaching and learning time as it will be conducted after school hours using online platforms such as WhatsApp/ Zoom and/or in-person interactions which will take place at a time convenient to you. If your participation in the study awakens any feelings of discomfort, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Please note that:

- Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- The choice to participate, not participate or stop participating in the research is left on to the participant. He/she will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- All confidentiality will be guaranteed by using the pseudonyms to protect the school and the participant's anonymity.
- Any information given by the participant cannot be used against him/her, and the collected data will be used for purposes of this research only.
- The participant's involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and there are no financial benefits involved.
- If you require any information about this study upon its completion, I will be most willing to provide you with this at the end of my study.

For any enquiries regarding this study please feel free to contact me or my supervisor Dr Nokukhanya Ndlovu. You may also contact the UKZN Humanities & Social Science Research Ethics Committee. Contact details are as follows:

Name	Contact Number	Email address
Dr Nokukhanya Ndlovu (Supervisor - UKZN)		
HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION Research Office, Westville Campus Govan Mbeki Building Private Bag X54001 Durban 4000 KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA		
Mr Kaylin Govender (Researcher)		

Thank you



Mr Kaylin Govender

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

PARTICIPANT DECLARATION OF CONSENT

The title of the research dissertation: *Leadership for care and support in teaching and learning: Stories of four primary school teachers*

I, _____ (Full name/s of Participant)
have been informed about the study entitled: *Leadership for care and support in teaching and learning: Stories of four primary school teachers*, by Kaylin Govender. I hereby grant permission to be a participant in this study. I understand that I have willingly agreed to participate in this research study and that I am at liberty to withdraw from the research study at any time, so should I desire. I also understand that my name, name of the school, and my responses will be kept confidential. If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher or the supervisor.

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about any aspect of the study or the searchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTHAFRICA
Tel: 27312604557 -Fax: 27312604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

I hereby **provide/ do not provide** consent to:

		Do consent	Do not consent
1	Consent to Kaylin Govender for conducting research.		
2	Consent to Kaylin Govender to use photographs provided by the participant.		
3	Consent to Kaylin Govender to use collages provided by the participant.		
4	Consent to Kaylin Govender to use narrative interviews as a data generation method.		
5	Consent to Kaylin Govender to audio record the narrative interviews.		

Signature of Participant _____

Date: ____/____/____

Appendix F: Data Generation Instruments

COLLAGE INQUIRY SCHEDULE

Study Title: Leadership for care and support in teaching and learning: Stories of four primary school teachers in deprived school contexts

Purpose: This activity aims to help you visually and creatively express your personal experiences, feelings, and beliefs related to your role in leading for care and support in your school. It will form part of a narrative inquiry to understand how primary school teachers make meaning of their leadership experiences.

Research Questions:

Your collage and explanation will help us answer the following:

1. What understandings do primary school teachers have about their role in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?
2. What factors affect primary school teachers in leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?
3. How do primary school teachers deal with or overcome negative factors (if any) when leading teaching and learning for care and support in deprived contexts?

Materials Needed:

You will need:

- Old magazines, newspapers, or printed images
- Scissors
- Glue or tape
- A large sheet of paper or cardboard
- Coloured pens or markers (optional)
- Personal or symbolic items (optional)
- Laptop (optional)

Instructions: Step-by-Step Guide

Step 1: Reflect (30–45 minutes)

Take time to quietly reflect on your experiences as a teacher who leads with care and support. Consider:

- Moments when you supported learners emotionally, socially, or academically.
- Times when you felt proud or challenged in this role.
- Support you received or lacked from your school, colleagues, or system.
- How you responded to obstacles or difficult situations.

You may journal or jot down some keywords before moving to Step 2.

Step 2: Create Your Collage (45–60 minutes)

Use images, words, symbols, or drawings to represent your story. Alternatively, you may create your collage using online tools, e.g. Microsoft Word or PowerPoint. Your collage can be abstract or literal. Try to capture:

- Your understanding of what it means to lead for care and support.
- What influences or affects your ability to lead this way (positively or negatively).
- How you respond to challenges or barriers.

Be as honest and personal as you are comfortable with. There is no right or wrong way to do this.

Step 3: Share your Story (30–45 minutes)

After you complete your collage, spend time to reflect on the meaning and significance of your collage. Then, verbally discuss or write a brief reflection or narrative regarding your collage. Share any insights, stories, or reflections that you would like to convey about your experiences and perspectives on the theme.

Consider the questions below to help shape or form your discussion:

1. Explain your collage: What do the images, symbols, and words mean to you?
2. Understanding your role: What does your collage say about how you understand your role in leading for care and support?
3. Influencing factors: What factors, internal or external, help or hinder your leadership for care and support?
4. Overcoming challenges: How have you dealt with any negative experiences or barriers shown in your collage (if any)?

Reminders for Participants

- You don't need to be an artist, this is about storytelling, not perfection.
- All contributions are valued and will be treated with confidentiality and respect.
- Your collage or written reflection will help shape a deeper understanding of teachers' leadership stories in real contexts.
- We may ask to take a photo of your collage and talk about it in a follow-up interview.

Contact & Submission

Please bring your completed collage and written reflection to the scheduled discussion/interview session. If you prefer, you may also submit a photo and reflection electronically to the researcher.

Thank you for your participation in my collage inquiry study! Your contributions will help me gain valuable insights into leadership for care and support in primary education.

Researcher: Kaylin Govender

Contact Number: [REDACTED]

Email address: [REDACTED]

Institution: University of KwaZulu-Natal

NARRATIVE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Study Title: Leadership for care and support in teaching and learning: Stories of four primary school teachers in deprived school contexts

Purpose of the Interview:

To explore and understand:

1. Teachers' personal understandings of leading for care and support
2. Factors that influence their ability to lead this way
3. How they respond to challenges or negative influences in their context
4. This interview allows space for personal stories, not just opinions.

Introductory Section (Warm-Up)

- Greet the participant and thank them for their willingness to share their story.
- Reassure them about confidentiality and explain that the purpose is to hear their lived experiences in their own words.
- Invite them to begin by introducing themselves, their teaching background, and their school context.

Opening Question:

- "Please tell me the story of your journey as a teacher and leader in this school."

Research Question 1: Understanding of Leadership for Care and Support

1. What does "leading for care and support" mean to you, in your own words?
2. Can you tell me about a time when you felt you truly led with care and support in your school?
3. When you think about your daily work, how do you show care and support to learners?
4. In your own words, what does it mean to be a teacher-leader in this school context?

Research Question 2: Factors Affecting Leadership for Care and Support

5. What helps or supports you in leading for care and support in your school?
6. What makes it difficult for you to lead for care and support in your context?
7. Can you describe some of the conditions in your school and community that make your role easier or more difficult?
8. What kind of support do you wish you had in order to lead more effectively for care and support?

Research Question 3: Overcoming Negative Factors

9. Can you share a story of a difficult situation where you still managed to lead for care and support?
10. How do you personally cope or stay motivated when things feel overwhelming or when you're unsupported?
11. Have you ever had to challenge school rules or systems in order to show care or support? What happened?

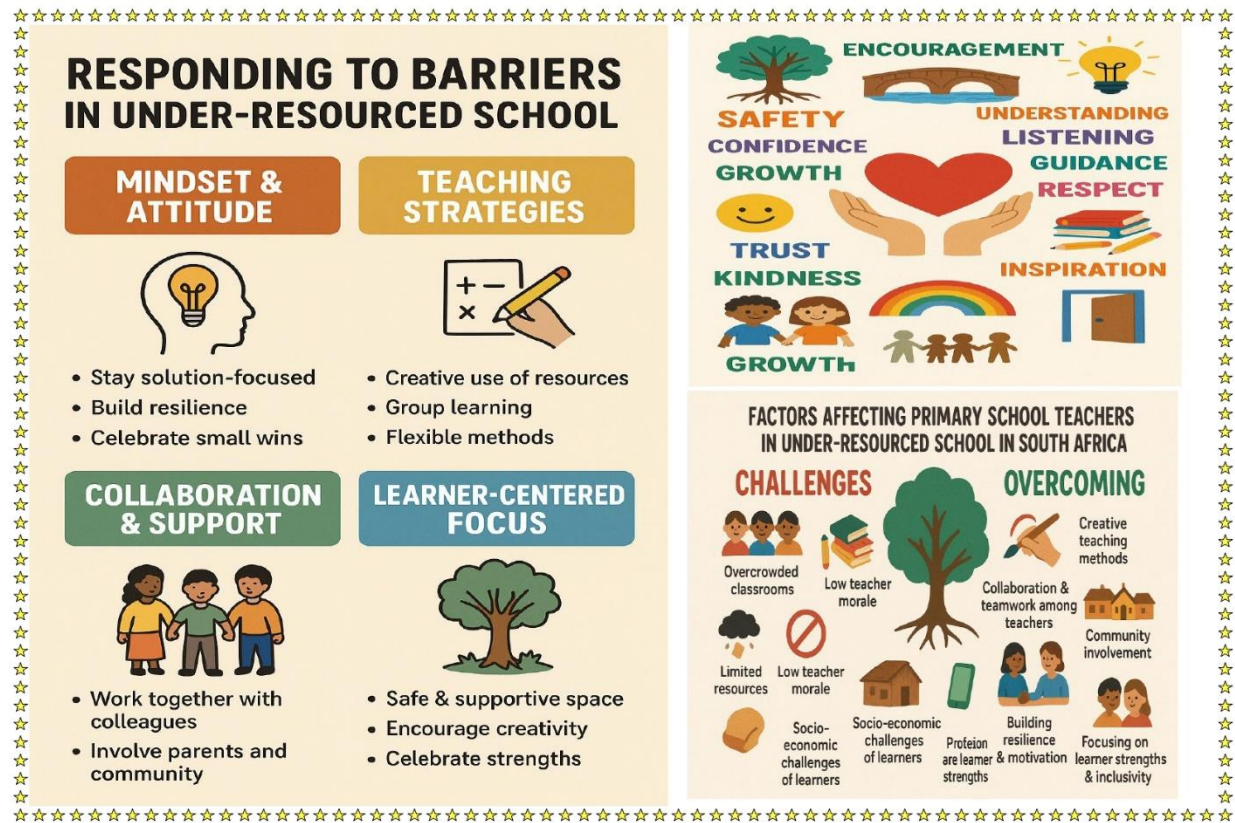
Closing Reflection Questions

12. From your journey and experiences, what key lessons have you learned about leading teaching and learning for care and support in a school like yours?
13. Is there anything else you'd like to share that you feel is important to your story as a teacher who leads for care and support?

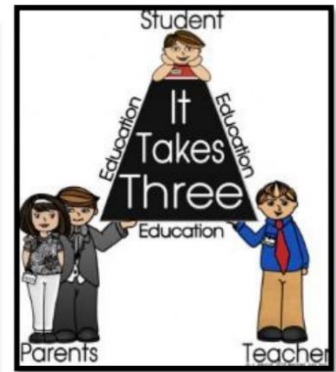
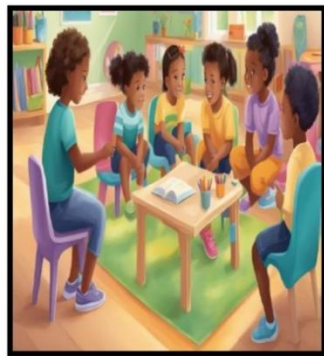
Appendix G: Data Generated from Miss Salvation (Collage Inquiry)



Appendix H: Data Generated from Miss Nazreth (Collage Inquiry)



Appendix I: Data Generated from Mr Kairos (Collage Inquiry)



Appendix J: Data Generated from Mr Calvary (Collage Inquiry)



Appendix K: Confirmation of Language Editing

N. E. Avery
Education Consultant


Pietermaritzburg

08/11/2025

Kaylin Govender

Student Number: 217048656

**Confirmation of Language Editing of MEd Dissertation: Leadership
for Care and Support in Teaching and Learning: Stories of Four
Primary School Teachers in Deprived Contexts**

Dear Mr Govender

This letter serves as confirmation that I conducted a language edit of the abovementioned Dissertation, as requested by you on 27 October 2025. In accordance with the request, the editorial process was limited to an English language edit only and I made no intentional substantive changes to the content. As usual in an editorial process I indicate that you are at liberty to accept or reject the proposed changes to ensure that no unintended modifications have been made to the original manuscript.

I found the attention to detail and quality of language usage in your dissertation to be at an exceptionally high level, resulting in a coherent, well-structured piece of work, which I enjoyed reading from both an editorial and academic perspective.

I congratulate you on this substantial achievement.

Yours faithfully



N. E. Avery

Appendix L: Turnitin Report

Masters Dissertation_Kaylin_217048656

ORIGINALITY REPORT

9 %	7 %	5 %	1 %
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

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