



**Exploring Care and Support Leadership: Experiences of Women
Principals in Pinetown District, KwaZulu-Natal**

by

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Thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

(By Coursework)

In the discipline of

Education Leadership, Management, and Policy

School of Education

College of Humanities

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Durban, South Africa

November 2025

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DECLARATION

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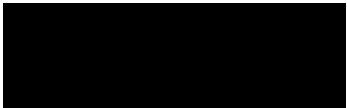
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my children, Ntwenhle and Mpumelelo, whose love, laughter, support, and resilience inspire me to become a better person every day, and to my students, who continually remind me why teaching and learning matter. You are both my motivation and my greatest reward.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I give thanks to the Lord Almighty, whose grace, wisdom, and strength sustained me throughout this journey. I also honour abakithi abangasekho for seeing me throughout this journey.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor for their invaluable guidance, encouragement, and patience. I am also grateful to the University of KwaZulu-Natal for providing the academic platform and resources that made this study possible.

My heartfelt thanks go to the principal of my school for his endless support which made it possible to pursue and complete this research. I am also indebted to the participants of this study, who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights; your contributions form the heart of this work.

To my own students, thank you for being a constant source of inspiration and motivation. Your curiosity, resilience, and determination remind me daily of the true purpose of education.

To my colleagues who stood by me, thank you for your support, encouragement, and collaboration throughout this journey.

To my family, especially my sisters, your love, encouragement, and unwavering support have been a pillar of strength throughout this journey.

Finally, to my beloved children, Ntwenhle and Mpumelelo, whose love, patience, and inspiration gave me the strength to persevere. You are my source of inspiration. I also acknowledge myself for doing all this work, the determination and perseverance that carried me through to the completion of this work.

ABSTRACT

This study explored the perceptions and experiences of women principals in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal regarding care and support leadership and its impact on school culture, teachers' morale, and learners' performance. In many South African schools, particularly those that are under-resourced, school leaders are required not only to provide instructional direction but also to offer emotional and psychosocial support to both staff and learners. Women leaders often employ relational, caring, and empathetic leadership styles; however, their contributions in this regard are frequently undervalued and under-researched. This research therefore seeks to foreground their voices and highlight their leadership practices within the context of care and support leadership. Emotional Intelligence (EI) theory, as described by Goleman (1995, 1998) and Mayer and Salovey (1997), provided the theoretical framework. EI identified self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills as key elements of effective leadership. This model offers a rich context in which to study how women leaders build trust, establish positive relationships, manage conflict, and address the emotional needs of teachers and students. Through the crossroads of care, support, and EI, the study explored how emotionally intelligent leadership supports caring and inclusive school environments. This study adopted a qualitative research approach, supported by a case study research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis to generate rich insights from participants at selected schools in the Pinetown District. The study examined how care and support leadership are conceptualised by women principals, how these practices are enacted to promote well-being, and the challenges they encounter, including policy pressures, structural disadvantages, and gendered expectations. The findings showed that care and support leadership enhances teacher morale, sustains collective school cultures, and positively affects students' engagement and academic performance. The study contributes to the gendered and relational leadership conversation in South African schools and invokes legitimization of care, support, and EI as core elements of effective and transformational school leadership.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, care and support leadership, women principals, school leadership, relational trust, qualitative study, educational leadership, lived experiences, Pinetown District, KwaZulu-Natal.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
DBE	Department of Basic Education
EI	Emotional Intelligence
PLCs	Professional Learning Communities
RQ	Research Question
RO	Research Objective
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SEL	Social-Emotional Learning
SGB	School Governing Body
SIP	School Improvement Plan

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

In recent decades, educational leadership has evolved beyond traditional administrative functions to encompass care and support as essential components of effective school leadership. Care and support leadership in schools encompasses practices that prioritise the well-being, social-emotional development, and holistic needs of students and staff, thereby fostering environments where everyone can thrive. Research highlights that such leadership fosters inclusive school cultures, improves teacher morale, and enhances student outcomes (Lijun & Chun Te, 2024). However, despite the growing recognition of its importance, there is limited understanding of how women principals, particularly in resource-constrained environments such as those often found in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal, experience care and support leadership (Bone et al., 2024). This gap is particularly pertinent in the South African context, where the education system continues to navigate historical inequalities and diverse social challenges.

This study focused on women principals in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, a region that, like many in the province, grapples with socio-economic disparities and pressures on its education system—exploring their perceptions, challenges, and strategies in implementing care and support leadership. Given the gendered nature of leadership, women leaders often navigate systemic challenges such as gender biases, societal expectations, and resource limitations (Chabaya C. C., & Ngulube, 2024). Furthermore, enacting effective care and support leadership necessitates strong interpersonal skills, empathy, and the ability to manage emotions effectively. In these areas, the role of emotional intelligence (EI) may be particularly salient for women in leadership. Understanding their experiences in this specific district within KwaZulu-Natal can provide valuable insights for policy and practice aimed at supporting women leaders and fostering more caring and supportive school environments across the province and beyond.

This chapter establishes the foundational groundwork for exploring the experiences of women principals in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, as they enact care and support leadership within often resource-constrained educational environments. It articulates the problem statement, highlighting the existing gap in understanding their perceptions and implementation amidst unique gendered and contextual challenges. The purpose and significance of the study is

outlined, emphasising its potential contributions to relevant literature and leadership development. Furthermore, my positionality will be acknowledged, and key terms will be defined to ensure clarity. Finally, this chapter provides an overview of the thesis structure.

1.2 Background to the Problem

In educational settings, leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the quality of care and support provided to both teachers and students. Effective leadership can enhance the school environment, foster positive relationships, and cultivate a culture that promotes well-being, academic success, and personal development (Leithwood et al., 2008). In educational settings, leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the quality of care and support provided to both teachers and students. Research indicates that effective school leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors influencing learner achievement. Studies further demonstrate that leadership practices significantly influence school climate, teacher commitment, and learner performance (Bush & Glover, 2014). Effective leadership has also been linked to the development of positive organisational culture, collaborative professional relationships, and enhanced learner well-being (Day et al., 2016).

However, in many resource-constrained educational contexts, including areas within KwaZulu-Natal, like the Pinetown District, achieving this level of leadership can be exceedingly tricky. National and provincial reports highlight persistent challenges such as shortages of qualified educators, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to psychosocial support services in public schools (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2021; Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2022). These financial, material, and human resource constraints compel school leaders to extend their roles beyond instructional leadership to include administrative management, crisis response, and social support coordination. These constraints, whether financial, material, or human, present substantial challenges for school leaders who must balance administrative duties, address the needs of students, support teachers, and create an environment conducive to learning and personal growth. These challenges are often amplified in regions with high levels of socio-economic inequality, where access to quality educational resources and support services is limited, potentially leading to burnout among teachers, increased stress for students, and a general decline in the overall effectiveness of the educational system (Agyapong et al., 2022).

These pressures are intensified in communities characterised by high socio-economic inequality. Statistics South Africa (2022) reports that poverty and inequality remain prevalent in KwaZulu-Natal, affecting learners' access to stable home environments, educational resources, and essential services. Exposure to such high-demand, low-resource environments has been associated with increased levels of stress and burnout among teachers, which may negatively affect instructional quality and learner outcomes (Agyapong et al., 2022; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

In such resource-limited settings, school leaders are often required to make difficult decisions regarding the allocation of scarce resources. With constrained budgets, insufficient teaching materials, and an underpaid and overburdened teaching staff, the work of educational leaders becomes even more demanding. The scarcity of financial resources can also hinder the implementation of essential programmes such as professional development, student support services, and educational technology, all of which are crucial for improving educational outcomes (Madani, 2019). Beyond financial limitations, structural barriers within educational systems further impede effective leadership. These barriers include inadequate policies for teacher support, poor teacher retention, high student-to-teacher ratios, and insufficient physical infrastructure (Noor & Ampornstira, 2019).

The complexities are further compounded by the gender disparities in educational leadership, particularly in the context where women constitute a significant portion of leadership roles. Despite the increasing number of women in educational leadership positions, gender bias and prevailing societal expectations continue to impede their full potential. Women leaders in educational settings encounter additional challenges, such as facing heightened scrutiny, experiencing discrimination in decision-making processes, and navigating a leadership landscape that may still be predominantly male (Chabaya, C. C., & Ngulube, 2024). These gendered challenges can have significant implications for women principals' ability to lead effectively and provide the necessary support for their staff and students. Women leaders, especially in resource-constrained environments, often find themselves balancing the demands of leadership with family responsibilities, cultural norms, and gendered expectations surrounding their leadership style. These intersecting factors can contribute to stress, burnout, and limited opportunities for professional growth among women in educational leadership roles (Doyle Fosco et al., 2023).

Within this intricate context, leadership that prioritises care and support becomes paramount for sustaining school environments that are nurturing, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse needs of both staff and students (Fannon, 2018). However, implementing such leadership practices is

complicated in resource-constrained settings, where the immediate need for financial and material support resources can overshadow the emotional and relational dimensions of leadership. The role of women principals, in particular, in embodying care and support leadership practices, is vital for fostering an inclusive, supportive school environment. (Amtu et al., 2020).

The problem of care and support leadership in under-resourced school contexts is situated at the intersection of systemic resource limitations, persistent gender inequalities, and increasing expectations placed on school leaders. South African schools, particularly those serving disadvantaged communities, continue to face infrastructural deficits, limited parental involvement, and socio-economic challenges that place additional emotional and managerial demands on principals (Spaull, 2019; Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2021). Within such contexts, school leaders are required not only to manage administrative and instructional responsibilities but also to provide emotional, relational, and pastoral support to both staff and learners.

Scholarly literature further indicates that women principals often navigate gendered expectations that simultaneously position them as natural caregivers while subjecting their authority to heightened scrutiny (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2021; Blackmore, 2020). This dual expectation can complicate the enactment of care-based leadership, particularly where care is misinterpreted as weakness rather than as a strategic leadership practice grounded in relational ethics (Noddings, 2005). Consequently, there remains a need to deepen scholarly understanding of how care and support leadership is conceptualised and practised within gendered and resource-constrained educational contexts, and how barriers to its effective implementation may be addressed

1.3 Problem Statement

Care and support leadership practices are increasingly recognised as essential for fostering positive school environments (Louis, Murphy et al., 2016). However, there is a notable gap in understanding the specific strategies women principals in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal use to enact care and support leadership, particularly given the unique challenges of constraints (Zuma, 2018). This lack of understanding limits our ability to effectively support these leaders and leverage their potential to create nurturing school environments in challenging settings. Women principals face unique challenges, including gender biases, societal expectations, and significant resource constraints, all of which impact their leadership and decision-making processes (Mataboge, 2024). In a district characterised by socio-economic inequalities, high dropout rates,

and persistent resource constraints, these women principals play a crucial role in maintaining, nurturing and supportive school environments (Ravele, 2021).

The literature reveals that care and support leadership, encompassing elements such as empathy, relationship building, and fostering well-being, contributes to school morale and fosters engagement among students and staff (Morris et al., 2020; Noddings, 2013). Leadership approaches grounded in ethics of care have been shown to enhance collaborative school cultures and strengthen interpersonal relationships within educational settings (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2013). However, few studies have specifically examined how women principals in a context like Pinetown implement these leadership practices and navigate the systematic and contextual challenges they encounter (Moorosi, 2010; Moyo et al., 2020; Naidoo & Perumal, 2014).

Existing South African scholarship has highlighted the gendered nature of school leadership and the structural barriers faced by women principals, yet limited attention has been given to how these leaders integrate care and support leadership within contexts shaped by socio-economic adversity and organisational pressures. This gap underscores the need for contextually grounded research focusing on women principals' lived experiences and leadership enactment in specific districts such as Pinetown.

This study sought to address this gap by exploring the experiences of women principals in the Pinetown District as they led through care and support. By identifying the challenges they faced and the strategies they employed, the study contributes to an emerging body of literature on the gendered nature of leadership dynamics while offering specific insights into improving educational leadership practices in resource-constrained contexts (Gonaim, 2018). Ultimately, this research can inform efforts to better support women leaders in creating thriving school environments despite significant obstacles.

1.4 Purpose and Significance of the Study

The central purpose of this study was to explore how women principals in the Pinetown District conceptualised, enacted, and experienced care and support leadership within their school contexts. To achieve this overarching aim, the research sought first to investigate how these women leaders understood and enacted care and support leadership within the daily realities of their leadership practices. Secondly, it identified the specific challenges that women principals in this district

encountered as they strove to practice care and support leadership, giving due consideration to the unique contextual factors prevalent in the region and the well-documented gendered dimensions of leadership (Chabaya, C. C., & Ngulube, 2024). Finally, the study examined the perceived effects of care and support leadership, as reported by these women principals, on critical aspects of the school environment, including school culture, teacher morale, and student performance.

This study has significant potential to contribute to a broader understanding of educational leadership and its practical application. Theoretically, it will contribute to the existing literature by providing an in-depth analysis of the intersection of gender, context, and leadership, specifically concerning care and support leadership enacted by women in resource-constrained environments. This can lead to a more nuanced understanding of leadership theories. Practically, the findings will offer valuable insights for school administrators and leadership development programmes, informing the design of targeted interventions and support strategies for women principals. In terms of policy, the research can provide evidence-based recommendations for educational policies aimed at promoting gender equity in leadership and addressing the unique challenges faced by schools in resource-constrained districts like Pinetown.

Beyond these direct contributions, the study also holds broader significance for the field of educational leadership. Firstly, by centring on the lived experiences of women principals in the Pinetown District, this research offers valuable, context-specific insights into the growing body of scholarship dedicated to women in educational leadership within the South African context (Christie, 2006; Moorosi, 2010). It illuminates the nuanced ways in which gender intersects with the multifaceted demands of leadership within this particular socio-economic and cultural milieu. Secondly, the research directly addresses the acknowledged need for a more profound understanding of how care and support leadership are translated into tangible actions within schools (Louis, Murphy et al., 2016). Focusing on the perceptions and strategic approaches of women principals provides rich insights into the practical application of this increasingly recognised leadership paradigm, especially within the context of a developing nation.

Furthermore, given the prevalence of socio-economic inequalities and resource limitations often characterising districts such as Pinetown (Ravele, 2021), this research will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the specific obstacles that women leaders face when attempting to implement care and support initiatives within such demanding environments. This knowledge is crucial for informing the development of more targeted and effective support mechanisms designed to empower these leaders. Moreover, the findings concerning the challenges encountered

and the successful strategies employed by these principals can inform the creation of more relevant and impactful leadership training and professional development programmes for both aspiring and current principals, with a particular focus on women leaders in KwaZulu-Natal and similar regions. This has the potential to cultivate leadership capacity that is more attuned to the specific needs and realities of these educational settings.

Finally, by exploring the perceived impact of care and support leadership on key school outcomes such as school culture, teacher morale, and student performance, this study can offer empirical insights that may encourage a greater emphasis on and adoption of these leadership practices. Understanding the perspectives of principals regarding these crucial linkages can inform school-level initiatives aimed at fostering more positive, inclusive, and ultimately more productive learning environments (Morris, et al., 2020). In a broader sense, this research will contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse surrounding gender and leadership (Blackmore, 1999; Chabaya, C. C., & Ngulube, 2024) by examining the experiences of women principals and highlighting both the unique strengths they bring to leadership roles and the persistent systemic barriers they may encounter in their efforts to lead with care and support.

1.5 Research Questions

This research aimed to explore how women principals in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal perceived and enacted care and support leadership, as well as the challenges they faced and the effects they observed in this context. The following research questions (RQs) guided the investigation:

1. How do women principals in the Pinetown District perceive and implement care and support leadership in their leadership practices?
2. What challenges do women principals face in practising care and support leadership in the Pinetown District?
3. How do women principals perceive the effects of care and support leadership on school culture, teacher morale, and student performance?

1.6. Rationale for Study

The imperative for effective leadership in South African schools, particularly leadership that prioritises care and support, has never been more pronounced. As KwaZulu-Natal continues to navigate the complexities of its diverse educational landscape and strives for equitable outcomes, the role of school principals in fostering nurturing and conducive learning environments is critical. This study explored care and support leadership practices among women principals to inform and enhance educational leadership effectiveness within the challenging contexts of the Pinetown District, KwaZulu-Natal. Research indicates that women leaders often adopt relational and supportive leadership approaches that prioritise the emotional and academic welfare of teachers and students, which are crucial for cultivating positive school cultures and improving student achievement (Raju, 2024).

However, a significant gap exists in the literature regarding the specific experiences and perspectives of women principals in KwaZulu-Natal, particularly those leading in under-resourced environments affected by socio-economic disparities (Mahadew, 2024). This lack of research means that current policies and support initiatives may not be tailored to their specific needs and strengths, potentially hindering their effectiveness. This study directly addressed this gap by investigating how these women enacted care and support leadership. It aimed to identify effective strategies and inform the development of targeted interventions to better support them. This gap is particularly pertinent in the current educational climate of KwaZulu-Natal, where ongoing efforts to address historical inequalities and improve learner outcomes necessitate a deeper understanding of effective leadership at the school level. This research examined how women principals navigated these challenges through care and support leadership practices, aiming to identify effective strategies and highlight their contributions to educational leadership. Understanding these leadership dynamics is crucial for empowering current and future women leaders and informing policies and professional development initiatives that promote gender equity in school leadership.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader discourse on educational leadership by emphasising the significance of care and support as foundational elements in building resilient school communities. By centring the voices of women principals, this research sought to deepen the understanding of gendered leadership practices and their transformative potential in schools for the benefit of students, teachers, and the broader community. This localised study within the Pinetown District offered a focused lens through which to examine the practical realities of

leading with care and support in a specific South African context, potentially revealing nuances that broader national or international studies might overlook.

Moreover, the insights gained from this research can directly inform leadership development programmes within KwaZulu-Natal, ensuring they are tailored to the specific challenges and strengths of women leaders working in districts facing socio-economic complexities. Ultimately, this study is necessary to provide contextually relevant evidence that can contribute to the empowerment of women principals in the Pinetown District and similar areas, fostering more supportive and effective school environments that benefit the entire school community in KwaZulu-Natal.

1.7 Researcher Positionality

As a woman and an educator in a leadership role conducting this research, my gender identity and professional experience significantly influenced my perspective. I was acutely aware of the gendered challenges women faced in leadership, such as navigating workplace bias, balancing professional and personal responsibilities, and being held to higher standards than their male counterparts. My experience as a leader within the educational sector provided me with a practical understanding of the complexities and demands of leadership roles in schools. This shared experience allowed me to connect with the challenges women principals faced in ways that informed my analysis and interpretation. While this shared experience could be insightful, I also recognised the importance of maintaining objectivity and ensuring that the findings reflected the broader realities of the participants rather than my own lived experiences.

Additionally, my cultural background and societal context influenced my understanding of leadership, gender, and educational practices. I was aware that my upbringing, education, and professional experiences shaped my interpretations, and these assumptions may have informed how I framed the research. Recognising this, I committed to being reflexive throughout the study, ensuring that I acknowledged the potential influence of my own identity on the research process.

Reflexivity was crucial in this study to ensure that the research was not biased by my personal beliefs, especially regarding care and support in leadership. I regularly engaged in self-reflection, including journalling and discussions with peers, to evaluate my assumptions and biases. This self-awareness helped me maintain objectivity and enhanced the rigour of the research. Moreover,

I was committed to upholding ethical standards by ensuring that participants, particularly women principals, felt respected and empowered to share their experiences. Creating a safe and supportive environment for participants was essential for gathering authentic and meaningful data.

Acknowledging my positionality allowed me to approach this research transparently, ethically, and rigorously. By remaining reflexive about my influence on the research process, I aimed to produce findings that accurately reflected the lived experiences of women principals and contributed meaningfully to understanding care and support leadership in resource-limited educational contexts. My dual role as a woman and a leader in education underscored my commitment to this research and deepened my understanding of its potential to contribute valuable insights to the field.

1.8 Overview of Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design within an interpretive paradigm, which emphasises understanding individuals' subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to their actions and contexts. To gain in-depth insights into the personal and contextual factors influencing leadership, a case study methodology was employed, generating methods including semi-structured interviews and document analysis. This section will be further elaborated in Chapter 4 of the dissertation.

1.9 Overview of the Theoretical Framework

This research was grounded in emotional intelligence (EI) theory, as conceptualised by Goleman (1995) and Mayer and Salovey (1997). This theoretical framework provides valuable insights into how women principals navigate leadership challenges through care and support in educational settings. EI refers to the ability to recognise, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others. The theoretical framework and its application to this study will be covered in detail in Chapter 3.

1.10 Definition of the Key Terms

1.10.1 Care and Support Leadership

According to Ainscow (2020) and Goleman (1995), care and support leadership refers to leadership practices that prioritise the well-being, emotional support, and personal development of both staff and students within an educational environment. Within the challenging and often resource-constrained context of the Pinetown district of KwaZulu-Natal, this study examined how women principals enacted care and support leadership, understood as their emotionally intelligent capacity to foster a nurturing and inclusive school climate, addressed the holistic needs of their staff and students, and navigated systemic challenges.

1.10.2 Resource-Constrained Educational Contexts

Resource-constrained educational contexts refer to environments, such as those often found within the Pinetown district of KwaZulu-Natal, where schools face significant limitations in terms of financial, material, and human resources. These limitations can affect the ability to provide essential teaching and learning materials, facilities, professional development opportunities, and adequate support for students and staff. In these contexts, school leaders, including the women principals in this study, are often required to find creative solutions and prioritise resources to ensure the effective operation of the institution (Mitchell, 2022).

1.10.3 Women Principals

Women principals are female leaders who hold the highest administrative position in an educational institution, typically a school within a district such as Pinetown in KwaZulu-Natal. These leaders are responsible for overseeing the academic, operational, and emotional aspects of the school environment. Their leadership practices frequently incorporate a focus on EI, inclusivity, and relational strategies to foster a supportive and collaborative school culture, which is crucial for navigating the diverse challenges of their roles.

1.10.4 Emotional Intelligence

EI, the theoretical framework underpinning this study, is defined as the ability to recognise, understand, manage, and influence one's own emotions and the emotions of others. In the context of educational leadership, EI plays a key role in fostering positive relationships, effective communication, conflict resolution, and creating a supportive environment. This was particularly

relevant for understanding how women principals in the Pinetown District led through care and support, enabling them to build trust, motivate others, and respond to challenges with empathy and resilience (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2021; Goleman, 1995).

1.10.5 Perception

Perception is not merely a passive reception of sensory signals but an active process of organising, interpreting, and consciously experiencing sensory information (Matlin & Foley, 1997). It is the way sensory information is processed and given meaning, shaped by an individual's learning, memory, expectations, and attention (Reisberg, 2013).

In the context of this study, the concept of perception was crucial for understanding how women principals in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal became aware of and interpreted the various aspects of their leadership role, particularly in relation to care and support. Their perception of the needs of their staff and students, the challenges they faced in resource-constrained settings, and the impact of their leadership actions on school culture and performance were all shaped by this process of organisation, identification, and interpretation. Therefore, this study sought to explore not just the experiences of these women leaders but also how they actively perceived and made sense of their leadership environment and their role within it.

1.11 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is structured into seven chapters to explore the experiences of women principals in enacting care and support leadership within the Pinetown District.

Chapter 1 provides the contextual foundation, highlighting the significance of care and support leadership, particularly in resource-constrained environments like Pinetown. It underscores the gendered challenges faced by women principals. It culminates in the articulation of the study's research questions and objectives, establishing the focus on their leadership practices and the overall purpose of the investigation.

Chapter 2 will delve into the existing body of research concerning care and support leadership, its advantages, and its role in cultivating inclusive school environments. This chapter will also

address the specific challenges encountered by women leaders, particularly within resource-limited settings, and will synthesise these insights in relation to the formulated research questions.

Chapter 3 will introduce the key theoretical framework underpinning the study, namely EI, explaining its relevance in guiding the research and informing the research questions. This chapter will establish the theoretical lens through which the leadership practices of women principals were analysed.

Chapter 4 will detail the qualitative research design employed, including the rationale for the chosen case study methodology, the participant selection process, and the data collection methods, specifically interviews and document analysis. It will also address crucial ethical considerations and acknowledge the limitations inherent in the research design to ensure transparency.

Chapter 5 will present the findings of the study, organised thematically around the research questions. This chapter will provide a detailed account of how women principals perceived and implemented care and support leadership, the challenges they navigated, and the perceived effects of their leadership on school culture and outcomes.

Chapter 6 will interpret these findings in relation to the existing scholarly literature reviewed in Chapter 2. It will compare and contrast the study's results with previous research and explore the broader implications for women in educational leadership, with a specific examination of the role of EI in their effectiveness.

Finally, **Chapter 7** will provide a comprehensive summary of the key findings, offer practical recommendations for supporting women principals in similar contexts, suggest potential avenues for future research, and reiterate the importance of addressing the challenges women face in educational leadership.

1.12 Chapter Summary

This chapter has established the critical role of care and support leadership in fostering positive educational environments, particularly within the challenging and resource-constrained context of the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Recognising a significant gap in understanding the experiences and perspectives of women principals in enacting such leadership

within this specific context, this chapter has articulated the problem statement, highlighting the unique gendered challenges these leaders face. The purpose and significance of the study have been outlined, emphasising its potential to contribute to the literature on women in leadership, care and support practices, and leadership development in resource-limited settings. Furthermore, my positionality as a woman and an educator in leadership has been acknowledged, underscoring the commitment to a transparent and reflexive research process. Key terms such as care and support leadership, women principals, resource-constrained environments, EI, and perception have been defined to establish a shared understanding for the reader. Finally, this chapter has provided an overview of the thesis structure, which comprises seven chapters in total. The subsequent chapter will delve into a comprehensive review of the existing literature relevant to these key concepts and the research focus.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 introduced the background and context of the study, outlining the problem statement, research purpose, and significance of examining women principals' enactment of care and support leadership within the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal. It highlighted the contextual realities of resource-constrained schooling environments, the gendered dynamics of educational leadership, and the identified gap in understanding how women principals navigate care-centred leadership amid systemic and socio-economic challenges. The chapter also clarified key concepts and presented the overall structure of the study.

Building on this foundation, this chapter examines contemporary academic discourse pertinent to the targeting and investigative inquiries of this study. It aims to critically engage with and integrate existing scholarly work on care and support leadership, educational leadership's gendered dimension, and the school leadership's contextual reality in resource-challenged settings, with particular emphasis on the South African situation. In doing so, the study positions itself within a broader collegiate conversation. It pinpoints the scholarly insufficiencies therein that not only warrant but also specify the trajectory of its investigatory work.

The socio-economic context of most South African schools is encapsulated by the quintile classification of the Department of Basic Education (DBE), which ascribes the following features to schools in Quintile 1 (the lowest): schools in this category are no-fee schools and located in areas where the majority of people live under severe conditions of poverty, hunger and malnutrition. High levels of unemployment are prevalent in these areas. The impact of HIV/AIDS is devastating, and most families have a high number of orphans. Educationally, the children in these families are the most disadvantaged. They live under circumstances that are not conducive to education. Against this backdrop, care and support leadership practices have become increasingly recognised as essential for fostering resilient, inclusive, and nurturing school environments.

This literature review examines the perceived impact of such leadership practices in South African schools enacted by women principals, as experienced in the Pinetown District, KwaZulu-Natal. Key thematic areas that inform the study are organised in this chapter. It begins with an exploration of the notion of leadership for care and support, including its theoretical underpinnings

and relevance for promoting well-being, inclusion, and a positive culture in schools. Then, the review shifts to the nature of educational leadership, focusing on the societal and institutional challenges that women principals face. These include gender bias, leadership stereotypes, and the difficulty of balancing multiple roles. Next comes a discussion on school culture and the larger educational leadership context in resource-constrained environments, with a particular emphasis on South African schools and the unique demands of district leadership in places such as Pinetown. Finally, the chapter identifies critical gaps in the literature, particularly the lack of research exploring how women principals in under-resourced settings perceive and implement care and support leadership. These insights establish a foundation for the research questions and reinforce the significance of the current study. EI, while relevant to the discussion of care and support leadership and women's leadership, will be explored in detail as the theoretical framework underpinning this study in Chapter 3

2.2 Global Perspectives on Educational Leadership

A comprehensive understanding of how various social, political, economic, and cultural contexts influence leadership practices is made possible by viewing educational leadership through a global lens. Common trends have emerged globally, especially in response to the shifting demands placed on schools and school leaders, even though leadership practices are unavoidably context-specific. Over the last few decades, the idea of educational leadership has changed dramatically, moving away from conventional, hierarchical models and towards more relational, collaborative, and student-centred strategies. Leadership approaches that emphasise inclusivity, EI, and responsiveness to the social-emotional needs of employees and students are becoming more and more critical on a global scale (Bush, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2019). Today, leadership is viewed as a dynamic process that involves motivating and assisting all parties involved in the school community rather than just as an administrative duty. One worthy worldwide trend is the increasing focus on transformational leadership, which emphasises teacher empowerment, professional development, and creating a shared vision for school improvement, which is one noteworthy worldwide trend (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). This trend is directly related to South Africa, where systemic and historical injustices still influence the country's educational system.

It is crucial to recognise that local cultural, economic, and policy contexts significantly impact educational leadership practices. For instance, leadership in low-income or crisis-affected environments frequently calls for a special set of abilities that emphasise community involvement,

creativity, and resilience (Mulford, 2003). Similar to leaders in parts of South Africa, school leaders in many developing nations, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, parts of Asia, and Latin America, usually work in environments with few resources, unstable political systems, or high rates of poverty and illness. In contrast, leadership discourse in high-income nations, like those in Europe or North America, frequently focuses on data-driven decision-making, performance standards, and accountability (Pont et al., 2008). Although these systems might provide more financial and structural support, leaders in these settings also face challenges like staff burnout, growing student mental health problems, and the need for culturally sensitive leadership techniques in schools that are becoming more diverse. On the other hand, values like relationality, community cohesion, and cultural preservation are frequently emphasised by leadership in indigenous or rural communities worldwide. Leaders are usually asked to incorporate local customs and knowledge into school operations in these kinds of situations (Lumby & Foskett, 2011).

Despite the diversity of contexts, a recurring theme shows up in all of these situations: successful leadership is based on empathy, EI, and a sincere dedication to the welfare of the school community. This realisation highlights the importance of care and support leadership, especially as it is applied by female principals in underserved communities like the Pinetown District, who frequently have to lead with empathy and fortitude in the face of hardship.

While transformational and instructional leadership models dominate global discourse, critics argue that these models often prioritise performance metrics over relational dimensions of schooling. Scholars increasingly advocate for leadership paradigms that integrate emotional intelligence, ethical responsiveness, and social justice (Harris & Jones, 2019; Shields, 2010). This shift reflects growing recognition that schools are not merely academic institutions but social spaces embedded in communities experiencing inequality, migration, trauma, and economic precarity.

From the perspective of this study's first research question, how do women principals perceive and enact care and support leadership? Global scholarship suggests that leadership enactment is shaped not only by policy mandates but also by leaders' personal values, professional biographies, and moral commitments. Research indicates that women leaders often interpret leadership as relational influence rather than positional authority (Blackmore, 1999). However, much of this research is situated in high-income countries, leaving a contextual gap regarding how such perceptions are formed and enacted in low-resource African settings.

2.3 The South African Context of Educational Leadership

South Africa's educational leadership landscape is uniquely shaped by its complex history of apartheid and its ongoing efforts to address systemic inequalities. The legacy of apartheid has resulted in significant disparities in resource allocation, infrastructure, and teacher quality across schools, with historically disadvantaged communities continuing to face substantial challenges (Christie, 2006). These disparities have a direct impact on school leadership, creating vastly different contexts in which principals must operate.

South Africa's socio-political landscape presents further unique challenges for school leaders. Issues such as poverty, violence, and social fragmentation can significantly impact the school environment, requiring principals to address not only academic concerns but also the social and emotional well-being of students and staff (Soudien, 2014). This is particularly relevant for women principals, who may be expected to provide additional care and support due to societal gender norms. Resource limitations can disproportionately affect women principals, who may face greater pressure to provide emotional and practical support to staff and students while simultaneously struggling to secure adequate funding and resources.

In this context, care and support leadership become exceptionally crucial. Principals are tasked with creating nurturing and inclusive school environments that mitigate the impact of these socio-economic challenges and promote positive learning outcomes. This requires a leadership approach that is sensitive to the diverse needs of students and staff, fosters collaboration, and empowers all members of the school community (Msila, 2011).

The literature highlights the critical role of principals in South Africa in fostering a sense of community and belonging within schools, particularly in historically disadvantaged contexts (Lumby, 2011). Effective leadership is seen as essential for creating a favourable school climate, promoting teacher morale, and ultimately improving student achievement. Women principals, in particular, may bring unique strengths to this role, often demonstrating strong interpersonal skills, empathy, and a commitment to social justice (Raju, 2024). However, they also face specific challenges related to gender bias, societal expectations, and the need to navigate complex power dynamics within the education system. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for supporting

women principals in enacting effective care and support leadership and for promoting equitable outcomes for all students.

Scholars argue that South African principals operate within a dual accountability framework: accountability to the state through policy compliance and to communities through moral and social responsiveness (Christie, 2006). This dual pressure intensifies in under-resourced districts, where principals frequently assume roles extending beyond traditional managerial responsibilities.

In relation to the second research question, the challenges women principals face, South African literature highlights systemic barriers such as bureaucratic overload, inadequate infrastructure, safety concerns, and limited psychosocial support services (Naicker et al., 2014). However, fewer studies interrogate how these structural challenges intersect specifically with gendered expectations of care. Women principals may experience amplified expectations to provide emotional labour while simultaneously being scrutinised for perceived lack of authoritative leadership. This intersection of structural constraint and gendered expectation remains under-theorised, thereby reinforcing the need for context-specific inquiry such as the present study.

2.4 Care and Support Leadership: Exploring Definitions and Models

Despite growing recognition in the discourse on global education, care and support, leadership remains a complex and dynamic idea, influenced by various educational, socio-political, and cultural contexts. The concept is not uniformly defined; some scholars emphasise the ethic of care, focusing on nurturing relationships and prioritising the needs of others (Noddings, 1992), whereas others highlight the importance of social-emotional support and the creation of a psychologically safe environment (Goleman, 1995; Luthans, 2002). Furthermore, some models integrate aspects of servant leadership, where the leader's primary role is to serve and empower their followers (Greenleaf, 1977).

For this study, care and support leadership is conceptualised as leadership strategies that prioritise students' and employees' emotional, social, and psychological well-being to in order to create secure, welcoming, and supportive learning environments (Noddings, 2005; Oplatka, 2019). This definition was chosen because it aligns with the South African context and the challenges faced by women principals in resource-constrained environments. It emphasises the relational aspects often

associated with women's leadership styles, directly addresses the holistic needs of the school community, and highlights the role of EI.

Globally, values like empathy, relational trust, and EI are recognised as foundational to care-based leadership. Scholars such as Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (2005) established that care, particularly in education, is a moral and ethical imperative, not merely an emotional response. Noddings' 'ethic of care' emphasised the importance of relational engagement, attentiveness, and responsiveness between teachers and students. This framework has influenced educational leaders worldwide, especially in contexts marked by trauma, inequality, and systemic disadvantage (Zembylas, 2013).

Feminist leadership theorists have significantly contributed to global understandings of care leadership by highlighting the gendered nature of emotional labour in educational settings. They argue that women leaders are often expected to be nurturing and emotionally attuned, yet such expectations are rarely institutionalised or rewarded within formal leadership frameworks (Blackmore, 1999; Oplatka & Tamir, 2009). These insights are particularly relevant when examining how women principals navigate care work and systemic constraints, especially in under-resourced contexts.

The expression of care and support leadership varies globally. In the Global North, it often manifests in inclusive decision-making, individualised student support, and professional learning communities focused on teacher well-being (Shields, 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Scandinavian countries, for example, institutionalise care-based leadership through frameworks integrating social-emotional learning with leadership development (Salo et al., 2015). In contrast, in low- and middle-income countries, care and support leadership often emerge as a grassroots response to systemic neglect, poverty, and crisis. School leaders in contexts like Kenya, India, and parts of Latin America frequently act as *de facto* social workers, addressing community trauma, food insecurity, and child protection issues with limited resources (Lagares & Connor, 2009; Swaffield & Jull, 2017). In these settings, care leadership is intertwined with survival, resilience, and cultural models of communal responsibility.

Despite these contextual differences, there is growing agreement that care, and support leadership are essential for establishing trust, enhancing student outcomes, and promoting school resilience. It is increasingly recognised as a vital element of transformative and socially just educational leadership as the global education community addresses issues of inequality, displacement, and

systemic trauma (Shields, 2010; Zembylas, 2013). Care and support leadership can also be located within broader frameworks of socially just leadership and trauma-informed leadership. Social justice leadership emphasises equity, advocacy, and dismantling systemic barriers affecting marginalised learners (Shields, 2010). Trauma-informed leadership recognises that schools in high-poverty contexts often serve communities affected by violence, illness, and economic instability, requiring leaders to cultivate emotionally safe environments.

In relation to the first research question, perception of care leadership may vary significantly depending on whether principals conceptualise care as a moral duty, a strategic practice, emotional labour, or an institutional responsibility. Existing scholarship seldom explores how women principals themselves define care within their socio-cultural contexts, especially in South African township schools. This gap further justifies the present inquiry.

2.4.1 Benefits of Care and Support Leadership

An increasing body of global research demonstrates the positive impact of care and support leadership on various aspects of school effectiveness, including school culture, employee morale, student outcomes, and community involvement. Studies indicate that leaders who prioritise care play a crucial role in creating emotionally safe spaces characterised by mutual respect, trust, and empathy (Khalifa et al., 2016; Louis, Murphy et al., 2016).

In schools with care and support leadership, teachers report higher levels of commitment, job satisfaction, and lower burnout (Cumming et al., 2020; Van der Vyver et al., 2014). These leaders foster professional collaboration, emotional well-being, and attention to teachers' individual and professional needs, all of which are critical for teacher retention and school improvement (Day & Sammons, 2016). Students, in turn, experience increased emotional resilience, decreased dropout rates, and improved academic engagement, particularly students from underprivileged backgrounds (Goddard et al., 2015; Zembylas, 2021).

Furthermore, care-based leadership is associated with inclusive teaching practices and the advancement of social justice, especially in marginalised or diverse communities where educational disparities persist (Azorín et al., 2020; Shields, 2010). Caring principals are more likely to address bullying, adopt culturally responsive pedagogies, and implement policies that support students with disabilities (Norman et al., 2021). These practices demonstrate the far-

reaching impact of leadership that integrates care as both a strategic and moral dimension of school governance.

Addressing the third research question concerning the effects of care leadership, empirical studies demonstrate correlations between relational leadership and improved teacher retention, enhanced learner engagement, and strengthened community trust (Day & Sammons, 2016). However, much of this evidence is derived from quantitative or policy-level analyses rather than qualitative accounts of leaders' lived experiences. Moreover, there is limited research examining whether the positive outcomes associated with care leadership are sustainable in severely resource-constrained contexts. Questions remain regarding whether the emotional investment required of care-based leadership may contribute to burnout, particularly among women leaders who already shoulder disproportionate emotional labour.

2.4.2 Implementation in Diverse and Resource-Constrained Contexts

While the benefits of care and support leadership are widely recognised, its implementation varies significantly depending on contextual factors such as institutional support, cultural values, and socio-economic circumstances. In high-income countries like Canada and Finland, care-based leadership practices are often supported by structured professional development, inclusive policy frameworks, and access to mental health resources (Anderson & MacNeil, 2019; Sahlberg, 2021). These systems provide a strong foundation for effective care leadership.

However, leaders in resource-constrained environments such as parts of sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America frequently implement care and support practices under intense socio-economic pressures and with limited institutional support. Despite these challenges, research demonstrates how school leaders in these contexts exhibit care leadership through adaptive problem-solving, emotional support for staff and students, and community outreach (Mincu, 2020; Swaffield & Jull, 2017).

For example, principals of low-income schools in Kenya and Malawi have been found to act as both administrators and emotional pillars for their school communities, providing psychosocial support in the face of HIV/AIDS, food insecurity, and poverty (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010; Zengele & Coetzer, 2022). Similarly, school leaders in post-conflict areas like parts of Afghanistan or Lebanon have adopted trauma-sensitive leadership approaches based on care, even without formal

training (Mendenhall et al., 2019). These global examples underscore the adaptability and transformative potential of care and support leadership, even in challenging contexts. Importantly, they also highlight the need for tailored leadership development programmes that consider the lived realities of school leaders, particularly women, working in under-resourced and high-pressure environments.

2.5 Gender and Leadership in Education

From a feminist theoretical standpoint, leadership cannot be separated from power relations embedded in patriarchal institutional cultures (Blackmore, 2020). Feminist scholars argue that women leaders often navigate a double bind, where demonstrating care aligns with gender norms but may undermine perceptions of authority, while assertiveness may invite criticism for deviating from expected femininity. In relation to this study's second research question, this double bind may intensify in rural or township contexts where traditional gender norms remain deeply entrenched. Yet, empirical studies exploring how women principals actively negotiate this tension in KwaZulu-Natal remain scarce. This highlights a significant contextual gap addressed by the present research.

2.5.1 Women's Representation and Experiences

Globally, while the number of women in educational leadership roles has increased in recent decades, significant gender disparities persist, particularly in senior and decision-making positions. Despite comprising the majority of teachers worldwide, women remain under-represented in high leadership roles (UNESCO, 2019). For instance, in OECD nations, over 70% of primary school teachers are women, yet they constitute only about 45% of secondary school principals (OECD, 2020).

Similar trends of under-representation are evident in South Africa. Women make up over 60% of the teaching workforce but hold less than 36% of principalship positions, with even fewer in rural or underfunded schools (Mestry & Schmidt, 2022a). This leadership gap stems from systemic obstacles, gender stereotypes, and cultural expectations.

Women's pathways to leadership often differ from men's, frequently involving self-initiated development, extensive teaching experience, and informal mentoring rather than formal career advancement structures. Research by Moorosi and Bantwini (2021) indicates that, in South Africa,

women often attain leadership roles through perseverance and community recognition rather than consistent institutional support. However, these paths are usually marked by gendered scrutiny and the ongoing need to prove their competence.

2.5.2 Gender Biases and Challenges for Women Leaders

Women in educational leadership encounter various gendered obstacles, ranging from overt discrimination to subtle biases and expectations. The persistent association of leadership with traditionally “masculine” traits like assertiveness and authority, influenced by patriarchal norms globally and locally, often leads to questioning women's leadership capabilities (Blackmore, 2020; Chabaya, C. C., & Ngulube, 2019).

In South Africa, the challenges faced by women leaders are compounded by intersecting factors such as geography, class, and race, particularly in township or rural schools (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2021). Women are frequently expected to balance professional responsibilities with household duties, nurturing roles, and emotional labour, leading to role conflict, emotional exhaustion, and isolation (L.J Rafapa & Madiope, 2023).

Systemic biases also manifest in hiring, promotion, and daily leadership practices. Ngulube and Makusha (2020a) report that women often need to exert more effort to be perceived as competent and are frequently excluded from influential networks or decision-making processes. This marginalisation impacts their leadership identity, well-being, and professional growth.

2.5.3 Relational and Supportive Leadership Styles

Emerging research suggests that women leaders often adopt relational, inclusive, and emotionally intelligent leadership approaches (Cummings, Skerrett, and Brown (2020a), Raju S, 2021). These styles prioritise teamwork, empathy, trust-building, and support qualities that strongly align with the principles of care and support leadership.

Studies across various international contexts indicate that women frequently leverage their interpersonal and community-focused skills to cultivate respectful and collaborative learning environments. Raju R's (2021) study of female principals in India found that these leaders typically prioritise the emotional safety and well-being of their staff and students over hierarchical

command structures. Similarly, Mestry and Schmidt's (2022) South African research observed that women leaders often exhibit “maternal leadership,” combining strong moral authority with nurturing roles in schools facing trauma and poverty.

This alignment between relational leadership and care and support leadership is particularly salient in resource-constrained settings. Van Der Vyver and Van Der Westhuizen (2020) suggest that women leaders in such contexts often operate at the intersection of institutional survival, emotional resilience, and community care. Their leadership styles, frequently rooted in personal experience and an ethic of care, serve as a response to the structural absence of formal support systems. Therefore, exploring the relational and care-oriented approaches of women leaders not only illuminates their unique contributions to leadership but also highlights how gendered leadership can offer transformative models for schools grappling with social and emotional adversity.

2.6 Literature Gaps and Research Significance

While each of the themes mentioned above has been extensively explored in the literature, there is limited research that examines explicitly their intersection, particularly within the South African context. Notably, there is a scarcity of studies investigating how women principals in under-resourced schools perceive and enact care and support leadership and how they utilise EI to balance institutional responsibilities with community care expectations.

Studies such as those by Mestry and Schmidt (2022) and Moorosi and Bantwini (2021) begin to explore this intersection by highlighting the maternal or relational leadership styles often adopted by women leaders in South African townships. However, these studies usually lack a critical examination of the structural, psychological, and emotional toll that this leadership style exacts on principals. Furthermore, despite indications in the literature that women frequently employ relational and nurturing leadership practices (Mestry & Schmidt, 2022; Noddings, 2005), there is a dearth of research exploring how women personally perceive and define care and support leadership within their contexts.

Although numerous studies have detailed gendered barriers (Blackmore, 2020; Chabaya, C. C., & Ngulube, 2019), emotional labour (Rafapa L.J & Madiope, 2023), and resource constraints (Govender & Sookrajh, 2014), few have investigated the simultaneous impact of these factors and

the coping or adaptive strategies developed by women principals. While the literature broadly agrees that care leadership fosters trust, inclusion, and emotional safety (Shields, 2010; Zembylas, 2021), there is limited empirical research measuring the perceived or observable outcomes within the specific context of under-resourced South African schools.

These gaps underscore the importance and uniqueness of this research. By focusing on women principals in the Pinetown District, a community characterised by poverty, social vulnerability, and educational inequality, this study contributes significantly to the discourse on EI, gendered leadership, and systemic change in education. This chapter's reviewed literature has looked at care and support leadership as a revolutionary approach to school governance, especially in the context of South African education. Additionally, it has examined the socio-economic and structural realities of resource-constrained environments, the gendered experiences of women leaders, and the importance of EI in educational leadership. This section combines these threads to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these four interrelated factors—gender, EI, care and support leadership, and resource constraints—influence the leadership practices and lived experiences of female principals, particularly in underprivileged areas like KwaZulu-Natal's Pinetown District.

Although existing literature discusses care leadership, gendered leadership experiences, and resource constraints independently, there is limited integrative research examining how these variables interact simultaneously within a defined geographical context. Specifically, there are few studies foreground women principals' own interpretations of care leadership rather than imposing predefined theoretical models. There is limited qualitative research captures the emotional, relational, and psychological dimensions of leadership enactment in under-resourced South African schools. There is insufficient empirical evidence documenting the perceived effects of care leadership from the perspective of women principals themselves. Scholarship rarely situates care leadership within a district-specific context such as Pinetown, where socio-economic vulnerability and educational inequality intersect.

2.7 Identifying Gaps in the Literature and Justifying the Current Study

While the significance of care and support leadership in schools is increasingly recognised, notable gaps persist in the academic literature, particularly concerning the interplay between gender, leadership, and resource limitations. Although theoretical perspectives on care-based

leadership (Noddings, 2005; Shields, 2010) and the general leadership challenges faced by women globally (Blackmore, 2020; Moorosi & Bantwini, 2021) have been explored, few studies have specifically investigated how women principals in low-resource South African contexts understand and implement care and support leadership. Even fewer delve into the relational and emotional dimensions of this leadership style, especially when navigating socio-economic hardship, community trauma, and structural injustices.

The predominant focus of existing literature on educational leadership in South Africa has been on broad system-level issues, transformational models, and policy analysis (Govender & Sookrajh, 2014; Naicker et al., 2014). While some research (Mestry & Schmidt, 2022; Ngulube & Makusha, 2020) examines gender and leadership in township or rural schools, there remains a scarcity of empirical studies that capture the lived experiences of women principals enacting care leadership within specific geographic locations characterised by significant challenges, such as the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal, with its prevalence of poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and high social vulnerability.

Therefore, this study aimed to address several key gaps by exploring:

- How women principals in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal perceive and enact care and support leadership.
- The challenges women principals in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal face in enacting care and support leadership.
- The effects that women principals in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal observe are a result of their care and support leadership.

By investigating these areas, this study offers novel insights into the fields of gender studies, educational leadership, and school improvement in underfunded environments. The findings have the potential to inform more nuanced leadership development initiatives, support structures, and policy recommendations that account for the realities faced by marginalised school administrators.

Therefore, this study not only responds to identified empirical gaps but also advances theoretical discourse by situating emotional intelligence, gendered leadership, and care ethics within the lived realities of women principals in resource-constrained schools. Through a qualitative exploration of their perceptions, challenges, and observed outcomes, the study offers a nuanced understanding of leadership that is relational, contextually embedded, and socially responsive.

2.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has critically examined contemporary academic discourse pertaining to care and support leadership, South African educational leadership, the gendered experiences of women in leadership, and the role of EI. The review charted the theoretical and empirical terrain of these areas, demonstrating the global shift towards relational, inclusive leadership and the increasing importance of empathy, relationships, and inclusivity in school leadership. It also detailed the ongoing socio-economic and gendered challenges faced by school leaders, particularly women, in underprivileged districts in South Africa, emphasising the move away from authoritarian to participatory models of leadership.

A key insight from the literature was the crucial role of compassion and EI in maintaining leadership efficacy and fostering positive school cultures, especially in resource-constrained settings. However, the review also revealed a significant dearth of studies specifically exploring how female principals in under-resourced South African schools, such as those in the Pinetown District, navigate these leadership responsibilities. These gaps highlight the necessity of the current study, which employed a qualitative design, as detailed in the next chapter (Chapter 4), to methodically investigate its research questions and gather in-depth perspectives from female principals through sampling plans and data gathering techniques.

The theoretical and empirical terrain pertaining to care and support leadership, South African educational leadership, the gendered experiences of women in leadership, and the function of EI was charted in this review of the literature. It demonstrated how school leadership is changing around the world and how empathy, relationships, and inclusivity are becoming more and more critical. It described the ongoing socio-economic and gendered challenges faced by school leaders, especially women, in underprivileged districts in South Africa, and it emphasised the shift from authoritarian to participatory models of leadership.

The importance of compassion and EI in maintaining leadership efficacy and fostering positive school cultures, particularly in settings with limited resources, was a significant lesson to be learnt from the literature. However, the literature also showed a notable dearth of studies that examine how female principals in South African schools with limited resources, like those in the Pinetown District, manage these leadership responsibilities. These gaps highlighted the need for a study that

methodologically investigated its research questions, taking into account the agency and limitations faced by female school leaders.

By organising the literature in alignment with the research questions, this chapter has demonstrated how existing scholarship provides valuable theoretical foundations while simultaneously revealing significant contextual and empirical gaps. The review has shown that although care leadership and gendered leadership are widely discussed, their intersection within under-resourced South African districts remains insufficiently explored. This positioning establishes a clear scholarly rationale for the present study and underscores its contribution to both national and international educational leadership discourse. The subsequent chapter will detail the methodological approach adopted to address these gaps, including the qualitative design, sampling plans, and data-gathering techniques utilised to obtain in-depth perspectives from female principals. Building upon this review, the subsequent chapter will outline the theoretical framework that will guide the analysis of the experiences of women principals in this study.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

As highlighted in the previous chapter, there is a limited body of research that examines explicitly how women principals in under-resourced Pinetown district contexts enact care and support leadership, particularly considering the influence of gender, EI, and systemic constraints. To address this gap, this chapter will outline the EI theory, which provides a valuable lens for understanding how these principals navigate their complex roles. The chapter will detail the key components of EI and their relevance to the study and justify the selection of EI theory as the guiding framework for this research.

3.2 EI as the Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in EI theory, which provided a lens to examine how women principals lead through care and support in challenging school environments. EI, defined by Goleman (1995) and Mayer and Salovey (1997) as the ability to recognise, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others, offers a robust framework for understanding how women principals leverage emotional competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, and social skills to foster nurturing school environments, build relationships, and respond to leadership challenges. EI theory was particularly well-suited for this research because it allowed for a nuanced examination of the relational dynamics of care leadership, the impact of social structures on women's agency, the role of EI in navigating challenges, and the interplay of these factors in resource-constrained environments. Moreover, this framework enabled the investigation of both the agency and limitations experienced by female school leaders, as called for by the identified gaps in the literature.

This study adopted EI theory as its primary framework to examine how women principals enacted care and support leadership in challenging school environments. This approach was strengthened by considering the broader theoretical underpinnings of care and support leadership, which align closely with the tenets of EI.

Several key theoretical frameworks inform the concept of care and support leadership. The ethic of care, notably developed by Noddings (1992, 2005), provides a crucial foundation by

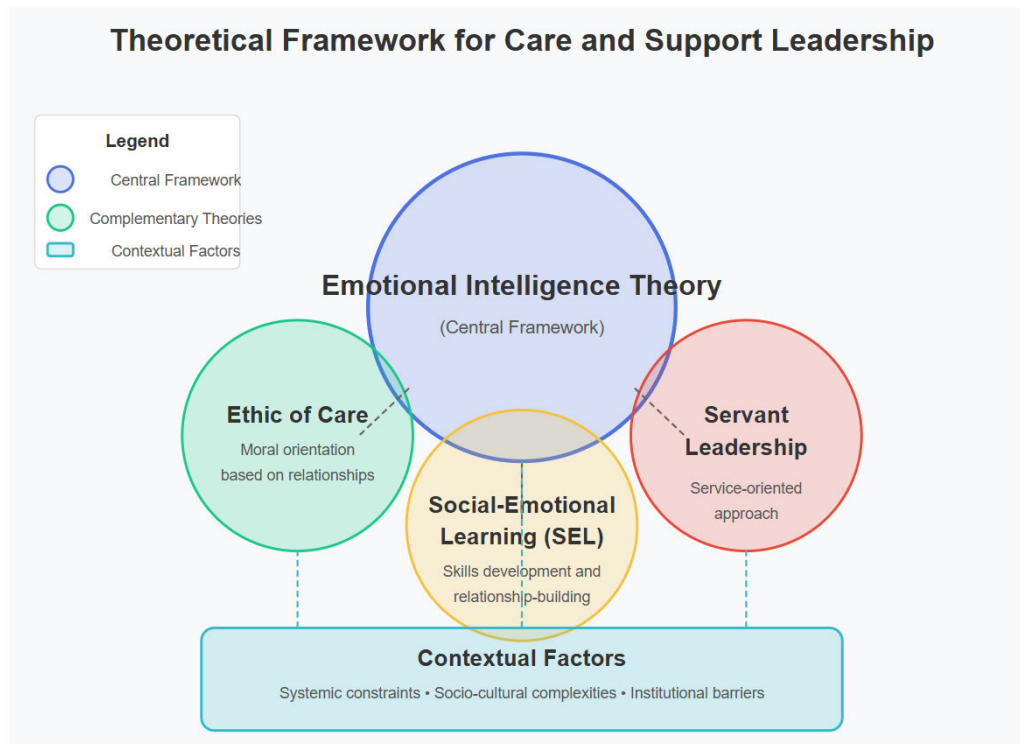
emphasising the centrality of relationality, the moral imperative to respond to the needs of others, and the cultivation of caring relationships. Key concepts such as caring relations, caring attitude, and ethical caring highlight the importance of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness in leadership practice.

These principles of the ethic of care find strong resonance in EI theory. EI, defined by Goleman (1995) and Mayer and Salovey (1997) as the ability to recognise, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others, offers a robust framework for understanding how leaders can develop and utilise the relational skills central to care and support. EI theory posits that effective leadership relies on emotional competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, and social skills, which are essential for fostering nurturing school environments, building strong relationships, and responding constructively to challenges.

Furthermore, theories of social-emotional learning (SEL) contribute to care and support leadership by emphasising the development of self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills, empathy, and responsible decision-making (Goleman, 1995). When applied to leadership, SEL principles underscore the importance of leaders cultivating these skills in themselves and others to create a positive and supportive school climate. Similarly, servant leadership, as noted by Greenleaf (1977), advocates for the leader's primary role as serving and empowering their followers, prioritising their growth, well-being, and development through listening, empathy, and building community. Below is a graphical representation of how these concepts relate to EI.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework for Care and Support Leadership



In essence, while EI Theory provided the primary lens for this study, it was enriched by these complementary perspectives. The ethic of care, SEL, and servant leadership all converge on the importance of relationality, empathy, and the holistic well-being of individuals—elements that are central to both care and support leadership and the effective application of EI. This integrated theoretical framework allowed for a nuanced examination of how women principals navigated the complexities of care and support leadership in resource-constrained environments, considering the interplay of emotional competencies, relational dynamics, and structural challenges.

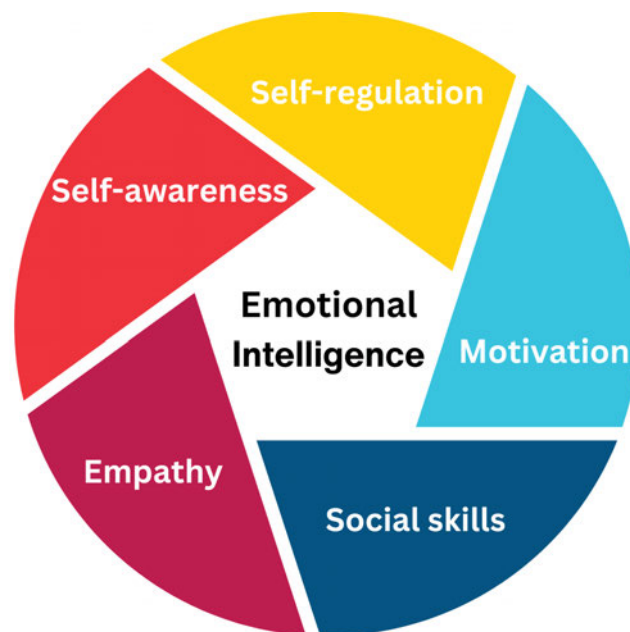
In conclusion, this study utilised EI theory as a central framework, complemented by insights from the ethic of care, SEL, and servant leadership to provide a comprehensive lens for examining care and support leadership. While EI offers valuable tools for analysing the emotional dimensions of leadership, it is crucial to recognise that this framework may not entirely account for the impact of systemic constraints and socio-cultural complexities on women principals' leadership practices. These contextual factors were also considered in the analysis of the study's findings.

3.3 Key Components of EI and their Relevance to the Study

Goleman's model of EI comprises five key components, as depicted graphically below, each of which is highly relevant to understanding the leadership practices of women principals in this study. The following subsections detail each component and its specific relevance to the research question (RQs) and research objectives (ROs).

Figure 2

Five Components of EI



3.3.1 Self-Awareness

Self-awareness, defined by Goleman (1995) as the ability to recognise and understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and their effects on behaviour, involves being in tune with one's emotional state, knowing how it influences actions, and having a clear understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses. Women principals must be conscious of their emotions and leadership styles, which affect how they handle stress, decision-making, and staff interactions. This aligns with RO1 & RQ1, as it explores how women perceive care and support leadership.

3.3.2 Self-Regulation

According to Mayer and Salovey (1997), self-regulation is the ability to modulate one's emotional state in order to achieve goals, maintain emotional balance, and maintain social harmony. Managing emotions is crucial in high-pressure environments, particularly in under-resourced schools. This links to RO2 & RQ2, where the study examines the challenges faced by women principals and their emotional responses.

3.3.3 Motivation

In Goleman's framework, motivation refers to the drive to achieve goals for reasons beyond external rewards such as money or recognition. It involves intrinsic motivation, where individuals are motivated by a passion for their work and a commitment to personal growth and success. For women principals, maintaining this inherent motivation, despite systemic challenges and limited resources, is crucial and directly impacts school culture and student performance (RO3 & RQ3).

3.3.4 Empathy

Goleman (1995) defines empathy as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Mayer and Salovey (1997) define empathy as the ability to perceive, understand, and respond to the emotions of others in a way that helps foster positive interactions. A fundamental element of care and support leadership, empathy enables women principals to understand the emotional and academic needs of teachers and students. This directly supports the importance of care and support in schools (RO1 & RQ1, RO3 & RQ3).

3.3.5 Social Skill

In Goleman's (1995) model of EI, social skills refer to the ability to manage relationships effectively, communicate clearly, and inspire or positively influence others. For Mayer and Salovey (1997), social skills involve the ability to manage and navigate social interactions effectively, using emotional awareness to facilitate positive interactions. Effective communication, conflict resolution, and team building are essential for fostering a positive school culture. This supports RO2 & RQ2, which examines gender differences in leadership experiences. These

components work together to enable individuals to understand, manage, and leverage their emotions effectively in personal and social interactions.

3.4 The Rationale for Choosing EI as the Primary Lens

Goleman (1995, 1998) popularised the concept of EI and proposed a model comprising five key components: self-awareness (understanding one's own emotions), self-regulation (managing emotions), motivation (emotional tendencies that facilitate reaching goals), empathy (understanding others' feelings), and social skills (managing relationships). Goleman (1995) argued that EI is a crucial predictor of leadership success, often surpassing the importance of cognitive intelligence. Other researchers have offered alternative perspectives on EI. For instance, Mayer et al. (2004) conceptualise EI as an ability, emphasising the capacity to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions.

Applying EI to educational leadership highlights its importance in various aspects of a principal's role. EI enables leaders to build trust, manage conflict effectively, foster collaboration, support staff and student well-being, and navigate emotionally challenging situations. For women leaders, EI can be particularly crucial in overcoming gender biases and building strong relationships within the school community.

In resource-constrained settings, where principals often face high levels of stress and adversity, EI becomes even more critical. The ability to manage emotions, empathise with others, and build resilience is essential for sustaining effective leadership and fostering a favourable school climate despite the challenges.

The theoretical frameworks of EI provide valuable insights into the emotional competencies that contribute to effective educational leadership. Understanding these theories is essential for examining how women principals utilise EI to navigate the complexities of their roles and create supportive learning environments.

In summary, EI theory offered a robust and relevant framework for this study. It provided the conceptual tools to analyse how women principals in under-resourced schools in the Pinetown District perceived and enacted care and support leadership. By focusing on the principals' self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, the study explored how these emotional competencies shaped their decision-making, resilience, and overall effectiveness in

challenging circumstances and how these competencies helped them to foster positive school cultures and improve school outcomes.

3.5 EI as an Analytical Lens

To effectively analyse the experiences of women principals in the Pinetown District, it was crucial to consider how the key components of EI theory might manifest within this specific context of under-resourced schools and the unique challenges faced by women leaders. For instance, self-awareness for these principals might involve a deep understanding of how their emotional responses are influenced by the chronic stressors inherent in leading schools with limited resources, coupled with the societal expectations placed upon them as women and leaders (Williams, 2023). Self-regulation was particularly vital in maintaining a stable and supportive environment for staff and students amidst these pressures, requiring a conscious effort to manage their anxieties and frustrations (Zembylas, 2021). Motivation, often driven by a profound commitment to their students' well-being and the upliftment of their communities, was a critical factor in their sustained resilience and dedication despite systemic obstacles (Zengele & Coetzer, 2022). Empathy was essential for understanding and responding to the complex emotional and academic needs of both teachers and students who faced significant socio-economic hardships and the impact of issues like poverty and the legacy of inequality (Zuma, 2018). Finally, strong social skills were indispensable for building and maintaining crucial relationships within the school, with parents, and with the broader community, enabling participants to leverage limited resources and garner support in challenging circumstances (Bone et al., 2024). This application of EI theory provided a nuanced lens through which to examine the intricacies of care and support leadership enacted by women principals in the specific context of the Pinetown District.

3.6 The Intersection of Care and Support Leadership, Women Leadership, EI, and Resource Constraints

The literature reviewed in this chapter examined care and support leadership as a transformative approach to school governance, particularly within the context of South African education. It also explored the socio-economic and structural realities of resource-constrained environments, the gendered experiences of women leaders, and the importance of EI in educational leadership. This section synthesises these themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of how four interrelated factors—gender, EI, care and support leadership, and resource constraints—influence

the leadership practices and lived experiences of women principals, especially in underprivileged areas like KwaZulu-Natal's Pinetown District.

Building on the synthesis provided above, this section elaborates on the key themes that intersect to shape the leadership experiences of women principals: care and support leadership, the influence of gender, the role of EI, and the impact of resource constraints. Care and support leadership, as highlighted by scholars such as Noddings (2005), Shields (2010), and Zembylas (2021), is grounded in relational trust, empathy, and responsiveness to the needs of both staff and students. This leadership model is particularly crucial in contexts characterised by high levels of poverty, psychosocial vulnerability, and systemic neglect, which are prevalent in many South African schools (DBE, 2016). In these settings, school leaders frequently assume additional roles as advocates, counsellors, caregivers, and community liaisons.

Women principals often demonstrate this care-oriented leadership style, influenced by socially constructed expectations around gender and emotional labour, as well as personal preferences or values (Blackmore, 2020; Mestry & Schmidt, 2022a). The literature suggests that women leaders tend to adopt relational and collaborative leadership approaches (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2021; S. Raju, 2021), which align strongly with the tenets of care and support leadership. However, these roles can lead to underappreciation, professional burnout, and emotional exhaustion, as they are frequently unsupported by institutional systems (T.J. Rafapa & Madiope, 2023).

EI is a crucial skill that enables women leaders to navigate these conflicting demands. As suggested by Cummings & Skerrett et al. (2020a) and Van der Vyver and Van der Westhuizen (2020b), EI helps leaders manage interpersonal conflict, provide emotional stability to staff and students, and make sound ethical decisions in challenging situations. Nevertheless, EI is often developed and applied informally and self-directed, particularly in resource-limited schools where access to professional development and mental health support is scarce.

Resource constraints further complicate the implementation of care-based leadership. Principals in under-resourced schools are expected to provide holistic care despite a lack of infrastructure, instructional materials, and psychosocial services (Govender & Sookrajh, 2014a; Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010). These challenges are compounded for women by persistent gendered barriers such as leadership stereotypes, societal expectations, and exclusion from decision-making networks (Ngulube & Makusha, 2020b; Bhebhe, T., & Ngulube, 2019).

3.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has delineated the theoretical framework underpinning this study: EI theory, as conceptualised by Goleman (1995) and Mayer & Salovey (1997). The chapter outlined the five key components of EI, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills and explicated their relevance to understanding the leadership practices of women principals, particularly in the context of care and support within challenging school environments. Furthermore, the rationale for selecting EI theory as the guiding lens was provided, emphasising its capacity to illuminate the relational dynamics of leadership, the influence of contextual constraints, and the agency of women leaders. Finally, the chapter applied the core tenets of EI theory to the specific context of under-resourced schools in the Pinetown District, KwaZulu-Natal, illustrating how each component might manifest in the lived experiences and leadership approaches of the participating principals. Building upon this theoretical foundation, the subsequent chapter will detail the methodological approach employed to explore these experiences in depth, outlining the qualitative research design, participant selection, and data collection methods.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHOD

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 presented a critical review of the literature related to care and support leadership, the gendered dimensions of educational leadership, and the contextual realities of leading schools in resource-constrained environments, with particular reference to the South African context. The chapter synthesised key theoretical perspectives and empirical studies, highlighting conceptual debates and identifying gaps in the scholarship, especially regarding how women principals enact care-centred leadership in district-specific contexts such as Pinetown. This review provided the theoretical and conceptual foundation that informs the present study.

This chapter outlines the research methodology adopted to explore how women principals enact care and support leadership in under-resourced schools within the Pinetown District, KwaZulu-Natal. It details the research paradigm, qualitative design, sampling procedures, data collection techniques, data analysis methods, and ethical considerations. The approach was selected to ensure a deep understanding of the lived experiences of women leaders, particularly within contexts defined by gendered expectations and systemic resource constraints.

4.2 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm refers to a set of underlying philosophical assumptions that guide how knowledge is understood, generated, and interpreted within a study. It encompasses beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology), and the appropriate methods for investigating social phenomena (methodology) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A clearly articulated research paradigm provides coherence between the research problem, theoretical framework, and methodological choices, ensuring that the study is conceptually aligned and philosophically grounded.

My study aligned well with the interpretivist paradigm, which was most suitable because the focus was to explore how women principals perceived and enacted care and support leadership in their schools. The interpretivist paradigm allows for a deep understanding of these personal and contextual experiences. A core aspect of interpretivist is subjectivity and meaning-making

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, EI theory emphasises self-awareness, empathy, and social skills, all of which require the understanding of subjective experiences.

4.3 Research Approach

The research approach used in this study was qualitative. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research is an approach to investigation that aims to comprehend human experiences, behaviours, and social phenomena from the viewpoints of those involved. It seeks to investigate how people interpret their surroundings within particular social and cultural contexts, emphasising depth over breadth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study intended to investigate the subjective experiences and individual interpretations of female principals as they exercised care and support leadership in under-resourced schools; thus the qualitative approach was the most appropriate approach. In contrast to quantitative studies, the nature of the research questions necessitated a profound, contextual understanding of leadership, relational, and emotional dynamics that could not be sufficiently captured by statistical analysis or numerical data (Bush, 2011; Tracy, 2020).

While quantitative research uses structured tools like surveys or experiments to measure and quantify variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), qualitative research uses tools like observations and interviews to provide flexibility, richness, and depth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because the goal of this study was to understand meaning, context, and individual lived experiences rather than to measure outcomes or generalise findings, a mixed methods approach, which incorporates both qualitative and quantitative elements (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), was not selected.

In order to investigate how self-awareness, empathy, and care appeared in the leadership practices of female principals, the qualitative approach aligned well with both the interpretivist paradigm and the theoretical framework of EI which emphasises subjective meaning-making and socially constructed experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

4.4 Research Methodology

In this study, a qualitative case study design was adopted, as it is most suited to the study of complex social phenomena in natural settings. Yin (2018) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 15).

The strength of the case study lies in its ability to capture contextual, holistic, and processual dimensions of the issue under investigation.

For this study, the case was women principals' practice of leadership in public, under-resourced Pinetown District schools, with a focus on how they practised care and support leadership in challenging socio-economic and organisational environments. The study design enabled me to investigate how these women conceptualised, constructed, and lived emotionally intelligent leadership so that it responded to the relational, emotional, and ethical intricacies of their work.

This case study is best described as an instrumental case study, where the case itself was used to help build understanding of a given issue, specifically, how care and EI manifested in gendered leadership practices (Stake, 1995). Rather than focusing narrowly on individual biographies, the research used the selected participants as windows into broader patterns of leadership, care, gender, and resilience in education contexts characterised by systemic inequity.

A case study methodology is especially apt for educational research where phenomena are embedded in context-rich, multi-layered environments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Schools are dynamic systems reacting to policy, community, leadership style, staff morale, and students' needs. Female leaders, especially in historically underprivileged contexts like Pinetown, often face unique challenges, including patriarchal cultural norms, emotional labour, and institutional constraints (Bush et al., 2019). A case study enables the exploration of these lived experiences within their particular institutional, cultural, and geographical contexts, an approach which is not possible with a more general survey or quantitative method.

Additionally, case studies have a high level of methodological flexibility. They accommodate the use of different data sources, such as interviews, documents, and field observations, hence increasing data triangulation and credibility (Yin, 2018). In the context of this research, the use of document analysis supplemented the interview data, providing information on the formalisation and operationalisation of care and support as developed in school policy and practice.

Interestingly, the case study is also in line with the EI theoretical construct that emphasises the internal processes of emotional regulation, empathy, and relational awareness—qualities that are not apparent to the naked eye but take on meaning through intensive, context-dependent examination (Goleman, 2021; Mayer et al., 2016). It is also in line with the interpretivist paradigm

that posits reality as a mutually constructed and inherently subjective phenomenon that must be understood from the point of view of the people who experience it (Lincoln et al., 2018).

In conclusion, the case study methodology provided the analytical depth and contextual sensitivity required to investigate how women principals enacted care and caring leadership. The methodology recognises that leadership is complicated, context-dependent, and affective, especially in the gendered and resource-scarce environments of South African public education.

4.5 Target Population

The target population, according to Cohen et al. (2018), refers to the group of individuals the study aims to investigate based on specific characteristics relevant to the research question. For this study, the target population consisted of approximately 42 high schools, which translated to approximately 42 principals, 52 deputy principals (depending on the school enrolment), and a sizeable number of senior educators in the Pinetown district of KwaZulu-Natal. A senior educator is an experienced teacher with additional responsibilities, such as mentoring, curriculum development, and leadership roles, thereby contributing to educational practices and strategic decision-making within the school (Harvey et al., 2020).

4.6 Sampling Strategies and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was used to select participants and schools for this study, ensuring that those chosen could provide relevant insights into the research topic. According to Patton (2015), purposive sampling facilitates my ability as the researcher to focus on those individuals possessing characteristics or experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. Two high schools in the Pinetown District were purposively selected based on the presence of women principals. All participants were selected from the chosen schools using the criteria below.

Inclusion criteria:

- Participants had to be from the two selected secondary schools
- The principal was required to be a woman
- All participants must have had at least two years' experience.
- Deputy principals and senior educators could be of any gender.

Exclusion criteria

- Male principals
- Principal, deputy principal and educators with less than two years of leadership experience
- Participants not currently working in the two selected schools

There were a total of seven participants (two principals, one deputy principal, and four senior educators). Women principals, the deputy principal, and senior educators were ideal participants for this study, as they directly shaped and managed the emotional environment of their schools.

The inclusion of deputy principals and senior educators was intentional and justified. Although the primary focus of the study was on women principals, deputy principals and senior educators play a critical role in shaping the emotional and relational environment of schools (Bush et al., 2019; Goleman, 2021). Their perspectives provided complementary insights into how care and Emotional Intelligence (EI) are enacted across different leadership levels within the same school context. Including these participants allowed the study to capture multiple viewpoints on leadership practices, team dynamics, and the promotion of a supportive, caring environment for both students and staff. This approach aligns with qualitative research principles, which emphasise depth, context, and the exploration of multiple perspectives rather than generalisation to a larger population (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tracy, 2020).

I contacted principals to arrange an in-person meeting with all participants. During the meeting, I presented detailed information about the study and addressed all queries.

4.7 Data Generation Methods

This study used semi-structured interviews and document analysis as the primary data generation methods to explore the experiences of women principals in the Pinetown District and how they enact care and support leadership in under-resourced schools. While the study also engaged with deputy principals and senior educators, their inclusion was supplementary, providing additional perspectives on the leadership practices of the women principals. The core focus, however, remained on the experiences and reflections of the women principals themselves.

According to Cohen et al. (2018), semi-structured interviews are a qualitative method that employs open-ended questions to explore participants' experiences in depth, allowing for

flexibility while maintaining focus on the research objectives. Semi-structured interviews were beneficial in this research in that they granted the interviewees the autonomy to express their views and feelings in their own words. At the same time, I was at liberty to seek in-depth explanations of the information provided (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and took place at schools because this was convenient for participants, and the environment was comfortable and provided privacy which fostered confidence in the interview dialogue. Interviews took between 50 and 90 minutes per person, depending on the level of detail the respondents provided. One interview was audio-recorded, while I took detailed notes during the interviews for other participants. The decision to rely on notes rather than audio recording for some participants was based on contextual constraints, including participants' preference not to be recorded and the need to maintain a comfortable and non-intrusive interview environment. Notes captured both verbal responses and non-verbal gestures, which were further reflected upon in the research diary and integrated into the subsequent analysis to ensure rigor and richness of the data. Document analysis complemented the interviews by reviewing key school documents, which included the school code of conduct and policy on school discipline.

a) Code of Conduct: The Code of Conduct for Schools is a statutory document developed in accordance with the South African Schools Act (Act No. 84 of 1996). It establishes the behavioural standards, rights, and responsibilities of learners within the school community. The code aims to promote discipline, respect, and a secure learning climate while imposing the values of justice, fairness, and restorative justice. The code provides guidelines on good behaviour, disciplinary procedures, and measures for correcting misbehaviour.

b) School Discipline Policy: The School Discipline Policy sets out the structure, principles, and practices used by the school for maintaining order and promoting good behaviour. It states the school's approach to discipline—whether punitive, corrective, or restorative—and defines the roles and responsibilities of teachers, pupils, parents, and school management. The policy also conveys the school's values, ethos, and commitment to a caring and nurturing learning environment.

In my study on care and support leadership among women principals, these documents were valuable for several reasons:

- They provided an understanding of the policy context of care and discipline.
- They linked leadership practices to institutional frameworks.

- They helped identify tensions between policy and practice.
- They provided documentary evidence for triangulation.
- They revealed gendered dimensions of leadership.

The theoretical foundations of triangulation in qualitative and multi-method research were examined in a recent study by Vivek et al. (2023). The authors discussed how triangulation can be used to increase the validity and dependability of study results. In order to obtain a variety of viewpoints and strengthen the validity of the study's findings, they emphasised the importance of employing a variety of data collection methods, including in-depth interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Neither of the schools had student care and support policies. Certain documents, such as the school code of conduct, were provided by School A for the purpose of this study; however, these documents did not include a student care and support policy.

4.8 Data Analysis

In this study, the data were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It provides a flexible and systematic approach to analysing qualitative data while enabling rich interpretation of participants' experiences (Nowell et al., 2017). This method was particularly appropriate for the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative case study design adopted in this study, as it enabled the exploration of subjective meanings and the emotionally complex experiences of women principals enacting care and support leadership in under-resourced school environments (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis was selected because it allowed for a systematic exploration of participants' perceptions and practices regarding care and support leadership, as well as the challenges they encountered in their schools. Since the study was guided by Emotional Intelligence (EI) theory, this approach enabled a nuanced analysis of relational, emotional, and contextual aspects of leadership practice. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six recursive phases of thematic analysis, which are described below.

Step 1: Familiarisation with the Data

The first phase involved immersion in the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of its content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process included repeatedly listening to the audio-recorded interviews and producing accurate transcripts. Where interviews were not audio-recorded, detailed notes and written transcripts were carefully reviewed several times. During this stage, initial ideas, emotional tones, and notable patterns were recorded in the margins of the transcripts. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), familiarisation is a crucial step that allows the researcher to become deeply engaged with the dataset before coding begins. This process facilitated the identification of preliminary insights related to care, empathy, leadership practices, and emotional awareness, as well as emerging concepts connected to EI (Goleman, 1995; Mayer et al., 2016).

Step 2: Generating Initial Codes

Following familiarisation, the second phase involved systematically coding the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were analysed line by line to identify meaningful segments of data relevant to the research questions. These segments were assigned descriptive codes that captured key ideas within the participants' narratives. Coding was conducted manually and supported by qualitative data analysis tools to ensure systematic organisation of the data. For instance, references to teacher well-being and student emotional support were coded under categories such as *staff support*, *student care*, and *emotional responsiveness*. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, coding combined both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-informed) strategies, allowing themes to emerge naturally while also considering constructs from EI theory and gendered leadership perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2022).

Step 3: Searching for Themes

In the third phase, the initial codes were organised into broader categories in order to identify potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved grouping related codes together to form meaningful patterns across the dataset. For example, codes relating to empathy, emotional awareness, and conflict management were grouped under broader thematic categories associated with emotional intelligence in leadership practice. Other patterns reflected issues such as working within resource constraints, gendered leadership challenges, and the creation of caring school cultures.

During the revision process, these preliminary themes were reorganised and refined to ensure clear alignment with the research questions guiding the study. As recommended by Braun and Clarke

(2006), themes were reviewed to ensure that they captured significant patterns in the data while also reflecting the focus of the research. Consequently, the themes were structured in accordance with the three research questions: (1) conceptualisation and enactment of care and support leadership, (2) challenges and gendered complexities in practising care and support leadership, and (3) perceived effects of care and support leadership on school culture, teacher morale, and learner performance.

Step 4: Reviewing Themes

The fourth phase involved reviewing and refining the preliminary themes to ensure that they accurately represented the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process occurred at two levels. First, the coded extracts within each theme were examined to ensure internal coherence and consistency. Second, the entire dataset was revisited to confirm that the themes adequately captured the range and complexity of participants' perspectives.

As part of the revision process, particular attention was given to ensuring that the themes were clearly aligned with the research questions of the study. This involved refining, merging, and reorganising themes so that each theme directly addressed a specific research question. This iterative process enhanced the analytic clarity and ensured that the thematic structure reflected participants' experiences of care and support leadership within their school contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As a result, the analysis yielded three final analytical themes: *Conceptualisation and Enactment of Care and Support Leadership* ; *Challenges and Gendered Complexities in Practising Care and Support Leadership*; and *Perceived Effects of Care and Support Leadership on School Culture, Teacher Morale, and Learner Performance*. These themes were developed to achieve internal consistency within each theme and a clear distinction between themes, in line with the guidance of Braun and Clarke (2006). Refer to Table 2: Integration of Descriptive Themes into Analytical Themes for a summary of the refinement process.

Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Following the review of the themes, each theme was clearly defined and assigned a descriptive label that reflected its central meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved identifying the essence of what each theme represented and determining how it contributed to addressing the

research questions of the study. A thematic map was developed to illustrate the relationships between the themes and their associated sub-themes, providing a clear overview of the thematic structure of the analysis.

During the revision process, the themes were further refined and reorganised to ensure clear alignment with the research questions guiding the study. While Chapter 5 initially presented eight descriptive themes derived from the coding process, these were subsequently consolidated and conceptually refined into three overarching themes that correspond directly with the research questions and structure the discussion in Chapter 6. These themes focused on (1) the conceptualisation and enactment of care and support leadership, (2) challenges and gendered complexities in practising care and support leadership, and (3) the perceived effects of care and support leadership on school culture, teacher morale, and learner performance. Defining and naming the themes in this manner ensured that each theme made a distinct contribution to understanding care and support leadership as experienced by women principals in under-resourced schools.

Step 6: Producing the Report

The final phase of thematic analysis involved integrating the themes into a coherent and analytical narrative presented in the findings and discussion chapters (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). In this phase, the themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework of Emotional Intelligence (EI). Verbatim quotations from participants were incorporated to illustrate and substantiate the themes, thereby ensuring authenticity and grounding the analysis in participants' lived experiences.

The reporting of the findings sought to demonstrate how the themes contribute to existing knowledge on EI, gendered educational leadership, and care and support leadership practices. Through this process, the analysis highlighted the interconnected relationship between leadership practices, care, gender dynamics, and emotional labour within the South African educational context. By presenting the findings in this way, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how women principals enact care and support leadership within resource-constrained school environments.

4.9 Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the concept of trustworthiness is used in place of traditional quantitative terms such as validity and reliability. To assess the quality and rigour of a qualitative study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced four key criteria that are widely accepted and applied: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria provided a framework for evaluating the authenticity and accuracy of qualitative findings. Each criterion is briefly defined below, followed by its application in this study:

Credibility refers to the confidence in the truthfulness, authenticity, and believability of the findings in qualitative research. It is analogous to internal validity in quantitative studies but is more concerned with whether the findings accurately reflect the lived experiences and perspectives of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). In this study, credibility was ensured through member checking, whereby participants were invited to review my interpretations and preliminary findings to confirm that these accurately represented their experiences and views. This process enhanced accuracy and authenticity and helped guard against misinterpretation.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a qualitative study can be transferred or applied to other contexts, settings, or groups. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is not the responsibility of the researcher to generalise findings, but rather to provide “thick description”—a detailed and contextualised account of the research process, setting, and participants so that readers or future researchers can judge whether the findings are applicable to their own situations. In this study, I ensured transferability by providing a comprehensive and richly detailed description of the research setting, participant demographics, data collection methods, and contextual factors. This level of detail supports the reader in assessing whether the findings are relevant and applicable in similar contexts.

Dependability refers to the stability, consistency, and reliability of the research process over time. It addresses the question of whether the research process is logical, traceable, and well-documented. Rather than aiming for replicability (as in quantitative research), qualitative dependability focuses on providing clear documentation that shows how the study was conducted, how decisions were made, and how data were managed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). In this study, I ensured dependability by maintaining an audit trail, which included detailed records of the research process. This encompassed documentation of the research design, participant selection criteria, and data collection procedures, changes made during the study,

coding decisions, and analytic memos. The audit trail served as a transparent record, allowing others to trace the logic and decisions that led to the findings, thereby enhancing the reliability and rigour of the study.

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings of the study are shaped by the participants' voices and experiences rather than by the researcher's biases, motivations, or assumptions. It aligns with the concept of objectivity in quantitative research but recognises that complete neutrality is not possible in qualitative work. The goal is to ensure that the findings are based on the data and not on the researcher's personal agenda (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure confirmability in this study, I engaged in reflexivity, a process of ongoing self-examination and critical reflection on my own positionality, beliefs, and potential biases (Berger, 2015). I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process, where I documented my thoughts, decisions, assumptions, and emotional responses. This reflective practice helped me remain aware of how my background as a researcher, particularly my interest in educational leadership and gender equity, may have influenced how I interpreted and presented the data (Cohen et al., 2018). Additionally, the audit trail and member checking served as external checks to ensure that interpretations were grounded in participants' actual accounts. My supervisor played a key role in confirmability by reviewing the audit trail, providing critical feedback on data analysis and interpretation, and ensuring that conclusions accurately reflected participants' voices rather than my personal assumptions. A comprehensive audit trail was maintained, recording all decisions made during data collection, coding, theme development, and interpretation, enabling other researchers to evaluate the methodological integrity of the study (Shenton, 2004).

Member checking was also employed as an external validation strategy. Participants were given the opportunity to review and comment on the interpretations of their interviews, ensuring that their meanings had been accurately represented and not distorted by my perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, my research supervisor played a vital role in supporting confirmability. Through regular supervisory meetings, my supervisor provided critical feedback on emerging findings, coding decisions, and thematic interpretations. This scholarly oversight served as an additional check to ensure that the analysis remained faithful to the participants' accounts rather than being influenced by personal bias or theoretical assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The supervisor's role in offering objective critique and methodological guidance added a layer of credibility and accountability to the research process.

4.10 Ethical Issues

Ethical practice is a cornerstone of qualitative research, particularly because it involves direct interaction with participants, often exploring personal and sensitive experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Scholars emphasise that ethical considerations must go beyond formal consent to include the ongoing protection of participants' rights, dignity, and well-being throughout the research process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Tracy, 2010). According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), ethical issues in qualitative research are closely linked to the relational nature of interviewing, where power dynamics and emotional depth may influence participant vulnerability. Therefore, researchers must be transparent, reflexive, and responsive to ethical challenges as they emerge.

Building on this foundation, this study on care and support leadership practices of women principals in the Pinetown District took the following steps to address these key ethical concerns. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university ethics committee before any data collection began, ensuring that the study complied with the required ethical standards. Participants were fully informed about the purpose, nature, procedures, and potential risks or benefits of the study. A consent form and information sheet was provided, and participants were asked to sign only after they fully understood their rights. They were also be informed that they could withdraw at any point without any penalty or consequence.

Given the sensitive nature of leadership experiences, all efforts were made to protect participants' identities. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and research outputs, and no identifying information, such as school names or personal details, was disclosed. All data, including interview recording, transcripts, and notes, were stored securely in password-protected digital files and locked storage for physical documents. Access was limited to me, and all data will be destroyed after the required retention period in accordance with institutional guidelines.

4.11 Positionality

Positionality refers to the social and personal characteristics of the researcher such as gender, race, class, education, professional role, and personal beliefs and how these influence the research process (Holmes, 2020). In qualitative research, where the researcher is often the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, acknowledging one's positionality is crucial to ensuring transparency, reflexivity, and trustworthiness.

According to Berger (2015), a researcher's positionality affects how they interact with participants, what questions they ask, how they interpret responses, and ultimately how meaning is constructed. Reflexively addressing positionality involves critically examining one's assumptions, privileges, and power dynamics that may shape the research encounter and influence the co-construction of knowledge. As the researcher conducting a study on care and support leadership practices among women principals in the Pinetown District, I acknowledge that my positionality may have influenced various aspects of this research.

I identify as a black South African woman and an experienced educator with professional experience in the education sector. This background informed both my interest in leadership practices and my understanding of the challenges faced by women in school leadership. My own experiences may have fostered a sense of empathy and shared understanding with participants, which could have facilitated rapport and open dialogue during interviews. However, I also recognise that my personal values and professional identity may have shaped how I interpreted participants' narratives, especially in relation to EI, gender, and leadership. For instance, my belief in the importance of caring leadership may have led me to emphasise certain themes or experiences over others.

4.12 Limitations of the Research Methodology chosen for the Study

Potential biases that may have occurred include principals presenting experiences more favourably than they actually were. Further, the small sample size may have inhibited my ability to capture the full expression of diversity within the district and may limit generalisability to other contexts. Furthermore, socio-cultural dynamics unique to the Pinetown District may have influenced the findings.

4.13 Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools

For the construction of this thesis, an artificial intelligence language tool ChatGPT was utilised to a limited and responsible extent to assist with writing. The tool helped in editing academic language, making grammatical corrections, and providing suggestions for clearer sentence structures. It was also used on occasion to produce APA 7th edition reference formats as well as to check the coherence of argument flow. The AI software was not used to produce original analysis, generate data, interpret results, or draw conclusions. I composed all the substantive material,

conducted the critical analysis with literature, interpreted the data, and formulated the final conclusions. The use of AI was carried out in alignment with institutional ethics guidelines on the responsible use of digital tools in academic work.

4.14 Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the research methodology employed to explore the care and support leadership practices of women principals in the Pinetown District. The study was framed within an interpretivist paradigm, which acknowledges the existence of multiple realities and values the subjective meanings individuals attach to their experiences. This philosophical stance aligned with the study's aim to explore how women principals made sense of and enacted emotionally intelligent leadership in their school contexts.

To achieve this, the study adopted a qualitative research approach using a multiple case study design, allowing for an in-depth, contextual exploration of participants' lived experiences across different schools. The primary data generation methods included semi-structured interviews with women principals and document analysis of leadership records, policy documents, and school reports. This combination enabled data triangulation, which enhanced the credibility and richness of the findings.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Both deductive and inductive coding strategies were applied: deductively using the EI framework, specifically the components of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills and inductively to allow for new themes to emerge from the data. This dual approach ensured that both theory-driven insights and participant-driven meanings were considered in the interpretation process.

The chapter also discussed the trustworthiness of the study through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability and detailed strategies such as member checking, an audit trail, thick description, and reflexivity. Furthermore, key ethical considerations were addressed, including informed consent, the right to withdraw, confidentiality, and the secure handling of data, in line with best practices in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Importantly, I acknowledged my positionality, with a commitment to reflexivity and awareness of how personal experiences, values, and identity may have influenced data collection and interpretation. This reflective stance ensured that the study remained grounded in the voices of participants while maintaining analytical rigour.

The chapter concludes by establishing a clear foundation for the next stage of the research. Chapter 5 will present and discuss the findings, drawing on both the thematic analysis and the theoretical frameworks outlined in this chapter. It will interpret the data in relation to the research questions and explore the implications of emotionally intelligent, caring leadership practices as exercised by women principals within their unique school contexts.

CHAPTER 5: DATA PRESENTATION

5.1 Introduction

This study examined how women principals in the Pinetown District conceptualised, enacted, and experienced care and support leadership within their school contexts. Open-ended interview questions and document analysis were used to generate data from women principals and senior teachers. The study adopted a qualitative research approach, situated within an interpretivist paradigm, to explore participants' lived experiences and meanings associated with care and support leadership. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, through which recurring themes related to the relational, emotional, and structural dimensions of women's leadership in educational settings were identified.

To ensure confidentiality and protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. The principals were referred to as Mrs Thandi (School B) and Mrs Nandi (School A). Culturally appropriate pseudonyms, reflective of the KwaZulu-Natal context, were similarly assigned to the deputy principal and the four senior teachers. These pseudonyms do not correspond to the participants' real names.

Data are presented under three overarching themes aligned with the study's three research questions: (1) the conceptualisation and enactment of care and support leadership; (2) the challenges and gendered complexities associated with practising this form of leadership; and (3) the perceived effects of care and support leadership on school culture, teacher morale, and learner performance. Each overarching theme is further elaborated through interrelated sub-themes that capture the relational, emotional, structural, and contextual dimensions of women principals' leadership experiences in their roles as school leaders.

5.2 Demographics of Participants

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Principals			
Real role	Pseudonym	School	Gender
Principal A	Mrs Nandi	School A	Female
Principal B	Mrs Thandi	School B	Female
Deputy Principal			
Deputy Principal 1	Mr Luthuli	School A	Male
Senior educators			
Senior Educator 1	Ms Langa	School A	Female
Senior Educator 2	Mr Lamula	School A	Male
Senior Educator 3	Ms Zuma	School B	Female
Senior Educator 4	Ms Zulu	School B	Female

5.3 Emerging Themes

The following themes emerged from the qualitative analysis:

Overarching Theme 1: Conceptualising and Enacting Care and Support Leadership

Sub-theme 1: Navigating Leadership: The Interplay of Style, Support, and Perception

A democratic and participatory leadership style was valued and used to varying degrees, according to the data from both schools. The principal of School A, Mrs Nandi, was characterised by all teachers as inclusive, cooperative, and consultative during the decision-making process. All teachers confirmed that decisions were reached by consensus during staff meetings and expressed a sense of involvement in the implementation of policies.

The data painted a more nuanced picture, despite the fact that the principal at School B, Mrs Thandi, characterised herself as democratic and adaptable. Although she assigned tasks and met with teachers one-on-one, staff members believed there was a lack of transparency and open

communication. All teachers felt marginalised, saying that only Mrs Thandi's ideas were put into practice, and that dissent was frequently met with emotional outbursts or defensiveness.

“In a meeting, the principal will raise a point or an idea and ask for our opinion, but her suggestions are the ones that get implemented.” (Miss Zuma)

Data also showed that in School A, Mrs Nandi's leadership style was made possible in large part by the support networks that surrounded the school. Her leadership style was supported by a male deputy principal who assisted her in maintaining a consultative and cooperative approach. It was said that Mrs Nandi was a stable, personable, and professional leader.

“She's a very good leader, an excellent communicator, and she's basically a professional individual.” (Mr Luthuli)

Mrs Thandi of School B, meanwhile, acknowledged that she felt undercut and scrutinised, especially by the staff, which made her defensive and caused her to react emotionally.

Both principals declined to provide access to School Leadership Team meeting minutes, limiting insights into formal decision-making processes. According to both principals, these documents were confidential and were therefore withheld. As a result, the information related to leadership processes was based solely on participant interviews.

Sub-theme 2: Beyond Training: Relational Trust, Emotional Support, and Teacher Engagement

In particular, at School A, where the principal placed a high priority on professional development through class visits, mentoring, and organising extra classes, teacher development and support emerged as a key element of care-oriented leadership.

“Collaboration is very important in teaching and learning. She's also part of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). She's leading the project that was assigned by the subject advisor to lead the Life Sciences project; hence, she's also teaching Life Sciences. We all understand the importance of teacher development in our school.” (Mr Luthuli)

“She organises staff/teacher development apart from the one that gets organised by the department through workshops.” (Mr Lamula)

All staff members said they felt encouraged, valued, and supported on a personal and professional level. Although it was inconsistent, teacher support was also present in School B. Staff experiences pointed to a lack of steady emotional and professional support, despite the principal's encouragement of staff development, recognition of excellent work, and regular communication. Citing favouritism, public criticism, and a lack of emotional safety, some educators felt disengaged and demotivated.

“Sometimes she shouts at you in front of other staff members, and she doesn’t even come back to apologise for that situation.” (Miss Zuma)

“There’s no balance in terms of relationships, where sometimes you’ll see favouritism.” (Miss Zulu)

The nature of teacher motivation was the subject of another important finding. At School A, an inclusive culture, where all staff felt valued and empowered, shared leadership, and recognition were the main sources of motivation. On the other hand, one of the educators at School B stated that their pay, not the leadership, was their main source of motivation.

“We don’t feel motivated at all because of her approach. The only motivation we have is our salaries.” (Miss Zuma)

Sub-theme 3: The Role of EI in Relational Leadership

The principals' ability to establish and maintain relationships with staff and students was greatly influenced by their EI. The principal of School A (Mrs Nandi) was frequently characterised as personable, courteous, and emotionally stable. Teachers perceived her as someone who "puts herself in our shoes" and they felt at ease sharing personal information with her.

“She’s able to put herself in our shoes because she is a teacher herself, teaching Life Sciences. So, in that way, she experiences all that we are going through at hand.” (Mr Lamula)

Teachers at School B, on the other hand, said that the principal was very emotional, impulsive, and inconsistent in her interactions. Her incapacity to handle conflict or criticism seemed to harm professional relationships, even though she occasionally demonstrates concern and emotional involvement by providing individual teachers with personal support. She was “defensive,” “unapproachable,” and occasionally showed partiality, according to her teachers.

“She’s a very emotional person. She makes her decisions emotionally, and she doesn’t like to be questioned. She uses power in a bad way.” (Miss Zulu)

Interestingly, these relational dynamics reflected broader gendered expectations in leadership and went beyond individual behaviour.

“I sometimes become too emotionally involved when it comes to providing care and support to employees.” (Mrs Thandi)

Sub- theme 4: Care and Control: Leadership Approaches to Learner Support and Discipline

Both schools demonstrated an understanding of the value of discipline and learner support as essential elements of care-based leadership. The principal of School A, Mrs Nandi, was said to be actively involved in upholding order and managing discipline. She prioritised the well-being of her students while aggressively addressing tardiness, absenteeism, and disruptions in the classroom. Teachers observed that she promoted a strong bond between teachers and students and thought that students, regardless of their low socioeconomic status, were the nation's best investment for the future.

“I lead by example. I also have a class in Grades 10, 11, and 12. So, it becomes very difficult for the teachers to be hesitant in my leadership because I involve them, and I even task them to lead some of the projects. Some of the students from this school stay with me at home, so I supervise them both at school and at home. No late coming, low level of absenteeism, no basking in the sun, no bunking of classes, and we’ve reduced the level of dagga usage in the toilet. Monitoring of tasks is handled by me. And I am the one who’s handling discipline while I let the teachers to do their teaching and learning to be more productive. And I do all that while attending my own classes.” (Mrs Nandi)

In School A, academic interventions like extra classes, teacher collaboration, and peer teaching were also examples of learner support. These procedures were ingrained in the school's shared responsibility culture and went beyond simple administrative efforts.

“She’s able to put herself in our shoes, when we’re having problems, not only work-related problems, but even in our personal lives. She plays a pastoral role within us in terms of taking care of ourselves and the problem that we’re facing at that particular time.” (Mr Lamula)

“My care and support leadership improved our school from 6.4% in 2016, it improved over the years until we started producing 100% from 2020 until 2024 (five consecutive years), hoping to do the same in these two remaining years as a leader in the school, as I’m due for retirement in the next two years. That came from strategising and sharing the vision with the teachers. “(Mrs Nandi)

With a principal who was characterised as strict and results-driven, School B, on the other hand, exhibited a more authoritarian approach to discipline. There was little discussion of ongoing academic or emotional support beyond basic compliance, despite a discernible improvement in learner discipline and academic performance from a 48% to an 81% matric pass rate over three years, as indicated in the document review. The extent of learner support was undermined by the principal's reported emotional reactivity and absence from extra classes.

“She lacks support. I always compromise my safety going to school alone with the students when she’s not there to monitor extra classes or to just give support to those who are willing to go an extra mile. She’s not involved at all. In fact, she’s more into personal relations than taking care of the core business, that is, teaching and learning.” (Miss Zulu)

“Her communication is more open with students than with staff.” (Miss Zulu).

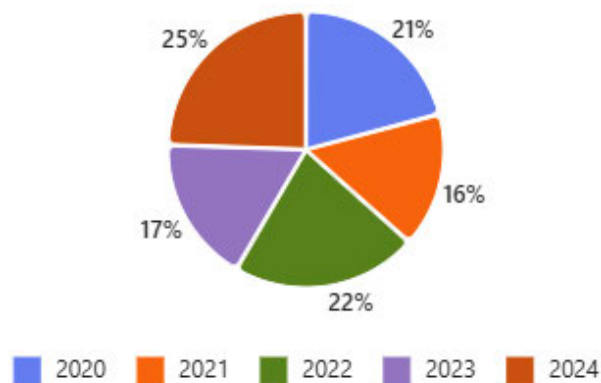
“There’s more discipline on students under her leadership. She’s very hands-on in disciplining students.” (Miss Zuma)

Academic performance data from both schools supported the views of teachers and principals regarding student discipline and academic support.

Mrs Nandi commented that from 2020 to 2024, the school's matric pass rates were 100% for five consecutive years. The principal claimed that the school did not currently have a formal School Improvement Plan (SIP) in place because of the consistently high academic results. In contrast Mrs Thandi of School B mentioned that the school's academic performance over the five years was as follows:

Figure 3

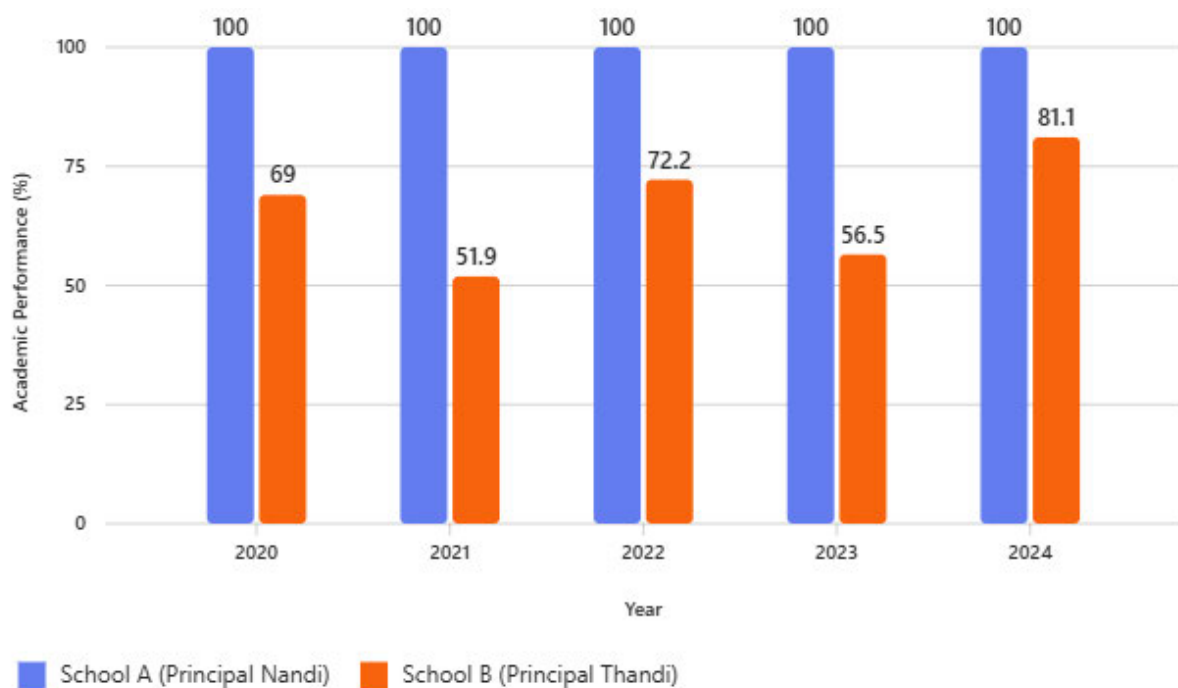
Distribution of Academic Performance Percentages for School B over Five Years (2020–2024)



Whether the school currently had a School Improvement Plan or related interventions in place was not indicated by any of the documents provided. Teachers' and principals' descriptions of the learner discipline and support systems in both schools were contextualised by the academic performance data.

Figure 4:

Comparative Academic Performance of School A and School B over Five Years (2020–2024)



Sub-theme 5: Engaging External Stakeholders: Strategies for Community and Parental Partnership

Although their methods and perspectives on community engagement were very different, both schools faced difficulties with parental involvement. The principal at School A took the initiative to engage local organisations and community structures, such as the School Governing Body (SGB), in order to support students, particularly in areas that were outside the purview of the school. She constantly worked to close the gap, despite noting low parental attendance at meetings and a lack of parental support for students' academic progress.

“The challenge that we have is that parents are not attending parents' meetings, yet they want their children to be promoted to the next grades.” (Miss Langa)

While parental involvement was similarly low at School B, the principal's involvement seemed more sporadic and reactive. Despite her claims of working well with parents, staff members said that parental support was insufficient and frequently ineffectual.

“Parents' meetings are not attended, they are really not playing their part.” (Miss Zulu)

Strong community partnerships and deliberate attempts to increase parental engagement outside of regular communication were not well documented.

Furthermore, the principals' varying abilities to interact with external stakeholders seemed to be related to their interpersonal and leadership confidence. The principal of School A, Mrs Nandi, consulted extensively and created connections, which strengthened the learner support systems and institutional resilience. However, because of her internal relationship issues, School B's principal may have had a harder time extending her leadership influence in the community.

Overarching Theme 2: Challenges and Gendered Complexities in Practising Care and Support Leadership

Sub-theme 1: Gendered Dimension of Leadership: Identity, Authority and Scrutiny

The information showed that societal views of female authority and gendered expectations influenced both principals' leadership experiences. School A's principal exhibited a strong sense of self as a professional. She was regarded as a role model for excellence in her leadership and teaching, and she was described as professional, calm, and consistent. Her management team and deputy principal both seemed to support and uphold her leadership identity.

“Our principal is one of the best leaders. When she approaches staff, she uses democratic. All the things that we do in our school are guided by the protocol of the Department of Education. She’s a democratic leader, she believes that all people must participate on everything that is happening in our school. We conduct meetings regarding every decision making in our school. She allows all the democratic processes to happen in our school. She’s collaborative, accessible, and she’s not autocratic—the list is endless—and she’s a professional. She handles issues within the school so professionally, communicates in a professional manner, and she’s not imposing anything on us.” (Mr Lamula)

The principal of School B, on the other hand, candidly discussed the emotional toll of being a female leader, admitting that she occasionally felt emotionally overburdened, undercut, and judged by her position. She talked about being “born a leader” and that she found inspiration in

her own life and experiences, but she also absorbed gendered criticisms like being “too emotional” or “sensitive.”

It became clear how emotionally taxing it was to navigate leadership in an environment where women were frequently subjected to harsher scrutiny than men.

“She doesn’t want to be questioned. Even if you need more clarity on certain things/issues, she’ll be defensive instead and always respond in a sense that her leadership is being attacked.” (Miss Zulu)

Moreover, the data suggested that leadership identity for women was relationally constructed and often contested. The principal of School B worked in a more fragmented setting where her authority was regularly questioned and her actions were closely scrutinised, whereas the principal of School A enjoyed the advantages of encouraging co-workers and having a robust internal culture.

Sub-theme 2: Navigating Obstacles: The Complexities of Care and Support Leadership

Both principals tried to lead with care, but they encountered many obstacles that made it difficult to apply supportive leadership consistently. The principal of School A, Mrs Nandi, faced outside pressure from parents who did not actively support their children’s education but expected academic advancement. She also faced socioeconomic challenges that affected student engagement and high levels of student indiscipline.

“There are times when she needs to take a stand on some instances, because sometimes she’s too lenient on some issues where she needs to take a stand. And consistency is very important when you are a principal. She’s lucky to have a very supportive staff because she’s very good at leadership, where she’s lacking a little in the management part of it. However, that’s where we fit in and assist with management. And it hasn’t been difficult for any of us to help where we’re needed because of the way that she leads by involving us at all times, especially in decision making.” (Mr Luthuli)

The difficulties at School B were more interpersonal and internal. Teachers said they felt emotionally cut off from the principal—unsafe, and unacknowledged. The principal also admitted

to experiencing criticism and undermining, which may have been the result of institutionalised gender biases but also reflected unresolved conflicts within her own leadership identity.

“I am also being undermined somehow and am judged through my past. And they preferred to be led by someone else who is also part of the establishment, not me, which has been a very big challenge. But I do consult my superiors or other women principals for guidance on how to escape some of the problems that I encounter at work.” (Mrs Thandi)

The disconnect between the demands of care-based leadership and the structural framework in which principals' function was a major conflict that could be seen in both situations. Female leaders were constantly under pressure from gendered scrutiny, teacher resistance, learner indiscipline, and disengaged parents. The principal of School A maintained a steady leadership environment through professional support, emotional control, and collaborative structures. School B experienced internal disarray, emotional instability, and strained relationships in spite of its democratic self-perception.

Overarching Theme 3: Perceived Effects of Care and Support Leadership on School Culture and Performance

Sub-theme 1: The Emotional Landscape of the School: Leadership, Morale and Cohesion

There were clear disparities in staff morale, unity, and the general school climate between the two schools, demonstrating the impact of leadership on school culture and climate. The principal of School A had fostered an inclusive, cooperative, and respectful culture. Teachers said there were "no groups or camps" at the school, indicating that the staff was unified and cohesive. People felt at home and inspired to go above and beyond in this setting, which was seen as both professional and nurturing.

In school A, this trusting environment improved student performance and teacher dedication. Shared decision-making, responsibility delegation, and acknowledgement of employees' efforts all contributed to their sense of empowerment. Open communication and collaborative problem-solving were made possible by the psychological safety created by the steady leadership, open-door policy, and respect for employee autonomy.

“We are less stressed because our problems are easily attended to, and outcomes are always positive. Basically, we’re a happy staff”. (Miss Langa)

“Our culture is to make everyone feel at home, be comfortable in their working space, as we spend more time here at work than at home. We are trusting and depend on one another. We do not work in isolation, we work collaboratively, as a team, towards the same goal of achieving our great potential, and the results speak for themselves.” (Mr Luthuli)

School B’s principal, Mrs Thandi, on the other hand, exhibited a more strained and disjointed school climate. Despite the fact that academic results and discipline had improved structurally, teachers said they felt alienated, demotivated, and left out of decision-making processes. Low staff morale and strained professional relationships were attributed to perceptions of favouritism, emotional instability, and a lack of open communication.

“If she can adjust somewhere and be approachable, start to consider us in decision making and have an open-door policy that doesn’t favour a few over all of us, I think we can go somewhere. Other than that, we won’t go anywhere.” (Miss Zuma)

“Culture of teaching and learning has improved compared to what it was, and discipline also has improved.” (Mrs Thandi)

“She really needs to work on herself, fix loopholes if she wants the best for the school. Honestly, she’s unapproachable and very difficult to handle.” (Miss Zulu)

5.4 Chapter Summary

Chapter 5 presented the empirical findings of the study, exploring how two female principals in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal enacted and perceived care and support leadership. The chapter compared and contrasted the experiences of Mrs Nandi (School A) and Mrs Thandi (School B) across several key themes, drawing on data from interviews with the principals and their staff. The findings revealed a significant contrast between the two schools, highlighting that while both principals aimed for a supportive leadership style, their approaches and outcomes differed dramatically. Principal Nandi was consistently described as a democratic, consultative,

and inclusive leader who fostered shared accountability. In contrast, Mrs Thandi, despite viewing herself as democratic, was perceived by her staff as lacking transparency and being defensive, leading to a disconnect between her self-perception and their lived experiences.

School A demonstrated a strong culture of professional and emotional support, where the principal actively engaged in mentoring, collaboration, and professional learning communities. This led to a sense of empowerment and shared ownership among staff. At School B, teacher support was inconsistent and undermined by issues of favouritism and public criticism, resulting in demotivation and disengagement, with some teachers citing salary as their only motivator. Principal Nandi was characterised by emotional stability and empathy, which helped her build trusting, professional relationships. She was seen as approachable and understanding. Mrs Thandi, on the other hand, was described as emotional, impulsive, and inconsistent, leading to a culture of mistrust and anxiety among her staff. Both schools faced challenges with low parental involvement. However, Principal Nandi actively and consistently engaged with community structures to build partnerships and support students. Mrs Thandi's engagement was perceived as more reactive and sporadic, with less evidence of deliberate, long-term community partnerships.

Both principals valued learner support, but their approaches differed. Mrs Nandi's leadership was characterised by a hands-on, pastoral approach that integrated discipline with genuine care, leading to improved academic outcomes and a strong bond between teachers and students. Mrs Thandi employed a more authoritarian style focused on compliance, which, while improving discipline and matric pass rates, appeared to lack the relational and emotional components of holistic learner support.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the empirical findings presented in Chapter 5, engaging critically with the data in relation to the study's research questions and relevant literature. The discussion is conducted within the context of the extant scholarly literature and the theoretical framework of the study, which combines the ethics of care (Noddings, 2005) with EI (Goleman, 1995) theory. The study's primary objective was to investigate the perceptions and enactment of care and support leadership by women principals in the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal, specifically examining the challenges and perceived impacts of this leadership style on school culture, staff morale, and learner performance. This chapter presents an analytical discussion of the findings, examining the similarities and differences in how Mrs Nandi (School A) and Mrs Thandi (School B) conceptualised, enacted, and experienced care and support leadership. The discussion is organised around three overarching themes aligned with the study's research questions: (1) the conceptualisation and enactment of care and support leadership; (2) the challenges and gendered complexities associated with practising this form of leadership; and (3) the perceived effects of care and support leadership on school culture, teacher morale, and learner performance. Within each overarching theme, related sub-themes are integrated to provide analytical depth and to highlight the study's contribution to educational leadership in the South African context.

6.2 Critical Interpretation and Discussion of Findings

To move from the detailed descriptive themes of Chapter 5 to a focused, critical discussion, the original eight themes were synthesised and integrated into four core analytical themes. This process reduced descriptive repetition and allowed for a deeper, more rigorous examination of the relationship between EI, Relational Trust, and Ethics of Care.

Table 2*Integration of Descriptive Themes into Analytical Themes*

Analytical Theme (Chapter 6)	Sub-Themes / Descriptive Findings	Rationale for Integration
6.2.1 Conceptualisation and Enactment of Care and Support Leadership	- Navigating leadership: The interplay of style, support, and perception - Relational trust, emotional support, and teacher engagement - EI in relational leadership - Learner support and discipline - Community and parental partnership	These descriptive themes collectively demonstrate how principals understand and implement care and support leadership in their schools. They highlight the relational, emotional, and structural aspects of leadership, showing how care is translated into daily practice and engagement with staff, learners, and the community.
6.2.2 Challenges and Gendered Complexities in Practising Care and Support Leadership	- Gendered dimensions of leadership - Navigating obstacles: The complexities of care and support leadership	These themes illustrate the structural, gendered, and contextual challenges principals face in practising care-based leadership. They link principals' experiences to theoretical frameworks, including feminist leadership theory and EI, and highlight tensions that affect leadership authority and decision-making.
6.2.3 Perceived Effects of Care and Support Leadership on School Culture, Teacher Morale, and Learner Performance	- Emotional landscape: morale and cohesion	This theme captures the outcomes of care and support leadership, showing its influence on school climate, teacher engagement and morale, and learner performance. It demonstrates the practical effects of leadership actions, linking practice to observable results and providing evidence for conclusions and recommendations.

The following discussion focuses on contrasting the lived realities of the two schools, where Mrs Nandi's leadership was characterised by high relational trust and positive staff morale, and Mrs Thandi's leadership was marred by inconsistent support and psychological distress among staff. The central argument proposed is that the differential outcomes were largely attributable to the

principals' varying levels of EI, which acted as the critical mediating variable in the successful application of care-based leadership.

6.2.1 Conceptualisation and Enactment of Care and Support Leadership

The data established a clear divergence in the principals' perceived leadership styles, fundamentally shaping relational trust within their schools. While both principals verbally embraced consultative practices, only Mrs Nandi consistently demonstrated democratic and inclusive leadership, aligning with the theoretical demands of the ethics of care. Her approach, characterised by shared decision-making, fostered collective ownership and professional efficacy among teachers.

Mrs Nandi's staff reported high levels of support and professional respect, which directly align with literature linking democratic leadership to enhanced job satisfaction (Noddings, 2005; Shields, 2010; Zembylas, 2021). This consistency cultivated relational trust, a prerequisite for effective teacher engagement. Her deliberate effort to understand and mentor teachers exemplified the reciprocity central to care ethics (Greenleaf, 1977). For example:

“The principal is always supportive and is like a mentor to us... This makes us want to perform better for the school.” (Mr Lamula)

“We are less stressed because our problems are easily dealt with... Basically, we are happy.” (Miss Langa)

“Our culture is to make everyone feel at home... We work collaboratively as a team towards the same goal.” (Mr Luthuli)

In contrast, Mrs Thandi was perceived as inconsistent and lacking transparency. Staff reported that her intentions did not always translate into practice:

“In a meeting, the principal will raise a point or an idea and ask for our opinion, but her suggestions are the ones that are implemented.” (Miss Zuma)

This gap between intention and action created distrust, undermining relational engagement and staff morale. Attempts at support were perceived as control, demonstrating the importance of consistency in operationalising care ethics (Day & Sammons, 2016).

6.2.2 Challenges and Gendered Complexities in Practising Care and Support Leadership

This theme explores how principals' leadership identities and authority were shaped by gendered expectations and contextual pressures. Female leaders are often expected to be nurturing, creating unique obstacles when exercising authority (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2021).

Mrs Thandi's experience was marked by scrutiny and feelings of being undermined, which may have contributed to her inconsistent leadership style and poor self-regulation:

"I feel like I am constantly judged on my performance... They seem to prefer being led by someone else who fits into the establishment and not me." (Mrs Thandi)

Conversely, Mrs Nandi's strong professional identity and high EI allowed her to neutralise these pressures, successfully enacting care strategically while maintaining authority:

"She really knows how to step into our shoes... She takes on a caring role for us." (Mr Lamula)

Both principals also faced systemic and contextual challenges, including infrastructural deficits and limited parental involvement. Mrs Nandi's relational capacity enabled her to navigate these obstacles effectively, building collaborative partnerships and extending care to vulnerable students, exemplifying a strategic and community-focused application of care ethics.

6.2.3 Perceived Effects of Care and Support Leadership on School Culture, Teacher Morale, and Learner Performance

This theme examines the impact of care-based leadership on school climate and outcomes. Mrs Nandi's relational approach fostered trust, collaboration, and professional morale among staff. She extended care beyond the school walls, personally supporting vulnerable students and cultivating community engagement, demonstrating the operationalisation of care as a strategic institutional practice (Putnam, 2000; Kilpatrick et al., 2010):

"Some of the students from this school stay with me at home... I supervise them both at school and at home." (Mrs Nandi)

By contrast, Mrs Thandi's transactional, authoritative approach produced measurable academic improvements (pass rate from 48% to 81%) but failed to build relational trust, teacher engagement, or institutional cohesion:

“She lacks support... She is just not involved.” (Miss Zulu)

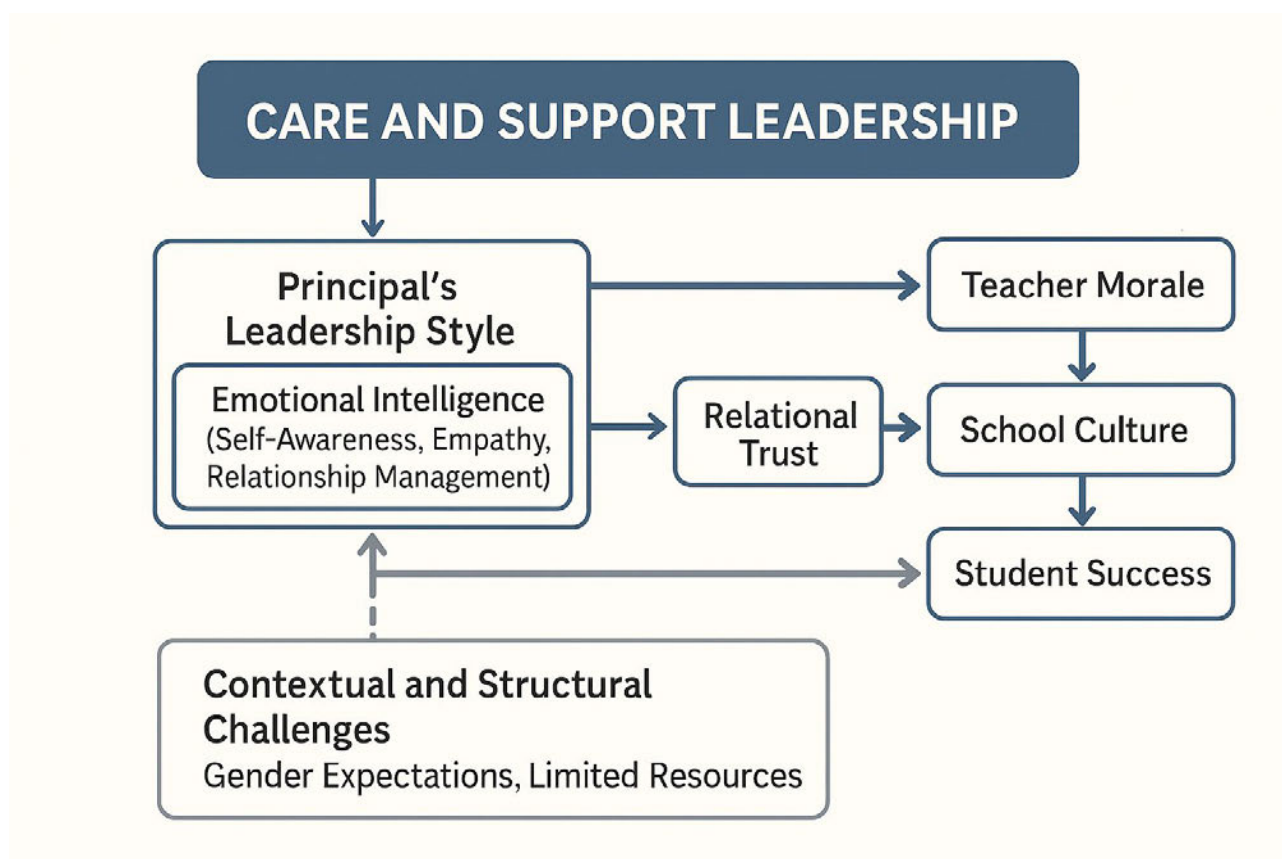
The findings highlight that care leadership contributes not only to academic outcomes but also to the emotional and social fabric of the school, showing how emotional intelligence and relational engagement mediate the effectiveness of leadership practices.

6.3 Overall Synthesis and Contribution to Knowledge

The critical interpretation of the data leads to a synthesised argument that fundamentally refines the understanding of care and support leadership within the South African context. The model presented in Figure 5 below highlights how EI, relational trust, and social capital serve as key links between leadership style and important outcomes like school culture, teacher morale, and student achievement. Additionally, gendered expectations and systemic constraints play a significant role in shaping these interactions, sometimes fostering and at other times hindering care-based leadership.

Figure 5

Model of Care and Support Leadership in Under-Resourced Schools



The graphical model synthesises the study’s findings into a framework for care and support leadership. It visually represents how a principal’s EI (self-awareness, empathy, relationship management) strengthens relational trust. That trust fosters teacher engagement, collaboration, and a supportive school culture, ultimately enhancing student success. The model also highlights how contextual and structural challenges, such as gender expectations and resource limitations, can either support or obstruct care-based leadership.

Themes 1, 2, and 3 navigating different leadership styles, building relational trust, and understanding the emotional core of leadership, lay the groundwork for nurturing and relational care. For example, a principal's EI and their knack for fostering trust play a crucial role in shaping teacher engagement and boosting morale. Themes 4 and 5 take this idea further, focusing on engaging external stakeholders and finding the right balance between care and control. School leaders work to involve parents, communities, and various disciplinary frameworks to ensure students thrive. Finally, themes 6 and 7 delve into the gendered aspects of leadership and the challenges leaders face. They shed light on the pressures and complexities that require strategic care, illustrating how principals tackle structural hurdles, manage emotional labour, and navigate scrutiny related to their identities.

Overall, the model demonstrates that successful care leadership in under-resourced South African schools is not just about individual personality traits or a nurturing instinct. Instead, it is a strategic, relational, and context-sensitive practice that demands emotional effort, institutional backing, and resilience in the face of structural and gender-related obstacles.

6.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a critical and academic interpretation of the findings from Chapter 5, linking the empirical data to the theoretical framework of the ethics of care and EI. The discussion established that the contrasting outcomes between the two schools were primarily driven by the principals' differing capacities for EI, which either enabled or obstructed the consistent enactment of care. The chapter highlighted how high EI leads to relational trust, democratic leadership, and strong school cohesion. In contrast, challenges in self-regulation and empathy lead to distrust, defensive leadership, and low staff morale. Furthermore, the discussion engaged with the gendered nature of leadership scrutiny and the differential ability of principals to leverage community resources. The conceptual model presented synthesises these findings, positioning EI as the critical mediator between leadership style and positive school outcomes. Overall, this chapter deepens the understanding of care leadership as a relational, emotionally intelligent, and context-driven practice that is essential for effective educational management in challenging South African school environments.

CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY, FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

This final chapter is a summary of the entire study and synthesises the study's findings in relation to the three research questions that guided the inquiry. Drawing explicitly on the three overarching themes presented in Chapter 5 and critically discussed in Chapter 6, the chapter articulates conclusions that are firmly grounded in the empirical evidence. These conclusions reflect women principals' conceptualisation and enactment of care and support leadership, the challenges and gendered complexities they encountered, and the perceived effects of this leadership approach on school culture, teacher morale, and learner performance.

Based on these evidence-based conclusions, the chapter advances recommendations directed at the Department of Basic Education (DBE), school governing bodies, and practising principals to strengthen the implementation and professional development of care and support leadership. The chapter concludes by acknowledging the study's limitations and proposing areas for future research.

7.2 Summary of the Study

The primary aim of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions and implementation of care and support leadership by women principals in under-resourced schools within the Pinetown District of KwaZulu-Natal. The research sought to understand the principals' lived experiences, the challenges they faced in implementing care-based practices, and the perceived impact of this leadership style on various institutional outcomes, including school culture, staff morale, and learner performance.

A qualitative, case study approach was employed, focusing on two contrasting schools. Data were generated through in-depth interviews with the two principals and teachers, as well as through document analysis. The study was anchored in a theoretical framework that integrated Noddings' Ethics of Care with Goleman's theory of EI, supplemented by insights from feminist leadership theories.

Chapter 4 detailed the research methodology and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 presented the data under various themes, revealing a distinct divergence in the relational outcomes between

School A (Mrs Nandi) and School B (Mrs Thandi). Chapter 6 critically interpreted these findings, arguing that the principals' EI was the crucial mediating factor that determined whether the intent to care successfully translated into practice, ultimately leading to the development of the Conceptual Model of Care and Support Leadership.

The primary aim of this qualitative study was to explore how women principals in under-resourced schools within the Pinetown District conceptualise and enact care and support leadership. The study sought to understand the principals' lived experiences, the challenges they encountered in implementing care-based practices, and the perceived effects of this leadership approach on school culture, staff morale, and learner performance.

A qualitative case study approach was employed, focusing on two contrasting schools. Data were generated through in-depth interviews with the two principals and senior teachers, as well as through document analysis. The study was anchored in a theoretical framework integrating Noddings' Ethics of Care with Goleman's theory of Emotional Intelligence, supplemented by insights from feminist leadership theories.

Chapter 4 detailed the research methodology and ethical considerations, while Chapter 5 presented the data under three overarching themes aligned with the research questions, highlighting differences in relational and organisational outcomes between School A (Mrs Nandi) and School B (Mrs Thandi). Chapter 6 critically interpreted these findings, demonstrating that the principals' emotional intelligence was a key factor in translating the intent to care into effective practice, culminating in the development of the Conceptual Model of Care and Support Leadership.

7.3 How the Research Questions Were Answered

This section addresses each of the three research questions posed in Chapter 1, synthesising conclusions that are directly grounded in the overarching themes identified in Chapter 5 and critically discussed in Chapter 6.

RQ 1: How do women principals in under-resourced schools perceive and enact care and support leadership?

The study revealed a distinct duality in the practice of care leadership. Both principals perceived care leadership as essential, defining it through emotional support, relationship-building, and staff development. However, their implementation differed markedly, shaped by their levels of EI. Mrs

Nandi demonstrated care through consistent democratic practices, high empathy, and self-regulated responses, which fostered strong relational trust. In contrast, Mrs Thandi's approach was inconsistent and transactional, hindered by challenges in emotional self-regulation, resulting in low trust and a defensive leadership style. The study concludes that while the perception of care is foundational, its successful implementation depends on the principal's capacity for EI. Moreover, systemic inequalities and gender norms can exert pressure on principals, potentially undermining their ability to lead with care consistently and effectively.

RQ 2: What are the challenges faced by women principals when implementing care and support leadership?

The research identified two primary categories of challenges that shaped the principals' ability to enact care and support leadership. Internal and gendered challenges included the experience of gendered scrutiny, where both principals felt their authority was frequently questioned and their actions judged through a gendered lens. For Mrs Thandi, this external pressure intensified internal emotional labour and led to defensive reactions that undermined her capacity to lead with care. In contrast, external and systemic challenges such as poor parental involvement and infrastructural deficits typical of under-resourced schools were navigated differently by the two leaders. Mrs Nandi employed strategic care and interpersonal skills to build vital social capital and community trust, while Mrs Thandi relied more heavily on formal compliance and control mechanisms. These contrasting approaches highlight how EI and relational strategies can mediate the impact of structural constraints on care leadership.

RQ 3: What are the perceived impacts of care and support leadership on school culture, teacher morale, and learner performance?

The study identified a direct causal chain linking the quality-of-care leadership to key institutional outcomes. In School A, where care leadership was consistently and authentically practised, the school developed a cohesive and emotionally positive culture, resulting in high teacher morale. In contrast, school B exhibited an inconsistent and distrustful enactment of care leadership, leading to a culture marked by anxiety, transactional engagement, and low intrinsic morale despite some administrative successes. Learner outcomes also reflected this divergence in School A; strategic and relational care extended beyond academics to address students' social and emotional needs, exemplified by the principal's initiative to house vulnerable students. While School B maintained academic discipline, its impact on long-term relational and emotional well-being appeared less

profound than that of School A. These findings underscore the importance of emotionally intelligent, relational leadership in fostering both staff well-being and holistic learner development.

7.4 Conclusion/Findings of the study

Based on the critical discussion of the findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

7.4.1 EI is the Enabling Competency for Care Leadership

The study demonstrates that EI is the essential, non-negotiable competency for effective care and support leadership. The intent to lead with care is insufficient; it is the capacity for self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy (the core elements of EI) that determines a principal's ability to foster relational trust, handle conflict non-defensively, and sustain a consistently democratic and supportive environment. Where EI was high, the ethics of care framework flourished; where EI was inconsistent, the care framework failed to materialise effectively.

7.4.2 Care Leadership must be Strategic, not Merely Nurturing

This research challenges the simplistic view of care leadership as merely a 'soft' or nurturing role, particularly in the context of female leadership. The successful implementation of care leadership at School A demonstrates that care must be understood as a strategic and context-sensitive practice. It serves as a tool to navigate gendered expectations, enabling the principal to maintain professional authority while meeting the relational demands of leadership. Furthermore, care leadership functions as an emotional and relational investment that builds the social capital necessary to address infrastructural and community-based challenges in under-resourced schools. These findings reinforce the notion that care, when grounded in EI and strategic intent, is a powerful leadership approach capable of transforming school culture and outcomes.

7.4.3 Relational Trust is the Ultimate Outcome of Effective Care

The study concludes that relational trust between the principal and the staff is the most significant determinant of a healthy school culture and high staff morale. This trust is not achieved through formal policies but through the principal's consistent, emotionally regulated, and empathetic daily

interactions. The absence of this trust, as seen at School B, leads to teacher disengagement, fear, and a climate of anxiety, regardless of the principal's efforts to improve academic outcomes.

7.5 Recommendations of the study

The conclusions drawn from this study warrant specific recommendations for stakeholders involved in school leadership and management in South Africa:

7.5.1 Recommendations for the DBE

To strengthen care and support leadership in schools, the DBE should integrate mandatory EI training into all leadership development programmes for principals and deputy principals. This training must focus on core EI competencies, such as self-regulation and empathy, and be recognised as a critical professional skill rather than a generic soft skill. Additionally, the DBE should develop targeted professional development modules for female principals, equipping them with strategies to navigate gendered scrutiny and authority challenges. These modules should promote strategic care that is both relational and authoritative, enabling female leaders to assert professional credibility while fostering trust-based school cultures.

7.5.2 Recommendations for SGBs

SGBs play a pivotal role in shaping leadership culture. During principal selection processes, SGBs should prioritise relational competencies, placing greater emphasis on candidates' demonstrated abilities in trust-building, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution beyond traditional academic and administrative qualifications. Furthermore, SGBs should provide contextual support by actively facilitating community engagement initiatives. Recognising that a principal's emotional labour often extends beyond the school gate, SGBs must support efforts to build social capital, especially in under-resourced environments where relational leadership is essential for overcoming systemic challenges.

SGBs must initiate development of Student Care and Support Policy. This policy's aim is to outline how the school should approach student welfare, including support for students facing socio-economic challenges, mental health issues, or learning difficulties, if available.

7.5.3 Recommendations for School Principals

Principals must engage in reflective practice to cultivate self-awareness, particularly regarding how emotional responses such as defensiveness or inconsistency impact staff trust and overall school culture. Beyond individual acts of nurturing, principals should work to institutionalise reciprocal **care** through formal structures. This includes transparent decision-making, shared leadership practices, and the creation of safe spaces for staff feedback. Such structures ensure that care is embedded in the school's operational ethos, promoting a sustainable and inclusive leadership model.

7.6 Limitations of the Study

When interpreting the findings of this study, several limitations should be considered. Firstly, the research was conducted as a small-scale qualitative case study involving only two schools within a single district. As such, the findings are not statistically generalisable to all schools in KwaZulu-Natal or South Africa. However, the depth of insight offers strong analytical transferability to similarly under-resourced educational contexts. Secondly, the study focused primarily on the perceptions of principals and teachers. While this provided valuable perspectives on leadership and school culture, the inclusion of learner and parent voices could have enriched the analysis by offering a more comprehensive understanding of the broader impact of care and support leadership.

7.7 Suggestions for Future Research

Building on the limitations and findings of this study, several areas for future research are recommended. Firstly, a large-scale quantitative study should be conducted to statistically examine the relationship between specific EI competencies measured using validated psychological instruments and measurable school outcomes such as teacher retention, learner attendance, and academic performance. This would provide empirical evidence to support the qualitative insights generated in this study and enhance generalisability across a broader sample of schools.

Secondly, a longitudinal study tracking a cohort of newly appointed female principals could offer valuable insights into how EI and care-based leadership practices evolve. Such research would illuminate how female leaders learn to navigate gendered expectations and systemic challenges, and how their leadership styles adapt in response to contextual pressures.

Finally, a comparative case study involving both male and female principals within the same district, using the conceptual model developed in this study, could deepen understanding of gendered leadership dynamics. This approach would help identify the unique pressures faced by each group and the different strategies employed to implement care and support leadership effectively, contributing to more inclusive and context-sensitive leadership development frameworks.

7.8 Conclusion of the study

This final chapter successfully fulfilled the aims of the study by providing a comprehensive summary of the research journey, detailing the key findings, and drawing robust academic conclusions. The study has established that in under-resourced schools, the successful enactment of care and support leadership by women principals is fundamentally dependent on their EI, which acts as the critical mediator between intention and outcome.

The conclusions demonstrated that high EI fosters the relational trust required to build a positive school culture. At the same time, a deficiency in EI, particularly in self-regulation, leads to distrust and compromised staff morale. Furthermore, the study offered a significant contribution to the body of knowledge by developing the Conceptual Model of Care and Support Leadership, which frames care not merely as a nurturing instinct but as a strategic, relational, and context-driven practice necessary to navigate systemic constraints and gendered scrutiny.

The implementation of the recommendations provided in this chapter, particularly the call for mandatory EI training for school leadership, offers a pathway for the DBE to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of care-based leadership practices. Ultimately, this research affirms that the emotional core of the principal is the driving force behind institutional health and successful management in challenging South African educational contexts.

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APPENDIX A - Ethical Clearance

03 April 2025

Cebisile Sindisiwe Mhlongo (224132107)

School of Education

Edgewood Campus

Dear CS Mhlongo,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00008355/2025

Project title: Exploring care and support leadership: Experiences of women principals in Pinetown district, KwaZulu-Natal

Degree: Masters

APPROVAL NOTIFICATION – EXPEDITED APPLICATION

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 11 March 2025 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 03 April 2026.

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

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL For research with human participants

INFORMED CONSENT RESOURCE TEMPLATE

Note to researchers: Notwithstanding the need for scientific and legal accuracy, every effort should be made to produce a consent document that is as linguistically clear and simple as possible without omitting important details, as outlined below. Certified translated versions will be required once the original version is approved.

There are specific circumstances where witnessed verbal consent might be acceptable and circumstances where HSSREC may waive individual informed consent.

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: xx 2025

Dear Principal/Deputy Principal/Senior Educator

My name is **Cebisile Sindisiwe Mhlongo**. I am pursuing a master's degree in Educational Leadership, Management and Policy (ELMP) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal School of Education. I will be conducting a research study as part of my degree fulfilment. The title of my study is Exploring care and support leadership: Experiences of women principals in Pinetown district, KwaZulu-Natal. My research study will be conducted under the supervision of **Dr L.L Mbatha**. She is a lecturer at the School of Education, College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus, and University of KwaZulu-Natal.

My supervisor's contact number is 033 260 5339, and her email address is MbathaL5@ukzn.ac.za.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research that explores the experiences of women principals in Pinetown district, KwaZulu Natal. The study aims to provide an understanding of the experiences of women principals in Pinetown District, KwaZulu-Natal, and how their leadership practices contribute to shaping the educational environment while also identifying the challenges and effects that come with this leadership approach.

The study is expected to enrol eight participants from two high schools. That is two female principals, two deputy participants and four senior educators. The study will involve one-on-one interviews as data generation methods. All information shared will be kept confidential, and all institutional guidelines will be adhered to.

The study will not involve any risks or discomforts to you. The study will provide no direct benefits to you as a participant. However, I hope that the study will contribute

to the academic discussion of educational leadership, ultimately enriching our understanding of effective leadership practices in education.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number HSSREC/00008355/2025).

Should you have any concerns or questions or wish to confirm your participation, please do not hesitate to contact me on the following details, [REDACTED] or the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details are as follows

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is voluntary, and you may withdraw participation at any point. If you refuse/withdraw your participation, you will not incur a penalty. You may also stop participating without stating any reasons, and your withdrawal can be done verbally or in writing. I may terminate you from the study if you are no longer employed at the two high schools or the district chosen for the study.

You will incur no costs due to your participation in the study. There will also be no incentives or reimbursements for participation in the study.

Your responses will be strictly confidential and used only for academic purposes. You will be anonymous throughout the study and given a pseudonym. The names and any information that could identify you as a participant will not be used in the final thesis or any publication deriving from this study. Printed copies of raw data/transcripts of interviews will be securely locked away in my supervisor's office. All digital audio files and other electronic data will be stored on the hard drive of my supervisor's password-protected personal computer and the hard drive of my supervisor's password-protected laptop. All data from computers and any other device will be deleted after five years.

CONSENT (Edit as required)

I(Name) have been informed about the study entitled (**Exploring care and support leadership: Experiences of women principals in Pinetown district, KwaZulu Natal**) by Cebisile Sindisiwe Mhlongo.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without any penalty.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact [REDACTED] or LL Mbatha (supervisor) at MbathaL5@ukzn.ac.za.

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

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview

YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness
(Where applicable)

Date

Signature of Translator
(Where applicable)

Date

APPENDIX C - Data Collection Tools

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Title:

Exploring care and support leadership: Experiences of women principals in Pinetown district, KwaZulu Natal

Aims:

To explore the experiences of women principals, deputy principals, and senior teachers in Pinetown District regarding care and support leadership and its impact on school culture, teacher morale, and student performance.

Introduction (5-10 minutes):

1. Welcome and Introduction

- Briefly introduce myself and the study aim.
- Explain the purpose of the interview and how the data will be used to inform the study.
- Assure participants that their responses will remain confidential and anonymous.

2. Informed Consent

- I will verify that the participant understands the purpose and confidentiality of the study.
- Confirm his/her consent to participate and be recorded.
- Give the participant an opportunity to ask any questions before beginning the interview.

Interview Questions for Principals

1. How would you describe your approach to leadership in your own words? (Self-awareness)
2. Can you share specific examples of how you demonstrate care and support in your daily leadership practices? (Self-awareness/Empathy)
3. How do you balance being supportive with maintaining necessary authority? (Self-regulation)
4. What motivates you to implement a care and support approach in your leadership? (Motivation)
5. How do you adapt your leadership style to meet the emotional needs of different staff members? (Empathy/Social skills)
6. What obstacles have you encountered when trying to lead through care and support? (Self-awareness)
7. How do you manage your emotions when facing resistance to your leadership approach? (Self-regulation)
8. What strategies have you developed to overcome challenges to your care-oriented leadership style? (Motivation/Self-regulation)
9. How do cultural or community expectations affect your ability to implement care and support leadership? (Social skills)
10. Can you describe a situation where your empathetic approach was misinterpreted or challenged? (Empathy)
11. How do you believe your leadership approach has influenced the school's culture? (Self-awareness)
12. What changes in teacher morale have you observed that you would attribute to your leadership style? (Social skills)

13. How do you measure the impact of your care and support leadership on student performance? (Motivation)
14. What feedback have you received from the school community about your leadership approach? (Empathy)
15. How has implementing care and support leadership affected your personal growth as a leader? (Self-awareness)

Interview questions for Deputy Principals

1. How would you describe the principal's approach to leadership? (Observation of principal's self-awareness)
2. What specific care and support practices have you observed in the principal's leadership? (Observation of principal's empathy)
3. How does the principal communicate her expectations and vision while maintaining supportive relationships? (Social skills)
4. In what ways does the principal's leadership style influence your own approach to leadership? (Motivation)
5. How do you collaborate with the principal to create a caring school environment? (Social skills)
6. What challenges have you observed the principal facing when implementing care and support leadership? (Empathy)
7. How does the principal handle situations that test her care-oriented approach? (Self-regulation)
8. What external pressures affect the principal's ability to maintain a care and support leadership style? (Context)
9. How does the principal navigate conflicts while maintaining her care-oriented approach? (Self-regulation)

10. Have you observed situations where the principal's care approach needed to be balanced with more directive leadership? (Social skills)
11. How has the principal's leadership approach influenced staff relationships and collaboration? (Social skills)
12. What changes in school culture have you observed since the principal implemented her leadership style? (Empathy)
13. How has the principal's approach affected teacher commitment and performance? (Motivation)
14. What impact have you observed on student outcomes that might be attributed to the principal's leadership style? (Empathy)
15. How has the school's reputation in the community been affected by the principal's leadership approach? (Social skills)

Interview questions for Senior Educators

1. How would you describe your principal's leadership style based on your experiences? (Observation of principal's self-awareness)
2. Can you provide examples of how your principal demonstrates care and support toward staff? (Empathy)
3. How does your principal create spaces for teacher voice and agency? (Social skills)
4. In what ways does your principal recognise and respond to the emotional needs of staff? (Empathy)
5. How does your principal's communication style reflect her care and support approach? (Social skills)
6. What situations have you observed where the principal's care approach was challenged? (Context)

7. How does your principal respond when her leadership decisions are questioned? (Self-regulation)
8. What systemic or cultural barriers affect how the principal's leadership style is received? (Context)
9. Have you observed instances where the principal had to compromise her care approach to meet external demands? (Self-regulation)
10. How does the principal balance caring for staff with addressing performance concerns? (Empathy/Self-regulation)
11. How has the principal's leadership approach affected your motivation and job satisfaction? (Motivation)
12. What changes in collegial relationships have you noticed under this leadership style? (Social skills)
13. How has the school culture evolved under the principal's leadership? (Empathy/Social skills)
14. In what ways has the principal's approach influenced your classroom practices and student engagement? (Motivation)
15. How would you describe the impact of the principal's leadership style on overall staff wellbeing and morale? (Empathy)

Document analysis

a) Code of Conduct at school: The Code of Conduct for Schools is a statutory document developed in accordance with the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996). It establishes the behavioural standards, rights, and responsibilities of learners within the school community..

b) School Discipline Policy: The School Discipline Policy sets out the structure, principles, and practices used by the school for maintaining order and promoting good behaviour.

APPENDIX D - Editor's Letter

Mrs G C Hannant

24 November 2025

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I certify that I have edited the master's dissertation:

**Exploring Care and Support Leadership: Experiences of Women Principals in
Pinetown District, KwaZulu-Natal**

by

Cebisile Sindisiwe Mhlongo

However, the correction of all errors/missing information remains the responsibility of the author.

G. C. HANNANT (BA HED)

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