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Bridging Classroom Realities and School Governance: The Roles and Responsibilities of Teachers within South African SMTs during the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary digital era, effective school leadership increasingly depends on collaborative approaches that can rapidly translate dynamic classroom data into responsive institutional strategies. Grounded in Distributed Leadership Theory, this study explores the evolving roles and responsibilities of teachers within School Management Teams (SMTs) in South African schools. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from school principals, deputy principals, and department heads (DHs). Thematic analysis reveals that teachers serve as a critical bridge between micro-level classroom realities and macro-level school governance. Specifically, teachers enhance SMTs decision-making by transforming classroom-based insights and student assessment data into actionable school policies. Furthermore, teachers drive instructional adaptation through data-driven interventions, personalized learning support, and proactive classroom management, which directly foster student resilience and academic achievement. However, the study highlights that maximizing teacher leadership in this digital climate requires sustained, collaborative professional development to overcome persistent institutional resource constraints. These findings underscore the critical need for educational authorities to foster inclusive, technologically-adaptive leadership practices that recognize teachers as legitimate co-constructors of school improvement and learner success. Concurrently, this study offers a significant empirical contribution by conceptualising a modern framework of distributed governance that links immediate pedagogical datasets with strategic school administration in post-apartheid developing contexts.

Keywords: Distributed Leadership, School Management Teams, Teacher Leadership, Decision-Making, Digital Era, South Africa

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1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary global education systems, the structural paradigm of school governance has shifted dramatically from traditional bureaucratic centralization toward distributed and collaborative leadership models (Nadeem, 2024; Toprak et al., 2023). Globally, evidence indicates that school leadership structures that isolate decision-making within a single formal authority often fail to adapt to the fluid, high-stakes demands of modern educational environments (Constantinides, 2022; Leithwood et al., 2020). In response to these governance challenges, the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) formalized the institutional role of the School Management Teams (SMTs) through various policy mandates, notably the Task Team Report on School Leadership and Management and the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 (Kruger et al., 2022; Olivier & Kruger, 2022; Spies, 2022). Synthesizing the standard statutory

composition, an SMTs typically comprises the school principal, the deputy principal, and heads of department (DHs) (Jansen & du Plessis, 2023; Mestry, 2025). This internal administrative body is legally tasked with managing day-to-day school operations, overseeing curriculum delivery, monitoring academic performance, and maintaining institutional accountability.

Despite this clear legal and structural delineation of SMTs responsibilities, contemporary educational realities, particularly within developing post-apartheid contexts, demonstrate that formal administrative positions alone cannot insulate a school against operational instability or poor academic outcomes (Mkhize & Nel-Sanders, 2025; Saka, 2024). In South Africa, empirical assessments by educational economists highlight a deeply fractured system, where approximately 75% to 80% of schools are categorized as dysfunctional or underperforming, because they are characterized by severe resource constraints, overcrowded classrooms, and infrastructural deficits (Bayat et al., 2025; Memela & Ramrathan, 2022; Mokgwathi et al., 2023). Within this challenging framework, the traditional top-down operational routines of SMTs are frequently overwhelmed. Consequently, scholarship in organizational management increasingly emphasizes that post-bureaucratic school effectiveness relies heavily on the active mobilization of teacher leadership as a core component of distributed governance. Teachers, by virtue of their immediate proximity to the classroom ecosystem, possess direct and unmediated access to student behavioral metrics, learning difficulties, and instructional challenges that formal SMTs members cannot observe from isolated administrative offices (Maharaj & Chauke, 2025; Matemane & Chauke, 2025).

Compounding these structural challenges, the modern educational landscape has entered a rapid digital era, introducing a new layer of complexity to school management routines worldwide (Kilcoyne, 2026; Printy & Liu, 2021). The integration of technology in educational spaces has fundamentally altered how instructional data is generated, analyzed, and applied (Mena-Guacas et al., 2025; Mhlongo et al., 2023). In the contemporary digital climate, data-driven decision-making (DDDM) has shifted from a theoretical luxury to an institutional necessity (AlShammari & AlAjmi, 2025; Kaspi & Venkatraman, 2023). Large-scale international comparative evaluations, such as those conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) via the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), demonstrate a robust statistical correlation between distributed leadership practices, technology adoption, and collective teacher efficacy(Ahn et al., 2025; Soncin et al., 2025). However, within sub-Saharan Africa, and South Africa specifically, the transition into the digital era is profoundly uneven (Astuti & Ayinde, 2025; Mhlongo & Dlamini, 2022). The systemic digital divide means that while affluent urban schools successfully leverage sophisticated Learning Management Systems (LMS) and automated analytics, under-resourced public schools face massive barriers, including erratic electricity, lack of hardware, and low digital literacy among staff (Ajani, 2025; Mojapelo & Durodolu, 2022). Under these digital-era constraints, the role of the teacher changes from a mere instructor to a critical administrative bridge, responsible for translating raw classroom-level pedagogical data into strategic insights that can guide SMTs policies.

To analyze how teachers navigate these complex, overlapping administrative and instructional spaces, this investigation is underpinned by an integrated tri-theoretical framework: Distributed Leadership Theory (Harris et al., 2022; Hickey et al., 2022; Nadeem, 2024), Instructional Leadership Theory (Hallinger et al., 2025; Munna, 2023), and Role Theory (Chandler et al., 2022). Distributed Leadership Theory conceptualizes leadership not as a property of an individual or a formal position, but as a dynamic practice stretched across leaders, followers, and organizational routines or tools (Harris et al., 2022; Modeste, 2022). Within this lens, the interactive exchange between teachers and the formal SMTs during routine administrative meetings represents the actual enactment of leadership practice. Instructional Leadership Instructional Leadership Theory by narrowing the analytical focus onto the specific mechanisms that improve the quality of classroom teaching and learning, such as managing the curriculum, protecting instructional time, and promoting a positive school learning climate (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2022). Finally, Role Theory provides the necessary psychological and sociological boundaries to examine how teachers cope with the practical friction of these expanded tasks (Anglin et al., 2022). Role Theory posits that individuals operating within complex organizations frequently experience "role conflict" (the friction of competing expectations) and "role overload" (the structural burden of insufficient time to fulfill multiple mandates) when forced to balance extensive classroom instruction with intensive administrative governance (Hudson & Hickman, 2026).

A rigorous review of global and domestic literature confirms that the intersection of collaborative decision-making and teacher leadership is deeply connected to overall school improvement and student success. Quantitative meta-analyses across international contexts establish that schools adopting distributed leadership configurations exhibit higher levels of organizational commitment, enhanced teacher retention, and superior performance in standardized student assessments. For example, empirical studies across Asian and European contexts demonstrate that when teachers are structurally integrated into formal decision-making bodies, the resulting policies are significantly more realistic, contextually responsive, and easily implemented at the classroom level (Cachia et al., 2026; Dieudé & Prøitz, 2024; Hwa, 2023; So et al., 2024). In South Africa, research by Shula (2026) and Moloto et al. (2026) confirms that involving teachers in leadership processes fosters institutional trust and collective efficacy, which directly counteracts the

pervasive sense of professional isolation often felt by teachers in high-stress, under-resourced public schools.

Furthermore, existing scholarship consistently connects effective classroom management and targeted learner support directly to broader institutional effectiveness (Herman et al., 2022; Putra & Yanto, 2025). Large-scale educational interventions demonstrate that structured classroom environments, proactive behavior management, and differentiated instructional models are essential for supporting struggling learners in socio-economically marginalized communities. In South Africa, the classroom environment is highly complex due to extreme linguistic diversity (with eleven official languages) (Ncokwana & Somlata, 2025), vast disparities in socio-economic backgrounds (Hamann & Horn, 2022), and varying levels of academic readiness (De Wit et al., 2023). Consequently, teachers must constantly design and execute personalized learning interventions. Literature on inclusive education emphasizes that for these classroom-level interventions to be sustainable, there must be a seamless channel of communication and resource allocation between the teachers executing the plans and the SMTs members controlling the school budget and strategic planning.

To sustain these complex capabilities, continuous professional development (CPD) remains an indispensable strategic lever (Nakaziba & Ngulube, 2025; Ndlovu et al., 2025). Research by Revina et al. (2023) on teacher professional growth indicates that traditional, one-off informational workshops are highly ineffective at altering long-term instructional quality or leadership capacity. Instead, contemporary scholarship emphasizes the superiority of sustained, school-based, and collaborative learning configurations, such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and peer mentoring networks (Maipath & Zulu, 2025). In South Africa, the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development (2011–2025) (Jita & Munje, 2021) explicitly mandates the establishment of school-based PLCs to overcome historic inequities in professional training. However, longitudinal empirical tracking of CPD implementation reveals severe, systemic bottlenecks, including uneven institutional access, heavy administrative workloads, inadequate financial backing from provincial departments, and a lack of specialized training for SMTs members on how to mentor teacher-leaders.

Despite this extensive body of international and domestic literature on school leadership, a profound and critical research gap persists within contemporary educational administration scholarship. While prior studies have extensively mapped out the normative, policy-level frameworks of teacher leadership (Mensah Abraham et al., 2026; Moloto et al., 2026) or evaluated the structural policy compliance of SMTs as bureaucratic units (Klinck et al., 2023; Shava & Muringa, 2024), existing literature has largely overlooked the empirical and micro-political realities of how teachers dynamically bridge the structural gap between classroom realities and institutional governance, particularly within the rapid transformations of the digital era. Most existing scholarship treats classroom-level instruction and school-level administration as separate, disconnected silos. Furthermore, there is a severe lack of qualitative, empirical research examining how immediate pedagogical datasets, such as digitized assessment scores, real-time behavioral observations, and fluid student performance feedback, are structurally mobilized by teachers to actively reshape SMTs strategic decisions. Existing South African studies frequently fail to capture how distributed governance actually operates under the pressures of rapid digital transitions when constrained by severe infrastructural shortages. This lack of empirical intersectionality leaves a significant void in understanding the authentic, bottom-up enactment of distributed leadership in developing economies.

To address this empirical and theoretical omission, this study offers a critical, timely intervention. The primary objective of this qualitative investigation is to explore the specific roles and responsibilities that teachers assume within South African School Management Teams (SMTs), focusing explicitly on how they bridge immediate classroom realities with macro-level school governance during the digital era. By capturing and analyzing the detailed qualitative narratives of school principals, deputy principals, and department heads (DHs), this study uncovers the fluid alignment between grassroots pedagogical execution and strategic school administration. Concurrently, in direct alignment with contemporary educational imperatives, this study provides a significant empirical contribution by conceptualizing a modern framework of distributed governance. This framework effectively links immediate classroom pedagogical datasets with strategic, digitally-aware school administration within resource-constrained, post-apartheid developing contexts, offering clear insights for educational authorities to foster inclusive, technologically-adaptive leadership practices that recognize teachers as legitimate co-constructors of school improvement and learner success.

2. METHOD

Grounded in Distributed Leadership Theory (Harris et al., 2022; Hickey et al., 2022; Nadeem, 2024), this study adopted an interpretivist qualitative research design to systematically explore the experiential perceptions and institutional insights of school leaders regarding the roles and responsibilities of teachers within School Management Teams (SMTs) during the digital era. A qualitative phenomenological approach was deemed most appropriate because it allows for a granular, contextualized, and in-depth understanding

of participants' lived experiences and professional realities. By prioritizing the subjectivity of key organizational actors, this design successfully uncovers the subtle micro-political and data-driven interactions that define the contemporary enactment of distributed leadership within complex school ecosystems. Purposive sampling was strategically employed to select information-rich participants from public secondary schools operating within resource-constrained South African environments. To ensure high-quality, systemic data triangulation, the participant matrix was explicitly limited to individuals holding formal administrative and oversight roles within the school hierarchy, namely school principals, deputy principals, and department heads (DHs). These administrators were selected because their specific leadership positions uniquely task them with monitoring curriculum execution, managing data-driven pedagogical outcomes, and observing the direct contributions of classroom teachers to broader SMTs functions. The final sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, the point at which further interviews yielded no novel themes or conceptual insights regarding teacher leadership practices. A total of 15 key informants participated in the study, comprising nine school principals, one deputy principal, and six department heads, corresponding to the specific pseudonyms utilized in the reporting of the empirical findings.

Primary empirical data were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews. This instrument was chosen to provide a rigorous yet flexible qualitative framework, enabling participants to elaborate extensively on their concrete observations, daily leadership routines, and institutional challenges. To align with the digital era framing of the research objective, the interview protocol was operationalized into four primary thematic axes, focusing specifically on how teachers structurally contribute classroom-based insights, student tracking data, and pedagogical metrics to guide SMT policy formulations, alongside the mechanisms through which they manage complex classroom dynamics, design targeted learning support interventions, and engage in continuous professional development (CPD). All interviews were conducted in English, lasting between 45 to 60 minutes. To maintain empirical integrity, all sessions were digitally audio-recorded with explicit permission, anonymized, and transcribed verbatim for rigorous analysis.

The verbatim transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, strictly adhering to the six-phase qualitative framework conceptualized by Braun and Clarke (Byrne, 2022). The operational steps executed to achieve the research objective were structured systematically, beginning with familiarization through iterative reading of the anonymized transcripts and cross-checking against the audio recordings to ensure absolute transcription accuracy. Open coding was subsequently conducted line-by-line across all transcripts, applying conceptual labels to meaningful semantic units, such as coding statements mentioning data sharing as active decision-making contributions or personalized plans as targeted interventions. These initial codes were then organized into broader conceptual categories and candidate themes, which were rigorously checked against the raw data extracts and the entire dataset to ensure absolute contextual harmony. The finalized thematic architecture was eventually locked into three distinct, non-overlapping subthemes that directly map onto the research results: collaboration and decision-making, classroom management and learner support, and professional development and capacity building.

To establish high qualitative rigor, the study employed Guba and Lincoln's parallel criteria for trustworthiness, ensuring credibility through member-checking, where preliminary transcript interpretations were returned to selected participants to verify accuracy, and data source triangulation, comparing perspectives across three distinct administrative levels. Dependability was ensured through a detailed audit trail documenting every step of the analytical process, including raw field notes, initial coding structures, and thematic evolution maps, while confirmability was maintained through rigorous reflexivity, where the researchers constantly bracketed personal preconceptions to guarantee that the findings represent the authentic voices of the participants rather than researcher bias. Regarding ethical considerations, official clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional and provincial educational authority. Prior to data collection, all participants were provided with a comprehensive information sheet and subsequently signed a formal informed consent document. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informants were explicitly notified of their right to withdraw at any stage without prejudice. To guarantee absolute confidentiality and anonymity, all institutional markers were omitted, and alphanumeric pseudonyms were applied to all data items throughout the manuscript

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Demographics and Contextual Overview of Participants

To maintain rigorous empiricism, a comprehensive understanding of the structural framework within which this study operates requires a detailed baseline mapping of the participant matrix. The primary qualitative dataset was elicited from a total of 15 key institutional informants who hold formal administrative, curriculum management, and evaluative oversight roles across selected public secondary schools in South Africa. The purposefully sampled cohort consists of nine school principals, one deputy principal, and six department heads (DHs) who represent the strategic core of their respective School Management Teams (SMTs). Specifically, the field-level narratives were extracted from Principal 1,

Principal 2, Principal 3, Principal 4, Principal 6, Principal 7, Principal 9, Principal 10, and Principal 12 , alongside Deputy Principal 1 , and Department Heads designated as DH1, DH2, DH3, DH5, DH6, and DH14. This multi-layered administrative representation ensures systematic data triangulation, as these school leaders are legally and operationally tasked with balancing macro-level institutional compliance with micro-level instructional quality.

The empirical setting of this study is situated within the complex, post-apartheid educational landscape of South African public secondary schools, which are currently operating under a dual-reality paradigm. On one hand, these institutions face severe, chronic resource limitations, infrastructure backlogs, uneven funding allocations, and heavy instructional workloads. These structural bottlenecks frequently manifest as overcrowded classrooms, linguistic diversities, and socio-economic inequalities that place extreme stress on routine school administration. On the other hand, these resource-constrained schools find themselves positioned directly within the inescapable transition into the digital era. This contemporary digital climate demands that schools rapidly adopt data-driven practices, integrate emerging instructional strategies, and process dynamic student performance datasets to ensure educational accountability.

Consequently, the participants' narratives reflect the lived realities of navigating this exact tension: how to execute collaborative school governance and improve learning standards while operating within under-resourced environments that are under pressure to adapt to modern, data-centric educational shifts. The qualitative insights presented in the subsequent sections demonstrate how these 15 school leaders perceive classroom teachers not merely as passive instructional deliverers, but as vital administrative links who utilize raw pedagogical data to help the SMTs cross the deep systemic divide between classroom realities and digital-era school governance.

3.1.2. Subtheme 1: Collaborative Decision-Making and Policy Formulation

The first major finding of this study centers on how micro-level classroom realities are systematically elevated by teachers to shape macro-level school governance and policy formulation within the SMTs. In the contemporary digital era, this collaborative dynamic has transitioned from traditional verbal reporting into a sophisticated structure of digital data-driven decision-making (DDDM). Rather than acting as passive consumers of administrative mandates, classroom teachers serve as active data nodes, capturing, processing, and presenting pedagogical datasets that directly determine institutional strategies. School leaders consistently noted that the SMTs cannot function as an isolated bureaucratic silo because it relies entirely on the fluid stream of classroom metrics provided by teachers.

The strategic necessity of integrating teachers' classroom insights into the SMT's executive planning was heavily emphasized by school principals. Informants noted that teachers possess a proximity to the instructional frontline that formal administrators lack, making their contributions indispensable for realistic policy development. For instance, Principal 1 observed:

"*Teachers are the ones on the ground; they know the learners better than anyone else in the SMT. Their inputs during our management meetings are what keep our school policies realistic and responsive to what is actually happening in the classrooms.*"

This perspective was further supported by Principal 2, who highlighted that strategic governance fails when it is divorced from the immediate pedagogical environment:

"*We cannot just sit in the office and design school strategies without the teachers. Their feedback on learner behavior, daily attendance, and curriculum coverage forms the actual foundation of our annual school improvement plans.*"

In the digital climate, this collaborative bridge is increasingly operationalized through the mobilization of structured student performance data and continuous assessment trackers. Teachers do not merely share anecdotes; they synthesize digital pedagogical datasets to alter institutional directives. Principal 3 explicitly connected teacher input with the management of academic standards:

"*When we analyze our quarterly results, it is the teachers who bring the raw marks and assessment breakdowns to the SMTs. They show us exactly where the learning gaps are, allowing the management to reallocate resources or adjust the timetable to support failing subjects.*"

Similarly, Principal 4 detailed how the SMTs uses computerized assessment summaries submitted by teachers to design immediate, data-driven school policies:

"*The teachers provide the SMTs with detailed schedules of test scores and learner profiles. Based on this data, we formulate specific school-wide intervention tracks, such as compulsory afternoon classes for high-risk subjects.*"

Principal 9 also confirmed that democratic governance within the SMTs is sustained by this collaborative data exchange, which informs broader curriculum management:

"*True leadership within the SMTs means recognizing that teachers hold the key instructional data. Their reports on learner performance and classroom resource deficits are what dictate our financial spending and purchasing of educational tools.*"

This top-level administrative view was strongly corroborated by middle management and executive assistants, who directly facilitate the flow of data from the classroom to the boardroom. Deputy Principal 1

explained the systemic process through which teachers' instructional analytics are elevated into strategic SMTs interventions:

"*My role involves synthesizing the academic reports from different departments before they reach the executive agenda. I see firsthand how teachers transform raw classroom marks into actionable data. When teachers flag a drop in performance via their tracking sheets, it forces the SMT to immediately revise our instructional guidelines.*"

Furthermore, Department Heads (DHs), who act as the primary structural link between teaching staff and the executive executive, provided granular insights into how this data transmission operates within specific subject fields. DH1 highlighted that curriculum policy modification is entirely dependent on bottom-up teacher input:

"*In our department meetings, teachers present their assessment portfolios and continuous tracking tools. We take these classroom realities directly to the central SMTs meetings. If the teachers report that a specific section of the syllabus is causing widespread failure, the SMTs modifies the school's assessment policy accordingly.*"

DH2 expanded on this by emphasizing how teachers' diagnostic data prevents the SMTs from enforcing detached or unworkable regulations:

"*Teachers use their daily mark sheets to show us what works and what does not. Without this bottom-up data stream, the SMTs would be making blind decisions that do not match the actual capacities or needs of our learners.*"

However, while the ideal of collaborative decision-making is robust, the actual operationalization of this data-driven bridge frequently collides with structural friction and institutional limitations. DH3 provided a critical perspective, noting that heavy workloads and a lack of formalized digital tools often hinder the seamless transmission of classroom data to the SMTs:

"*We want teachers to contribute more to SMTs planning, but the reality is that they are overwhelmed with administrative paperwork and large classes. Sometimes, the data they bring to us is delayed or incomplete because they do not have proper digital platforms to record and analyze their marks efficiently, and the management support for training is limited.*"

Despite these operational hurdles, the data proves that when channels are sustained, teacher input remains the primary anchor for institutional coherence. DH6 summarized this collective reliance, stating:

"*The SMTs provides the framework, but the teachers supply the substance. Every major policy we pass regarding curriculum delivery or student tracking is a direct reflection of the continuous data and insights brought forward by our teaching staff.*"

In conclusion, the empirical evidence within Subtheme 1 demonstrates that teacher leadership within South African public schools is enacted through the continuous elevation of micro-level classroom data into macro-level school governance. In the digital era, this process serves as a vital institutional mechanism, transforming classroom teachers into legitimate co-constructors of school policy who ensure that executive SMTs decisions remain directly aligned with the evolving instructional realities of the learners.

3.1.3. Subtheme 2: Classroom Management and Data-Driven Learner Support

The second empirical theme identifies the frontline operational mechanisms through which teachers translate routine classroom management and academic metrics into targeted learner support. In the contemporary educational landscape, effective classroom management has transcended physical behavior regulation; it has evolved into a form of technologically-adaptive leadership. Within this paradigm, teachers actively analyze localized student performance datasets to diagnose learning barriers, optimize instructional environments, and design personalized, interactive pedagogical interventions. The qualitative data reveals that the SMTs relies fundamentally on teachers to act as pedagogical diagnosticians who ensure that macro-level academic recovery strategies remain tightly synchronized with micro-level student needs.

School principals heavily emphasized that the capacity of the SMTs to support marginalized or underperforming students is entirely contingent on the structured learning environments and diagnostic reports managed by teachers. Informants underscored that inclusive education cannot be achieved through administrative mandates alone, but through data-informed classroom structures. For instance, Principal 1 articulated this reliance by stating:

"*Effective school governance cannot be separated from what happens inside the classroom. Teachers create the disciplined, structured environment that allows learning to take place. When a teacher manages their classroom well, they are able to closely monitor individual learner progress and provide the SMTs with clear indications of who is falling behind.*"

Expanding on this, Principal 4 highlighted how teachers utilize systematic academic records to shift the school's intervention strategies from reactive policing to proactive, data-driven support:

"*The SMTs depends on teachers to identify learners who require urgent academic support. Teachers use their continuous assessment records to flag specific learning deficits. This micro-level data allows us to collaborate and plan targeted remedial programs rather than guessing what the learners need.*"

Furthermore, school leaders observed that in complex, resource-constrained environments, teachers must act as adaptive instructional leaders who use student data to navigate systemic socio-economic bottlenecks. Principal 6 observed:

"*Our learners face deep socio-economic challenges that affect their academic performance. Teachers play a critical role by looking beyond the surface; they analyze test marks and classroom engagement to identify struggling learners early. They then bring these insights to the SMTs so we can coordinate wider support frameworks.*"

Principal 10 also confirmed that creating a conducive, data-responsive learning environment is a core leadership responsibility that teachers execute on behalf of the institutional collective:

"*Classroom management is not just about keeping quiet; it is about creating an environment where data guides instruction. Teachers track how learners respond to different teaching methods and adjust their lessons accordingly. This classroom-level flexibility is what keeps our curriculum responsive.*"

This systemic view was heavily reinforced by executive administrators who manage the integration of school-wide curriculum plans. Deputy Principal 1 detailed how teachers' classroom-level tracking tools are structurally mobilized to alter broader instructional schedules within the SMT framework:

"*As part of the SMTs oversight, I review the learner profile sheets and intervention logs compiled by teachers. Their daily documentation of student struggles serves as our early warning system. When teachers show us a pattern of failure in specific foundational concepts, it prompts the SMTs to reallocate instructional hours and adjust our academic support policies.*"

Department Heads (DHs), who directly oversee subject-specific curriculum delivery, provided granular insights into how teachers operationalize "planning lessons based on data" to foster inclusive education. DH1 explained that departmental strategy formulation is hollow without the diagnostic metrics generated by teaching staff:

"*In our department, teachers do not just teach blindly. They conduct rigorous error analyses after every test to see exactly which questions or concepts the learners failed to grasp. We use this diagnostic data during our SMTs feedback sessions to completely redesign our instructional pacing and remedial materials.*"

DH5 expanded on this process, noting that teachers' ability to implement differentiated instruction based on academic tracking data is what prevents widespread student failure:

"*Teachers are constantly modifying their lesson plans based on the performance trends they observe in their mark sheets. They group learners according to their academic needs and design personalized support paths. This level of classroom leadership ensures that our SMTs policies are translated into actual learning improvements.*"

However, the field-level narratives also demonstrate that executing this highly demanding, data-driven support model exposes teachers to significant operational friction, particularly when administrative backing is uneven. DH14 provided a crucial, realistic perspective on the structural burdens teachers face when balancing these dual mandates:

"*We encourage our teachers to use data for personalized learner support, but it is an immense task. Teachers are managing overcrowded classrooms with diverse learning needs, and the administrative pressure to document every intervention can lead to role overload. Without sustained support and better resource allocation from the SMTs, maintaining this level of tracking becomes unsustainable for the staff.*"

In summary, the empirical evidence within Subtheme 2 indicates that teachers within South African public secondary schools enact critical leadership roles by transforming traditional classroom management into an analytical, data-centric practice. By analyzing immediate student performance metrics and structurally mobilizing these datasets to plan adaptive lessons and targeted interventions, teachers effectively bridge the gap between classroom vulnerability and strategic school governance, ensuring that institutional support remains directly aligned with learner achievement.

3.1.4. Subtheme 3: Professional Development and Institutional Constraints

The final empirical theme addresses the critical nexus between continuous professional development (CPD) and the structural systemic barriers that shape teacher leadership within the SMTs. In the contemporary digital era, the demand for collaborative and data-driven school governance necessitates a corresponding evolution in professional capacity building. However, the qualitative evidence reveals that the transition toward sophisticated, digitally-aware leadership models is profoundly constrained by a persistent digital divide and widespread institutional shortages. The narratives of school leaders indicate that while ongoing training is recognized as a mandatory strategic lever to empower teachers, the operationalization of these initiatives frequently collides with severe infrastructural deficits and unmanaged workloads.

School principals consistently identified targeted workshops and resource provision as essential prerequisites for enabling teachers to overcome operational anxieties and fully engage in executive SMTs functions. Informants noted that empowering teachers to handle complex educational datasets requires

structured institutional backing. For instance, Principal 7 highlighted the direct correlation between active management support and effective distributed leadership, stating:

"*We support the teachers by offering ongoing training, useful resources, and structural support. This helps teachers overcome challenges and participate fully in the SMTs, fostering a collaborative environment for informed decision-making.*"

Expanding on this imperative, Principal 9 emphasized that professional capacity building serves as a vital psychological and operational mechanism to integrate teachers into the macro-governance framework:

"*The school leaders really want to help teachers by doing workshops. This way, teachers can more easily tackle challenges and get involved in the SMTs. By working together and communicating openly, we can make better decisions that will help both teachers and learners.*"

Furthermore, school leaders acknowledged that in the digital era, professional development must move away from static, one-off informational sessions toward advanced, systematic training configurations. Principal 12 articulated this institutional commitment to sustainable capacity building by noting:

"*To make sure teachers are well-prepared and always getting better, the school leadership works to give them access to advanced training, lots of helpful resources, and steady, reliable support.*"

However, the field-level data uncovers a stark divergence between these administrative aspirations and the harsh material realities of under-resourced public schools, where the digital divide severely limits professional growth. When teachers lack access to digitized mark sheets, functional computer laboratories, or automated analytical software, the administrative demand to practice "data-driven governance" inevitably induces role strain. DH3 provided a vital, critical perspective that contextualizes how limited resources and inadequate institutional support bottleneck grassroots teacher leadership:

"*However, we do face challenges, especially with limited resources and support from the school management. To address these issues, we request the resources we need and seek professional development opportunities.*"

This institutional friction proves that the digital divide in developing contexts is not merely an infrastructural issue, but a critical governance barrier. When public schools lack steady funding, adequate technology hardware, and specialized digital literacy workshops, teachers are forced to rely on exhausting manual logging systems to process pedagogical metrics. This operational reality demonstrates a severe mismatch between policy expectations for modern distributed leadership and the actual resource-constrained environments of many South African schools.

In summary, the empirical findings within Subtheme 3 demonstrate that maximizing teacher contributions to SMTs during the digital era requires a deliberate institutional pivot toward technologically-adaptive professional development. Otoritas sekolah and education departments must look beyond conventional training and proactively address systemic resource deficits, erratic technology access, and heavy administrative workloads. Cultivating teachers as legitimate co-constructors of school governance can only be sustained when continuous professional learning is structurally aligned with the fluid technological demands of the modern educational era.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Enacting Distributed Leadership: Transforming Teachers from Policy Implementers to Co-Constructors of Governance

The findings of this study suggest that effective school governance cannot be sustained solely through the actions of formal School Management Teams (SMTs), particularly within the increasingly complex and dynamic context of contemporary education. Narratives from principals, deputy principals, and department heads indicate that leadership is no longer confined to formally designated positions but is enacted through collaborative interactions among administrators and teachers. This pattern aligns closely with Distributed Leadership Theory (Harris et al., 2022; Hickey et al., 2022; Nadeem, 2024), which conceptualizes leadership as a practice distributed across multiple organizational actors. The findings further demonstrate that when teachers contribute classroom-based knowledge to strategic planning processes, they become active participants in school governance rather than solely implementers of policy directives. As a result, teachers play an increasingly influential role in shaping institutional priorities, curriculum decisions, and resource allocation processes.

This transformation of teacher agency aligns with and extends findings from several influential international studies published in recent years. For instance, studies by Skhosana et al. (2023) and Skhosana et al. (2023) demonstrate that schools operating under decentralized governance structures possess a greater capacity for rapid organizational adaptation. When classroom-based data are prioritized by middle management, institutional strategies become more contextually responsive and pragmatically grounded. This finding resonates with Maree et al. (2023), who demonstrated how South African SMTs utilize teachers' diagnostic assessment data to inform localized school interventions. Furthermore, Tsakeni et al. (2023) found that distributed leadership frameworks serve as a powerful mechanism for strengthening collective teacher efficacy and fostering collaborative school improvement. Similarly, Sesoane et al. (2025) argued that the structural integration of teachers into executive administrative processes helps dismantle

longstanding cultures of professional isolation and cultivates a stronger sense of shared accountability for learner achievement.

In the context of digital transformation, collaborative engagement between teachers and School Management Teams (SMTs) plays a crucial role in fostering organizational resilience and professional trust. Waghid (2023) emphasizes that sustainable digital reform depends not only on technological resources but also on participatory leadership structures that facilitate meaningful teacher involvement in decision-making processes. This argument is reinforced by Mestry (2025), whose investigation of curriculum supervision in under-resourced South African schools revealed that inclusive leadership practices can help schools navigate significant operational and resource-related challenges. Collectively, these findings suggest that integrating teachers' classroom-based knowledge into strategic planning processes enhances the capacity of schools to respond adaptively to both educational and organizational demands.

Finally, the critical need to bridge classroom realities with institutional decision-making to foster a positive professional climate is reinforced by the empirical findings of Uras Eren & Atay (2025). Schools characterized by strong, multi-layered teacher representation within internal management structures are exponentially more successful at sustaining long-term educational reforms. By linking these recent global perspectives with the field-level data of this study, it becomes theoretically indisputable that the active involvement of teachers in SMTs operations is not merely a collaborative ideal. Within the volatile, tech-driven, and resource-constrained landscape of post-apartheid education, this distributed governance model stands as a mandatory institutional strategy to secure administrative coherence and ensure that strategic management decisions remain deeply rooted in the authentic pedagogical needs of the learners.

3.2.2. Bridging the Gap: Mobilizing Pedagogical Datasets for Strategic School Governance

The findings of this study suggest that teachers play a pivotal role in connecting classroom-level realities with school-level governance processes. Through the systematic collection and communication of assessment data, learner feedback, and classroom performance information, teachers contribute valuable evidence that informs SMTs deliberations and strategic decision-making. This continuous flow of information enables school leaders to make decisions that are more responsive to student needs and classroom conditions, thereby strengthening the alignment between institutional objectives and educational practice. The findings further indicate that teacher involvement in data-informed processes extends beyond instructional responsibilities, positioning teachers as active participants in organizational learning and school improvement. Consistent with contemporary perspectives on distributed leadership, these contributions enhance the capacity of schools to make informed, context-sensitive decisions and respond effectively to emerging educational challenges.

This mobilization of classroom-generated pedagogical data for strategic institutional planning aligns with and extends a growing body of international scholarship on data-informed educational leadership. Qazi & Pachler (2025), for example, demonstrated that schools implementing systematic teacher-led data analysis processes exhibit greater curriculum adaptability and responsiveness to emerging learning needs. By transforming everyday student performance data into actionable knowledge, teachers contribute directly to more informed instructional planning and resource allocation. This finding resonates with evidence from South African schools, where principals utilize assessment data to guide the redistribution of remedial support and instructional time. Similarly, Lichy (2026) emphasized that effective educational leadership increasingly depends on the integration of bottom-up pedagogical evidence rather than reliance on top-down managerial intuition. Collectively, these studies suggest that sustained flows of assessment information between teachers and school leadership constitute a critical foundation for institutional resilience and continuous school improvement.

Furthermore, the findings of Tyler et al. (2025) provide additional support for the strategic role of teacher-generated data in contemporary school management. Their qualitative investigation of data-driven teacher teams demonstrated that collaborative engagement with student performance data can strengthen the effectiveness and responsiveness of school-wide interventions. This observation is consistent with the accounts of department heads and deputy principals in the present study, who identified departmental assessment analyses and learner progress records as critical sources of information for instructional planning and intervention. Likewise, Arif et al. (2025) found that schools operating in resource-constrained contexts rely heavily on classroom-level diagnostic information to inform decisions about resource allocation and educational priorities. These findings closely align with the experiences of South African SMTs members, who described teacher-generated assessment data as a key factor influencing budgeting decisions and resource procurement processes.

Finally, the findings of Zhan et al. (2024) provide further support for the interconnected roles of teacher leadership, data use, and institutional coherence within contemporary school systems. Their large-scale investigation of sustainable data-informed practices revealed that meaningful teacher engagement is essential for embedding data use within everyday school processes and organizational culture. Consistent with these findings, the qualitative evidence generated in the present study suggests that teachers play a significant role in translating classroom-level information into actionable knowledge for school leaders. As

a result, teacher participation in data-informed processes extends beyond instructional practice and contributes to broader governance and decision-making functions. In increasingly complex educational environments, these contributions strengthen the capacity of SMTs to make responsive, context-sensitive decisions that support both organizational effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

3.2.3. Data-Driven Interventions and Inclusive Pedagogy in Complex Environments

The findings of this study indicate that classroom teachers play a pivotal role in supporting learners who experience academic challenges. By drawing on assessment results, learner feedback, and ongoing classroom observations, teachers develop personalized instructional responses that are sensitive to diverse learning needs. The qualitative evidence suggests that teachers move beyond generalized remediation approaches by continuously monitoring learner progress and implementing differentiated instructional strategies. These practices contribute to the effective enactment of inclusive education at the classroom level and support the broader goal of equitable learning opportunities for all learners. Furthermore, the findings highlight the close relationship between pastoral support and instructional adaptation, demonstrating how teachers contribute to school-wide efforts aimed at improving learner achievement and promoting academic recovery.

The findings of this study are consistent with a growing body of research emphasizing the role of data-informed practices in supporting inclusive education. Goyibova et al. (2025), for example, contend that differentiated instruction is most effective when teachers use diagnostic information to tailor learning experiences to individual learner needs. Demmans Epp et al. (2023) suggests that data-informed instructional adjustments can enhance learner engagement, resilience, and academic progress. These findings closely align with the experiences of department heads in the present study, who reported using assessment analyses to inform instructional pacing and targeted support strategies. Similarly, Yermakova et al. (2025) highlight the importance of combining inclusive pedagogical approaches with systematic identification of learner needs. Diagnostic assessment processes can support more responsive instructional interventions and create greater opportunities for participation among learners who face academic barriers. Collectively, these studies reinforce the importance of teacher-led data use as a mechanism for advancing inclusive educational practice and improving learner outcomes.

The findings of this study align with contemporary research emphasizing the role of teacher-generated data in advancing educational equity, particularly within resource-constrained educational settings. Sortwell et al. (2024) argue that continuous formative assessment practices enable teachers to develop instructional responses that are sensitive to the diverse needs of learners, thereby helping schools address the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on educational outcomes. In the South African context, where schools often operate under conditions of linguistic diversity, overcrowding, and infrastructural limitations (Mokgwathi et al., 2023). Similarly, Asfaw et al. (2025) highlights the importance of data-informed teaching practices in supporting inclusive education during ongoing digital transformation processes across sub-Saharan Africa. The study suggests that teachers' ability to interpret and act upon learner performance data is essential for identifying learners who may be at risk of academic disengagement and for providing timely support that promotes participation, inclusion, and educational success.

Finally, the findings of Ketikidou & Saiti (2025) highlight the importance of sustained communication between teachers and school leadership in the implementation of inclusive educational practices. Their research suggests that intervention strategies are more effective when school leaders actively incorporate classroom-based evidence into decision-making and resource allocation processes. Consistent with these findings, participants in the present study emphasized the value of continuous dialogue between teachers and SMTs members in identifying learner needs and coordinating appropriate support measures. Collectively, these findings indicate that teachers' engagement with complex classroom challenges extends beyond instructional practice and contributes meaningfully to broader leadership and governance functions within schools. In the context of post-apartheid public education, data-informed and locally responsive interventions may therefore represent an important mechanism for strengthening inclusive education and enhancing schools' capacity to address diverse learner needs.

3.2.4. Navigating the Friction: Role Overload and the Digital Divide Amidst Resource Constraints

The final theme emerging from this study concerns the challenges associated with implementing distributed leadership within resource-constrained public secondary schools. While distributed leadership theory emphasizes collaboration, shared responsibility, and collective agency, the findings suggest that the practical enactment of these principles is often influenced by contextual limitations. In particular, the account provided by DH3 highlights how resource constraints and uneven institutional support can complicate teachers' participation in leadership processes. Participants reported balancing extensive instructional responsibilities alongside increasing administrative and managerial expectations, creating tensions between teaching and leadership roles. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of distributed leadership depends not only on opportunities for teacher participation but also on the availability of adequate resources, organizational support, and clearly defined structures. Without such conditions, efforts

to expand teacher leadership may place additional demands on educators and limit the sustainability of distributed leadership practices.

This finding aligns closely with Role Theory, particularly its emphasis on role conflict and role strain within complex organizational settings (Anglin et al., 2022). In developing contexts such as South Africa, these challenges may be further intensified by disparities in technological access and uneven infrastructure development. This observation is consistent with the arguments advanced by Davids (2023), who highlight the tension between policy aspirations for democratic school governance and the practical realities faced by under-resourced schools. The findings suggest that when schools lack adequate technological infrastructure, reliable electricity, and efficient data management systems, the implementation of evidence-informed governance becomes more demanding. Under such conditions, teachers are often required to undertake extensive manual data collection and reporting processes, which may increase workload pressures and complicate the effective enactment of leadership responsibilities.

Furthermore, recent scholarship on educational leadership in developing contexts highlights the importance of addressing structural constraints to support the sustainable implementation of distributed leadership practices. Nadeem (2024), for example, argues that the effectiveness of distributed leadership may be limited when schools are expected to adopt collaborative governance structures without corresponding investments in infrastructure and organizational capacity. Under such conditions, schools may demonstrate procedural compliance with leadership reforms while facing challenges in translating these reforms into meaningful improvements in practice. Similarly, Constancio (2025) examined the influence of digital inequalities on the work of middle managers in sub-Saharan public schools. Their findings suggest that limited digital literacy and inadequate administrative technologies can create additional pressures for teachers and school leaders who are expected to engage in data-informed decision-making processes. These observations closely align with the experiences reported by DH3 and Principal 7 in the present study, both of whom highlighted the challenges associated with resource limitations and administrative demands in implementing distributed leadership effectively.

Additionally, Brazauskienė (2025) found that the sustainability of data-informed governance depends on reducing teachers' administrative burdens and providing adequate support for data-related tasks. Similarly, King et al. (2025) emphasized that teacher leadership in post-apartheid educational contexts is strengthened through context-responsive continuous professional development (CPD) focused on data use and educational management. Together, these studies underscore the importance of organizational support in sustaining teacher leadership and data-informed school governance.

4. CONCLUSION

This study systematically concludes that within the contemporary digital era, the operational success and systemic resilience of School Management Teams (SMTs) in South African public secondary schools are fundamentally contingent upon the active, data-driven contributions of classroom teachers. By investigating the experiential insights of school principals, deputy principals, and department heads, the empirical findings successfully fulfill the primary research objective, demonstrating that teachers act as an indispensable structural bridge that translates immediate, micro-level classroom realities into macro-level school governance. Rather than remaining passive implementers of top-down administrative regulations, teachers actively execute critical distributed leadership roles through the continuous mobilization of frontline pedagogical datasets, such as test scores, continuous assessment metrics, and student profiles, to co-construct realistic, evidence-based institutional policies. Furthermore, this collaborative dynamic has effectively transformed traditional classroom management into an analytical, technologically-adaptive practice where teachers utilize localized student tracking parameters to engineer highly targeted learning interventions, thereby securing inclusive education and enhancing academic outcomes within socio-economically marginalized environments. Consequently, this investigation establishes that successful school governance can no longer operate in administrative isolation; instead, it relies on a fluid alignment where grassroots instructional insights continuously guide the central administrative agenda.

Despite its significant empirical and theoretical contributions to the discourse of distributed governance in developing post-apartheid contexts, this study acknowledges distinct limitations that warrant careful consideration. Methodologically, because this research relied on an interpretivist qualitative phenomenological design restricted to a purposively sampled cohort of school administrators within a specific geographical pocket of South Africa, the localized findings cannot be broadly generalized to all primary or private educational institutions nationwide. Additionally, the qualitative data predominantly focused on the administrative perspectives of the SMTs core, thereby leaving the unmediated personal experiences, digital anxieties, and direct micropolitical voices of non-SMTs classroom teachers underrepresented. This limitation is particularly relevant given the documented occurrence of role overload and role strain among staff when attempting to balance heavy full-time instructional assignments with rigorous, digitized data logging obligations demanded by the management. Furthermore, the study captured institutional dynamics at a specific point in time, which limits its capacity to evaluate the long-term

longitudinal sustainability of these teacher-led, data-driven interventions amidst fluctuating socio-economic environments and varying levels of provincial department support.

Building upon these identified constraints, several critical avenues for future empirical research are recommended to advance scholarship in educational administration. Future studies should utilize mixed-methods or quantitative designs, employing structural equation modeling to statistically measure the correlation between the level of teacher integration in SMTs networks and overall student standardized testing outcomes across diverse socio-economic school quintiles. Longitudinal tracking investigations are also highly recommended to evaluate how continuous professional development (CPD) frameworks, explicitly focused on digital data literacy and managed workloads, affect long-term teacher retention and collective administrative trust. Furthermore, future scholarship must actively capture the unmediated voices of classroom teachers to unpack the psychological frictions of role conflict induced by the digital divide and inadequate technology infrastructure in under-resourced schools. Finally, comparative research between urban schools utilizing advanced Learning Management Systems and rural schools relying on manual tracking metrics should be conducted to provide policymakers with context-responsive strategies for closing the systemic digital gap in educational leadership.

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