



**LEADING FROM WITHIN:
INTRAPERSONAL SELF-LEADERSHIP PRACTICES AMONG
SCHOOL LEADERS IN ZIMBABWEAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

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Abstract

This study explored intrapersonal self-leadership practices in school management within public high schools in Bindura District, Zimbabwe, against the backdrop of persistent educational challenges such as limited resources, declining staff morale, ineffective leadership preparation, and increasing organisational pressures. Guided by Manz's self-leadership theory and Bass's transformational leadership theory, the study sought to examine how principals and heads of departments (HODs) regulate themselves through practices of self-discipline, ethical accountability, reflection, and intrinsic motivation to enhance school management. An interpretivist qualitative case study design was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with twelve participants comprising four principals and eight HODs selected purposively from four public high schools. Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. The findings revealed that intrapersonal self-leadership was enacted through integrity and accountability, planning and time management, self-awareness and self-reflection, and self-motivation. These practices enabled school leaders to sustain professionalism, regulate behaviour, manage institutional demands, and maintain organisational stability despite challenging working conditions. However, the findings also revealed tensions associated with emotional labour, excessive accountability, and leadership fatigue within resource-constrained contexts. The study contributes to

scholarship by extending self-leadership theory within educational leadership contexts in the Global South and by conceptualising self-leadership as a contextually shaped process of ethical self-regulation and reflective discipline. The study recommends institutionalising self-leadership development programmes, strengthening reflective leadership cultures, enhancing organisational support, and integrating self-leadership competencies into leadership policy frameworks. The study concludes that self-leadership is a foundational requirement for sustainable and effective school management in contemporary educational contexts.

Keywords: *accountability; integrity; reflective practice; school management; self-awareness; self-leadership; self-motivation.*

Introduction

Leadership continues to play a central role in determining the effectiveness of school management and educational performance across diverse educational contexts. In increasingly complex and demanding schooling environments, educational leaders are expected to manage institutional resources efficiently, maintain staff morale, strengthen accountability, and respond proactively to evolving educational challenges. Effective leadership has consistently been associated with improved school functionality, enhanced teacher performance, and positive learner outcomes (Delpont et al., 2021; Lancet et al., 2023). In contrast, ineffective leadership practices often contribute to organisational instability, low teacher motivation, poor decision-making processes, and declining academic achievement (El-Achi et al., 2025). Within the context of Zimbabwean public schools, these leadership challenges are further intensified by persistent teacher shortages, inadequate resources, infrastructural limitations, absenteeism, declining teacher morale, and increasing public dissatisfaction with the quality of education in government schools. Such challenges have contributed significantly to deteriorating learner performance and the migration of learners from public to private educational institutions (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2023; Machisa et al., 2023). These realities underscore the urgent need for leadership approaches capable of promoting resilience, adaptability, accountability, and innovation within schools. Against this background, self-leadership has emerged as an important construct within organisational and educational leadership scholarship. Self-leadership refers to the process through which individuals regulate and influence their own behaviours, thoughts, and actions through cognitive and behavioural strategies that encourage self-direction, self-motivation, and goal attainment (Kang et al., 2022). Grounded in principles of self-regulation, intrinsic motivation,

and constructive thought processes, self-leadership encourages individuals to assume personal responsibility for their professional conduct, behaviours, and development (Inam et al., 2023). Existing studies further suggest that self-leadership contributes positively to organisational effectiveness, innovation, accountability, and employee performance across various professional settings (Dilber et al., 2022). Within educational contexts, self-leadership has been linked to improved emotional regulation, reflective practice, adaptive leadership, and effective time management among school leaders (Kiplimo, 2023). The growing complexity of twenty-first-century educational leadership therefore reinforces the importance of school leaders possessing strong self-regulatory capacities capable of sustaining ethical, reflective, and adaptive leadership practices within challenging institutional environments.

Despite the acknowledged significance of effective school leadership in promoting institutional performance and educational quality, public schools in Zimbabwe continue to experience persistent managerial and educational challenges that undermine both organisational effectiveness and public confidence in the education system. School leaders frequently operate within difficult contexts characterised by inadequate funding, shortages of qualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching and learning resources, declining staff morale, and increasing administrative responsibilities (Mphosi & Chauke, 2025). These challenges are particularly visible in districts such as Bindura, where growing dissatisfaction with the quality of public education has resulted in many parents transferring learners to private schools in search of improved academic standards and institutional stability (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2023). Existing scholarship further suggests that these challenges are exacerbated by limited leadership capacity among school management teams, particularly principals and heads of department (HODs), many of whom assume leadership positions without adequate preparation in leadership and management practices. The absence of structured and comprehensive leadership development programmes has consequently contributed to ineffective decision-making, weak curriculum implementation, diminished accountability, and declining organisational performance within schools (Justice et al., 2023). Furthermore, conventional leadership approaches that depend heavily on hierarchical authority and bureaucratic control have become increasingly inadequate in responding to contemporary educational environments shaped by rapid social, economic, and technological transformation (Tenha, 2022). Modern schooling contexts require leaders who are reflective, adaptable, emotionally resilient, innovative, and capable of effective self-regulation.

Although self-leadership has emerged as a promising framework for enhancing leadership effectiveness through self-motivation, personal responsibility, and proactive behaviour (Gharanfoli & Kemal, 2021), research on self-leadership within Zimbabwean public schools remains limited. Existing studies in Zimbabwe have largely concentrated on church-affiliated institutions and broader leadership practices, with limited attention given to how principals and HODs understand, practise, and experience self-leadership within public secondary schools (Madzore & Gasa, 2025; Muzenda et al., 2025). Consequently, there remains insufficient scholarly understanding of how self-leadership principles are enacted within school management practices in resource-constrained educational environments such as Bindura District.

Furthermore, studies conducted within educational settings have often concentrated exclusively on school principals while neglecting the perspectives and experiences of HODs, despite their critical role in instructional leadership and school management (Kubheka et al., 2025; Tlali & Matete, 2020). Existing Zimbabwean studies have also failed to explore self-leadership as an intrapersonal process involving self-regulation, self-awareness, intrinsic motivation, reflective practice, and ethical accountability among school leaders. Consequently, there remains limited contextual understanding of how self-leadership principles are understood, enacted, and constrained within Zimbabwean public high schools operating under difficult socio-economic conditions. This study therefore sought to address this gap by exploring intrapersonal self-leadership practices among principals and HODs in Bindura District, Zimbabwe. The rationale for this study emerged from the growing need to strengthen leadership effectiveness within Zimbabwean public schools amidst increasing educational challenges and organisational pressures. Given the persistent difficulties faced by school leaders, including resource shortages, declining staff morale, bureaucratic constraints, and limited leadership preparation, there is a need for alternative leadership approaches capable of promoting resilience, accountability, adaptability, and sustainable school management. Self-leadership offers a relevant framework for understanding how school leaders regulate their behaviour, sustain motivation, manage professional responsibilities, and model ethical leadership practices within demanding institutional contexts. The study is significant because it contributes to the limited body of African and Zimbabwean scholarship on self-leadership in education while simultaneously extending understanding of intrapersonal leadership processes within public school management. The findings may

further assist educational policymakers, leadership development institutions, and school management training programmes in designing interventions that strengthen reflective, ethical, and self-regulated leadership practices among school leaders in Zimbabwe and similar educational contexts.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to explore how intrapersonal self-leadership principles influence school management practices among high school principals and HODs in Bindura District, Zimbabwe.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to generate rich, detailed, and contextually grounded insights into the intrapersonal self-leadership practices of school leaders. Qualitative research is appropriate when researchers seek to understand participants' experiences, meanings, perceptions, and interpretations of social phenomena within their natural settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The approach enabled the researcher to explore how school principals and HODs understood and practised self-regulation, personal discipline, reflective leadership, and intrinsic motivation within their day-to-day management roles. The qualitative approach further allowed for flexibility, depth, and responsiveness during the data collection process, thereby enabling participants to provide nuanced accounts of their leadership experiences within the Zimbabwean public-school context. The study employed a qualitative case study design to facilitate an in-depth exploration of self-leadership practices within a bounded educational context. According to Yin (2018), a case study design enables researchers to investigate complex social phenomena within real-life settings. The bounded system for this study consisted of four purposively selected public high schools in Bindura District, Zimbabwe. The case study design was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to examine how self-leadership practices were understood, enacted, and constrained within specific school management environments. Through this design, the researcher gained deeper insights into the contextual realities influencing school leaders' practices of integrity, accountability, planning, self-awareness, and intrinsic motivation. The case study design further enabled the researcher to generate detailed and context-sensitive

findings that reflected the complexities of leadership within resource-constrained educational settings.

The population for the study comprised school management personnel within public high schools in Bindura District, Zimbabwe, specifically principals and HODs, who occupy strategic leadership positions within schools. Purposive criterion sampling was utilised to select participants who possessed direct experience and knowledge relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Campbell et al., 2020). The final sample consisted of twelve participants drawn from four purposively selected public high schools, including four principals and eight HODs. Participants were selected based on their leadership positions, experience in school management, involvement in decision-making processes, and familiarity with leadership challenges within Zimbabwean public schools. The inclusion of both principals and HODs enabled the researcher to capture multiple leadership perspectives regarding intrapersonal self-leadership practices and their influence on school management. Purposive sampling was considered suitable because it allowed the researcher to intentionally select information-rich participants capable of providing meaningful insights into self-leadership practices within schools.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which served as the primary data collection method for the study. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provided sufficient flexibility for probing participants' responses while maintaining consistency across interviews (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). The interviews enabled participants to describe their experiences, perceptions, and understandings of self-leadership within school management in their own words. Interview questions focused on key areas such as integrity and accountability, planning and time management, self-awareness and self-reflection, and self-motivation. The use of semi-structured interviews further enabled the researcher to explore sensitive leadership experiences in greater depth while allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on issues relevant to their leadership practices. Interviews were conducted within participants' school environments, thereby enabling the researcher to gather contextually grounded and authentic data related to intrapersonal self-leadership in school management.

The data generated from the interviews were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to identify, organise, analyse, and interpret

recurring patterns and themes emerging from participants' accounts. The analysis process involved familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this process, key themes relating to intrapersonal self-leadership practices emerged, including integrity and accountability, planning and organising, self-awareness and self-reflection, and self-motivation. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to generate rich interpretive insights into how school leaders regulate themselves, sustain professional discipline, and navigate leadership challenges within Zimbabwean public schools.

Ethical principles were carefully observed throughout the study to ensure the protection, dignity, and rights of all participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee before the commencement of data collection. Permission to conduct the study was also secured from the Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and the participating schools. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms and participant codes were used instead of participants' real names, and all collected data were stored securely. The researcher further ensured that the study caused no physical, emotional, or professional harm to participants during the research process.

Limitation of the Study

Although the study generated valuable insights into intrapersonal self-leadership practices within school management, certain limitations were acknowledged. The study was limited to four public high schools within Bindura District, Zimbabwe, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts or regions. The study also focused exclusively on principals and HODs, thereby excluding perspectives from teachers, learners, and other educational stakeholders who may have offered additional insights into leadership practices within schools. In addition, because the study utilised a qualitative case study design, the findings were context-specific and not intended for statistical generalisation. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported interview data may have introduced the possibility of social desirability bias, as participants may have favorably presented themselves during

interviews. Despite these limitations, the study provided rich and contextually grounded insights into self-regulation and personal discipline as foundational dimensions of intrapersonal self-leadership within Zimbabwean school management contexts.

Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion section presents and interprets the data generated from the semi-structured interviews conducted with principals and heads of departments (HODs). The discussion integrates participants' experiences and perspectives with relevant theoretical and empirical literature to examine how intrapersonal self-leadership practices influence school management within the selected public high schools in Bindura District, Zimbabwe. For purposes of anonymity and confidentiality, participants are identified using codes, where "P" refers to principals and "H" refers to heads of department.

1 Integrity and Accountability

At least half of the participants (six out of 12) identified integrity and accountability as essential self-leadership skills that can enhance effective school management. The element of honesty was seen as particularly important. One participant stressed that honesty is central to representing the administration fairly and responsibly:

You also need to have some honesty, because you are representing the admin council in most aspects. Honesty is required where resources need to be bought – you don't exaggerate what needs to be bought at the expense of the admin. (H7)

Another participant highlighted the expectation that leaders should act as role models by being honest and exemplary:

You must be someone who is also exemplary, honest. (H6)

For others, integrity was connected to reliability and moral character in the workplace:

Someone who can always be relied on and has good moral character at work. (H2)

Participants also emphasised the importance of being transparent and accountable, linking this directly to self-motivation and self-awareness:

I should be accountable, self-motivated and have self-awareness...(H3)

This was reinforced by another participant who simply noted that these are non-negotiable skills:

I think integrity, accountability - you should have those skills. (P1)

The weight of responsibility was particularly noted in relation to financial management, where the principal is ultimately the only accounting officer:

At an institution such as this one, I receive large sums of money and those monies need to be accounted for, and the only accounting officer is the school principal. (P2)

More than half of the participants (six out of twelve) identified integrity and accountability as core self-leadership attributes underpinning effective school management. While honesty was consistently emphasised, participants' accounts suggest that integrity was not understood merely as a personal moral trait but as an active, self-regulatory practice shaped by the responsibilities of leadership. Honesty was frequently framed in relation to representation and stewardship, particularly when leaders act on behalf of the administration. One participant emphasised the ethical restraint required when managing resources, noting the need to avoid exaggeration when requesting purchases so as not to exploit institutional trust (H7). This highlights integrity as a behaviour-focused self-leadership strategy (Manz, 1986) where leaders consciously monitor and regulate their own actions to align with internalised ethical standards rather than external surveillance. In this sense, integrity enables self-leadership by fostering self-observation and self-corrective behaviour, consistent with Manz's (1986) model.

Several participants also positioned integrity as a visible leadership quality, closely tied to role modelling. Descriptions such as being "exemplary" and "someone who can always be relied on" indicate an expectation that leaders embody moral consistency in both decision-making and conduct. However, these statements also suggest a normative assumption that integrity is a fixed personal quality, rather than a skill that may be challenged by contextual pressures. This lack of critical reflection on the difficulty of sustaining ethical consistency may mask the emotional and organisational strain leaders experience when navigating competing demands. Accountability emerged most strongly in relation to financial management, where the burden of responsibility was described as resting almost entirely on the school principal. While this concentration of accountability may reinforce careful self-regulation, it may simultaneously constrain self-leadership by increasing fear of error and limiting opportunities for distributed decision-making. In this context, accountability appears as both an enabler and a constraint: it strengthens ethical vigilance yet may also heighten stress and risk aversion, potentially narrowing leaders' sense of autonomy. Some participants explicitly linked accountability to self-awareness and self-motivation, suggesting an

internalised orientation towards responsibility rather than compliance driven by external monitoring. This aligns with Neck and Houghton's (2006) view of self-leadership as value-based self-regulation. Acting ethically was not described merely as an obligation but as a source of personal meaning, reflecting the role of natural reward strategies in sustaining self-leadership (Al-Halbusi et al., 2023). In such cases, integrity becomes intrinsically motivating, reinforcing leaders' commitment to their roles despite contextual challenges.

At the organisational level, participants' emphasis on honesty, reliability, and transparency points to an overlap between self-leadership and transformational leadership. Leaders who discipline themselves to act ethically position themselves as moral exemplars, consistent with Bass's (1998) notion of idealised influence. However, the data also suggest that this influence is contingent on trust and institutional support. Where systems are weak or overly centralised, the ethical burden placed on individual leaders may limit the sustainability of self-leadership practices. Thus, integrity and accountability function as a critical bridge between internal self-regulation and external leadership influence. While these qualities clearly enable self-leadership by anchoring leaders' actions in internalised values, they can also become constraining when responsibility is individualised without adequate support structures. This tension underscores the complexity of practising self-leadership in school leadership contexts and sets the stage for the next theme, communication, through which these values are enacted, negotiated, and tested in everyday leadership interactions.

2. Planning, Organising and Time Management

More than half of the participants recognised planning, organising and time management as an essential principle for self-leaders. These participants felt the need to manage their schedules, which they do in different ways. One participant explained how a daily routine helped create structure in her leadership practice:

Usually I have my timetable, daily routine if you look just behind you. I have my routine. (P1)

The demands of leadership were also highlighted, with one head of department stressing the need to prioritise and delegate effectively:

Managing a busy schedule as a head of department requires prioritising tasks. It also requires effective delegation and strategic time management, so what I do is prioritise and plan...(H3)

Time management was described not only as a matter of scheduling but also of personal organisation. As participant H8 described:

I take time as a leader, organising myself, introspecting on how I'm going to execute the duties that I've been given and even going a little further, trying. (H8)

Participant H1 pointed to planning as the foundation of effective leadership:

Remember, everything begins with planning. When you plan, you organise yourself and put yourself in the right position at the right time. Through the diaries provided by the school, we manage to keep things on track through proper planning so that you know what you are supposed to do at the right time and at the right moment. (H1)

Practical tools were frequently mentioned. One participant described relying on a diary to keep track of tasks:

I use my diary. I have to write them down... (P2)

Similarly, another created a departmental calendar of events to complement the school's calendar:

From that school calendar of events, you have to come up with your own departmental calendar of events. (H2)

A to-do list was also highlighted as a useful tool for self-regulation:

I have to come up with a to-do list where I just write down what I want to achieve on a particular day. And I tick the items as the day progresses. At the end of the day, I just look at everything to see that I have achieved what I planned. (P3)

The findings indicate that time management operates as a form of self-leadership discipline through which leaders attempt to impose structure on complex and often unpredictable school environments. Participants' reliance on routines, diaries, calendars and task lists reflects not only organisational competence but also deliberate self-regulatory effort aimed at maintaining control over competing demands. Within Manz's (1986) Self-Leadership Model, these practices align with behaviour-focused strategies such as self-goal setting, self-observation and self-corrective feedback. By externalising tasks through written schedules and monitoring progress, leaders create mechanisms for regulating their behaviour and sustaining focus on professional priorities (Orkamo et al., 2025). However, the data also suggest that such strategies emerge partly as responses to pressure, indicating that time management is often reactive rather than purely strategic. This raises questions about the extent to which leaders experience genuine autonomy over their time.

Participants' emphasis on prioritisation reflects an acute awareness of time as a scarce and non-recoverable resource in schools (Allard et al., 2025). While prioritising essential responsibilities can enable self-leadership by preventing overload and reinforcing purposeful action (Sjöblom et al., 2022), it may simultaneously constrain leaders' capacity to engage in reflective or developmental activities. Time spent managing urgent administrative demands may reduce opportunities for strategic thinking, professional learning, or relational leadership, thereby limiting the broader enactment of self-leadership. From a transformational leadership perspective, disciplined time management was associated with modelling professionalism and reliability. Leaders who demonstrate punctuality, preparedness and consistency enact idealised influence by setting behavioural standards for their teams (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Clear planning also supports inspirational motivation by providing staff with structure and direction, fostering confidence and alignment with school objectives (Sianipar & Putri, 2025). Yet this modelling function also places additional pressure on leaders to perform constant control and efficiency, which may intensify self-surveillance and reduce flexibility. The findings suggest that time management serves as both an enabling and constraining condition for self-leadership. Structured routines and planning practices support self-discipline and task completion, but they also risk narrowing leadership practice to operational efficiency. Self-leadership in this context is therefore characterised by an ongoing tension between managing immediate demands and preserving space for reflection, growth and relational engagement.

3 Self-Awareness and Self-Reflection

A prominent finding was the importance of self-awareness and self-reflection for leaders. One participant explained that self-awareness helped him adapt his approach to staff interactions, particularly when dealing with teachers facing personal challenges:

It [self-awareness] also assists me to adjust how I talk to my teachers who have their own personal challenges. I do not have to shout at adults, but rather I talk engagingly and professionally; I have learnt that. (P4)

Another participant highlighted that being self-aware means having a clear sense of one's own goals and the overall direction of the department:

Knowing what you want, knowing where we are going. (P1)

A participant described using weekly reflection to evaluate performance and make necessary adjustments for the future:

Sometimes I evaluate at the end of the week to see how successful we have been during the course of the week so that we plan for the next week and make corrections and improvements so that I don't slacken, in terms of our performance...(H1)

Similarly, another spoke of reflecting both daily and weekly to identify areas where personal improvement was needed:

Normally I reflect on a day-to-day basis at the end of the day. I reflect on what happened during the day. And sometimes I reflect on a weekly basis so that I can see where there's a need to improve on my part. (H3)

Participant P3 stressed that reflection allowed him/her to consider whether tasks could have been handled better and to plan new strategies:

At times you look back to say, "How did the event go? Could we have done it better?" (P3)

For participant H8, reflection was closely tied to introspection and organising himself as a leader to execute responsibilities effectively:

The time I take is... as a leader, organising myself and introspecting on how I'm going to execute the duties that I've been given. (H8)

Even positive events are reflected on, as is evident in the quote below:

Especially if there are positives, for example, when we have speech and prize day, my members of the department scoop most of the prizes – those are some of the events that I think about them and that I have to have a reflection on. (H2)

The findings indicate that self-awareness and reflection function as deliberate self-leadership practices through which leaders monitor, evaluate, and recalibrate their behaviour in response to ongoing demands. Participants' accounts suggest that reflection is not a passive or occasional activity but an intentional process embedded in daily leadership practice, aimed at sustaining effectiveness and personal growth. Within Manz's (1986) Self-Leadership Model, these practices align with behaviour-focused strategies such as self-observation, self-monitoring, and self-correction. Leaders described reviewing their actions, questioning whether tasks could have been handled differently, and adjusting their behaviour accordingly. This indicates that reflection enables self-leadership by supporting adaptive regulation rather than rigid adherence to habitual practices. However, the data also imply that this constant

self-scrutiny can intensify pressure, as leaders hold themselves to high internal standards without always receiving external affirmation or support.

Constructive thought strategies emerged strongly in participants' accounts, particularly through questioning outcomes and mentally rehearsing improved approaches. As Yosep et al. (2025) argue, constructive self-talk and mental imagery support flexible thinking in complex environments. In this context, self-awareness enables leaders to challenge assumptions and imagine alternative responses. At the same time, excessive reflection may risk overanalysis or self-doubt, potentially constraining decisive action and confidence, especially in high-stakes situations. From a transformational leadership perspective, reflective self-awareness contributes to both individualised consideration and idealised influence. Participants indicated that reflection informed how they chose to engage colleagues, for example by responding respectfully rather than relying on positional authority. Such behaviour aligns with Bass's (1998) conception of idealised influence, where leaders model ethical and authentic conduct. However, the data also suggest that sustaining this level of reflective responsiveness requires emotional and cognitive labour, which may strain leaders' capacity for sustained self-leadership over time.

Reflection further supports individualised consideration by enabling leaders to interpret colleagues' needs more accurately and respond with sensitivity. As Hartung (2020) notes, awareness of both strengths and areas for growth enhances leadership effectiveness. Yet the findings suggest that this awareness is not inherently empowering; its impact depends on leaders' ability to balance reflection with action and to avoid internalising responsibility for systemic or structural challenges beyond their control. Self-awareness and reflection operate as central mechanisms of self-leadership that enable learning, adaptability, and ethical engagement. Simultaneously, they introduce vulnerabilities related to self-pressure, emotional fatigue, and decision paralysis. Self-leadership in this context is therefore characterised by an ongoing negotiation between reflective depth and practical action.

4. Self-Motivation

There was overwhelming evidence that self-motivation was a key trait of self-leadership. A participant explained that self-leadership is defined by the ability to rely on self-drive when performing essential responsibilities:

A type of leadership which is self-driven, especially when doing your core duties. (P2)

Another participant emphasised that self-motivation requires taking the lead proactively, rather than waiting for others to set the pace:

No one should be behind you. (P3)

Similarly, one participant stressed that self-leaders do not wait to be pushed but take the initiative to meet responsibilities and deadlines:

Self-motivated. I am not a person who waits to be pushed. I know what I'm supposed to do and when I am supposed to do it to meet the deadlines. For me, if you have self-leadership and you are self-motivated, then you don't have to be pushed... (H8)

In addition to initiative, participants highlighted that motivation must come from within. One respondent explained that in the Zimbabwean context, extrinsic incentives, such as salaries, were insufficient to motivate teachers:

You know there is that intrinsic motivation because in Zimbabwe we cannot talk about extrinsic motivation because the money that I get is not even enough to fuel my car for a month (P4).

Another participant echoed a similar sentiment:

... it comes from within, because at times you won't find something externally motivating you to go that far, especially within this Zimbabwean setup (H7).

For many, self-motivation was also closely tied to the belief that teaching is a calling. One participant reflected:

... we say teaching is a calling. So, if it is a calling, you remain focused. If it is a calling. We have got the kids at heart, so we try to remain focused so that we achieve our objectives. We are responsible for the upbringing of these young kids. (H6)

Another reinforced this, stating:

...the motivation we have here is self-driven; we are motivated to excel simply because teaching is a calling. You cannot be a teacher if you were not called to be a teacher, so the motivation comes from intrinsic factors... (H 1).

Some participants connected self-motivation to achieving excellence and striving for results.

One participant explained:

I think our main objective as a department is to have that self-drive, and we strive to have the best results around. You know you are motivated when you are one of the best departments around... (H2)

Another described success itself as a motivator, noting that improved pass rates gave them the energy to continue working hard:

...If we achieve better results, it motivates me. Like the previous year, I was the one who was teaching Commerce, our pass rate for Commerce is at 40% right now. When I joined the school, it was 18.19%. When the pass rate increases, it keeps me going, and it motivates me. (H3)

The findings indicate that self-motivation is a central self-leadership resource for teachers and leaders operating in the Zimbabwean context, where economic instability and limited financial incentives significantly weaken the effectiveness of extrinsic motivation. Participants' reliance on internal sources of drive, such as professional identity, commitment to learners, and a sense of calling, suggests that self-motivation functions not only as a personal preference but as a necessary adaptive response to contextual constraints. From a self-leadership perspective, these accounts align strongly with natural reward strategies, which emphasise deriving satisfaction from meaningful work rather than external rewards (Okumuş & Aslan, 2026; Patterer et al., 2024). By focusing on the intrinsic value of teaching and leadership, participants sustain engagement and persistence despite material hardship. However, the data also suggest that this reliance on intrinsic motivation may place additional emotional and psychological demands on educators, as personal passion is repeatedly drawn upon to compensate for systemic deficiencies.

Participants' descriptions of self-drive, independence, and perseverance in the absence of external enforcement further reflect behaviour-focused self-leadership strategies, including self-goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-discipline (Manz, 1986). These practices enable leaders to maintain standards and professional commitment without reliance on formal accountability mechanisms. At the same time, the expectation of continuous self-regulation risks normalising overextension, where responsibility for sustaining performance is shifted disproportionately onto individuals rather than institutions. The framing of teaching as a "calling" also resonates with transformational leadership, particularly idealised influence. Leaders who demonstrate commitment beyond material gain model values that inspire colleagues and foster shared purpose (Khan et al., 2025). Such value-driven leadership can strengthen collective morale and resilience, especially in challenging environments. Yet the findings also imply a potential tension: when passion becomes an implicit expectation,

leaders may feel pressure to suppress fatigue or dissatisfaction, limiting their capacity for sustainable self-leadership.

Contribution of the Study

The study makes an important contribution to the field of educational leadership and management by providing a contextually grounded understanding of intrapersonal self-leadership within resource-constrained schooling environments. Drawing from the lived experiences of school leaders, the study demonstrates that self-leadership extends beyond individual personality traits or psychological dispositions to encompass ethical conduct, reflective practice, emotional resilience, behavioural discipline, and intrinsic motivation. The findings reveal that effective school leadership is sustained through the interaction between leaders' internal self-regulatory capacities and the complex organisational realities within which they operate. In this regard, the study advances scholarly understanding of how school leaders navigate demanding educational contexts while maintaining professional accountability and organisational effectiveness. A significant contribution of the study lies in its conceptual integration of the themes identified during the research process. The study shows that integrity and accountability, planning and time management, self-awareness and reflection, and self-motivation are interconnected dimensions of intrapersonal self-leadership rather than isolated leadership competencies. Integrity and accountability form the ethical basis of leadership practice, while self-awareness and reflection promote behavioural adjustment and professional growth. Planning and time management create structure and discipline, whereas self-motivation sustains perseverance despite contextual challenges. Collectively, these dimensions establish an integrated framework of self-leadership characterised by intentionality, continuous self-regulation, and internal discipline.

The study further contributes theoretically by extending the applicability of self-leadership theory, particularly the work of Charles Manz and Christopher Neck, to school leadership contexts in the Global South. Existing self-leadership theories often focus on individual agency and autonomy within corporate or organisational environments. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that school leaders in under-resourced educational settings experience self-leadership as a more complex process shaped by institutional pressures, emotional demands, and limited resources. The study therefore refines existing theoretical perspectives by illustrating that self-leadership within schools is relational, emotionally

demanding, and heavily influenced by contextual realities rather than solely individual agency. Importantly, the findings challenge idealistic assumptions embedded within traditional self-leadership models. While self-leadership empowers leaders to remain disciplined, reflective, and ethically grounded, the study also reveals the emotional and psychological burdens associated with constant accountability, self-monitoring, and professional responsibility. Excessive self-scrutiny and institutional demands may contribute to stress, emotional exhaustion, and leadership fatigue. These findings highlight the tensions and contradictions within self-leadership practice and demonstrate that self-leadership is a dynamic process requiring continuous negotiation between personal values, organisational expectations, and emotional labour.

The study additionally contributes to transformational leadership scholarship by demonstrating how intrapersonal self-leadership practices strengthen broader organisational leadership processes. Leaders who demonstrate ethical self-regulation, reflective awareness, and intrinsic motivation are better positioned to inspire trust, model professionalism, and cultivate positive school cultures. Consequently, the study positions self-leadership as a foundational component of transformational leadership within educational settings. Furthermore, the findings provide practical and policy-related contributions by emphasising the need for leadership development programmes that prioritise emotional resilience, reflective practice, ethical self-regulation, and self-management skills alongside administrative competencies. The study therefore offers valuable insights for policymakers, leadership trainers, and educational institutions seeking to develop sustainable and contextually responsive school leadership practices.

Recommendations

Institutionalising Self-Leadership Development Programmes

Education ministries, teacher training institutions, school governing bodies, and leadership development agencies should institutionalise structured self-leadership development programmes for school leaders at all levels of school management. These programmes should be incorporated into both pre-service and in-service leadership training and should focus on developing competencies such as ethical self-regulation, reflective practice, emotional intelligence, resilience, self-awareness, time management, goal setting, and intrinsic motivation. The implementation process may include leadership workshops, accredited

professional development courses, mentoring initiatives, reflective practice seminars, and continuous leadership coaching. Universities and teacher education institutions should collaborate with education departments to design contextually relevant leadership curricula grounded in self-leadership theory and transformational leadership principles. This recommendation is significant because the findings of the study revealed that many school leaders rely heavily on personal experience and informal learning to develop self-regulatory leadership practices. Structured leadership development programmes would therefore strengthen leaders' capacity to manage themselves effectively, navigate emotional and organisational pressures, and sustain ethical and reflective leadership practices in increasingly complex school environments.

Strengthening Ethical Accountability Structures

Education authorities, school governing bodies, and school management teams should strengthen ethical accountability structures within schools to ensure that leadership responsibilities, particularly financial and administrative responsibilities, are distributed more equitably and transparently. This can be achieved through the establishment of collaborative financial oversight committees, shared governance structures, transparent procurement procedures, and regular ethical leadership audits. Leadership mentoring programmes and ethics-focused professional development workshops should also be introduced to reinforce integrity, accountability, honesty, and responsible decision-making among school leaders. School principals should not carry the full burden of institutional accountability in isolation; instead, leadership responsibilities should be distributed among deputy principals, heads of department, and governing body members to promote collective responsibility and reduce leadership strain. The significance of this recommendation lies in the study's finding that accountability often places immense emotional and professional pressure on school leaders, particularly principals, who function as primary accounting officers within schools. Strengthening institutional accountability systems would therefore not only improve transparency and governance but would also create supportive leadership environments that promote sustainable and ethical school management.

Promoting Reflective Leadership Cultures

School management teams, district education offices, and professional learning communities should actively promote reflective leadership cultures within schools by embedding reflective practice into everyday leadership activities and institutional processes. This recommendation may be implemented through regular reflective meetings, peer mentoring sessions, leadership reflection journals, collaborative evaluation forums, and professional learning communities where school leaders critically examine their leadership practices, challenges, and decision-making processes. Education departments should also allocate protected time within school schedules for reflective activities to ensure that reflection is not overshadowed by administrative demands and operational pressures. Furthermore, digital reflective platforms and leadership dialogue forums may be introduced to encourage continuous professional engagement among school leaders across schools and districts. The significance of this recommendation is grounded in the study's finding that self-awareness and self-reflection are central mechanisms of self-leadership that enable leaders to adapt, learn, and improve their professional conduct. By cultivating reflective leadership cultures, schools may strengthen adaptive leadership, improve interpersonal relationships, encourage ethical responsiveness, and foster continuous organisational improvement.

Enhancing Time Management and Organisational Support

Education departments, school governing bodies, and school management teams should enhance organisational support systems that assist school leaders in managing increasingly complex administrative and instructional responsibilities. This recommendation can be implemented through the provision of administrative support personnel, digital management systems, workload management policies, and leadership assistance programmes designed to reduce excessive bureaucratic pressures on school leaders. Schools should also provide training on strategic planning, prioritisation, delegation, and organisational management to strengthen leaders' capacity to manage time effectively while maintaining a balance between operational and strategic leadership responsibilities. In addition, leadership responsibilities should be distributed appropriately among management team members to reduce the over-concentration of administrative duties on individual leaders. The significance of this recommendation stems from the study's finding that school leaders often rely heavily on personal discipline, routines, diaries, and self-imposed structures to manage demanding

workloads. While these practices support self-regulation, excessive operational pressures may limit opportunities for reflective leadership, professional growth, and meaningful relational engagement. Improved organisational support would therefore enable leaders to function more effectively, reduce stress, and create space for visionary and developmental leadership practices.

Encouraging Value-Driven and Transformational Leadership

School governing bodies, education departments, and leadership training institutions should encourage value-driven and transformational leadership practices that emphasise integrity, professionalism, ethical conduct, accountability, and relational leadership within schools. This recommendation may be implemented through leadership development programmes that integrate ethical leadership modules, values-based leadership training, mentorship initiatives, and reflective leadership practices into principal preparation and leadership advancement programmes. Schools should also establish recognition systems that celebrate ethical leadership, collaborative leadership practices, and positive role modelling within school communities. Senior leaders should intentionally model professionalism, fairness, transparency, and commitment in their daily interactions to foster positive organisational cultures and strengthen trust among staff members. The significance of this recommendation lies in the study's finding that school leaders function as visible role models whose personal conduct directly shapes organisational culture, staff morale, and professional relationships within schools. Promoting value-driven leadership would therefore contribute to the development of ethical, collaborative, and human-centred school environments capable of supporting meaningful educational transformation.

Policy Recommendations

National education ministries, educational policymakers, teacher regulatory authorities, and educational leadership institutions should revise existing leadership policies and professional standards to integrate self-leadership competencies as essential components of effective school leadership. This may be achieved through the inclusion of competencies such as emotional regulation, reflective practice, ethical accountability, self-awareness, resilience, and intrinsic motivation within principal preparation frameworks, leadership appraisal systems, and professional leadership standards. Policymakers should also allocate funding for

leadership support programmes, school leadership wellness initiatives, and continuous professional development opportunities that strengthen intrapersonal leadership capacities. In addition, educational leadership policies should promote distributed leadership approaches that reduce the excessive concentration of responsibility on individual school leaders. The significance of this recommendation is grounded in the study's finding that existing leadership frameworks frequently prioritise managerial and technical competencies while overlooking the intrapersonal dimensions of leadership that sustain ethical and emotionally resilient leadership practice. Integrating self-leadership into policy frameworks would therefore contribute to the development of more reflective, adaptive, and sustainable leadership systems within contemporary educational contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored intrapersonal self-leadership practices in school management, focusing on how school leaders regulate their behaviour, sustain motivation, and maintain ethical and professional standards within complex educational environments. The findings demonstrate that self-leadership is deeply embedded in everyday leadership practice and is enacted through integrity and accountability, reflective self-awareness, time management, planning, organisation, and intrinsic self-motivation. These practices enable school leaders to navigate institutional pressures, maintain professional discipline, and provide direction within challenging school contexts. The study further revealed that self-leadership extends beyond personal effectiveness and functions as a critical foundation for organisational leadership. Leaders who regulate themselves effectively are better positioned to model ethical conduct, build trust, inspire commitment, and create stable and functional school environments. The findings therefore reinforce the argument that leadership effectiveness in schools begins with intrapersonal discipline before it extends to interpersonal and organisational influence. In this regard, the study contributes to the growing body of literature grounded in Manz's Self-Leadership Theory and transformational leadership by demonstrating how self-regulatory leadership practices operate within educational settings.

At the same time, the findings highlight important tensions within self-leadership practice. While self-awareness, accountability, and intrinsic motivation empower leaders to remain committed and resilient, these same practices may also intensify emotional labour, self-surveillance, and professional strain when institutional support systems are weak. The study

therefore challenges romanticised understandings of self-leadership that assume internal motivation alone is sufficient for sustainable leadership effectiveness. Instead, self-leadership should be understood as a dynamic and contextually shaped process that requires both personal agency and institutional support. The study also makes an important contextual contribution by illustrating how school leaders continue to rely on intrinsic motivation and personal commitment despite difficult socio-economic and organisational realities. Participants repeatedly framed leadership and teaching as a calling, suggesting that professional identity and moral purpose remain powerful sources of motivation in education. However, relying excessively on individual resilience without systemic support risks normalising overwork, emotional exhaustion, and leadership burnout.

Consequently, the study calls upon education departments, policymakers, school governing bodies, and leadership development institutions to move beyond viewing leadership solely as a managerial or technical function. Greater attention must be given to the intrapersonal dimensions of leadership, including emotional regulation, reflective practice, ethical self-discipline, and psychological sustainability. Educational institutions must therefore create enabling conditions that support reflective, ethical, and emotionally sustainable leadership. Thus, the future of effective school leadership depends not only on leaders' ability to manage schools, but also on their capacity to manage themselves. Educational stakeholders are therefore urged to invest intentionally in self-leadership development, establish supportive leadership environments, and promote leadership cultures grounded in integrity, accountability, reflection, and human-centred practice. Without deliberate action in these areas, schools risk placing unsustainable burdens on individual leaders while overlooking the structural conditions necessary for meaningful and sustainable educational transformation. The study concludes that self-leadership is not an optional leadership attribute but a foundational requirement for effective school management in contemporary educational contexts. As schools continue to face increasing complexity, uncertainty, and accountability demands, the cultivation of reflective, ethical, self-motivated, and emotionally resilient leaders must become an urgent priority for educational transformation and long-term institutional success.

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