



# The Impact of Educational Leadership on Student Achievement: A Comparative Analysis of Urban and Rural Schools

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## Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## ABSTRACT

**Overview:** Educational leadership plays a critical role in shaping student achievement, with its impact varying significantly between urban and rural settings. This study investigated the influence of leadership practices on student outcomes, comparing urban and rural schools to understand the unique challenges and advantages each context presents.

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**Body of Knowledge:** Educational leadership significantly influences student achievement, with its impact varying between urban and rural settings. This study explores how leadership practices affect student outcomes in both contexts, revealing that while urban schools benefit from greater resources and community engagement, rural schools excel in fostering close-knit communities despite facing resource limitations. By identifying these unique challenges and advantages, the study offers valuable insights for policymakers and educators to tailor leadership strategies effectively.

**Methods:** The research design was a comparative study with both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. The study sampled 300 respondents within 6 selected schools in Lusaka district. The population consisted Head Teachers, Teachers, and Pupils from the selected schools. The study made use of the questionnaires, academic records, and leadership assessment to collect quantitative data while interviews and focus groups were used to collect qualitative data from the participants. The quantitative data collected were analyzed using appropriate statistical methods, such as descriptive statistics using SPSS (Statistical package for social sciences) and excel whereas the qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

**Results:** The findings revealed that urban schools benefit from superior resources and community engagement, leading to higher student achievement. Conversely, rural schools face resource constraints but excel in fostering strong community bonds and personalized learning environments. Effective leadership practices, such as robust resource management and continuous professional development, are crucial across both settings. Differences in resource availability and community dynamics highlight the need for context-specific leadership strategies to bridge achievement gaps.

**Recommendation:** The study recommended adopting context-specific leadership approaches to address the distinct needs of urban and rural schools.

*Keywords:* Comparative study; educational leadership; student achievement; rural schools; urban schools.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of educational leadership on student achievement varies significantly between urban and rural schools. Effective leadership in urban schools often focuses on addressing diverse student needs, managing larger staff teams, and leveraging more resources, which can result in higher student achievement [1]. In contrast, rural school leaders may face challenges such as limited resources, smaller staff, and greater isolation, which can impact student performance. However, rural leaders who foster strong community relationships and innovate within resource constraints can still drive significant student success. Comparative studies highlight that while the context differs, the core principles of strong leadership vision, communication, and community engagement are crucial in both settings for improving student outcomes.

Urban schools, typically located in densely populated city areas, face unique challenges and opportunities compared to their rural counterparts. These schools often benefit from better access to resources such as technology, extracurricular activities, and specialized staff due to their proximity to educational institutions, businesses, and cultural centers [2]. However, they also contend with significant issues such as

overcrowding, higher student-to-teacher ratios, and greater diversity in student backgrounds, which can create disparities in academic achievement and access to quality education. Urban schools are also frequently affected by socio-economic factors, with many students coming from low-income families, leading to challenges like underfunding, limited parental involvement, and higher dropout rates. Despite these challenges, urban schools have the potential to implement innovative teaching practices and community partnerships, providing students with a rich and diverse learning environment. Effective leadership, targeted funding, and community engagement are crucial for addressing the challenges and maximizing the potential of urban schools to foster student success [3].

Rural schools often face unique challenges and opportunities that distinguish them from their urban counterparts. These schools frequently struggle with limited resources, including inadequate funding, insufficient educational materials, and a shortage of qualified teachers [4-16]. Infrastructure in rural schools can be substandard, with issues such as poorly maintained buildings, lack of access to technology, and insufficient transportation options for students. Despite these challenges,

rural schools can also offer a close-knit community environment where students receive more individualized attention and support from teachers and staff. Community involvement is often high, and schools can serve as central hubs for local activities and events. Additionally, rural schools provide opportunities for innovative teaching practices tailored to the local context, such as integrating local culture and environmental issues into the curriculum [17]. Addressing the disparities faced by rural schools requires targeted policies and investments to ensure that all students, regardless of their geographic location, have access to high-quality education.

Educational leadership refers to the process of guiding and managing educational institutions, such as schools, colleges, and universities, to achieve their goals and improve student outcomes [18]. It encompasses a range of practices and responsibilities, including setting a vision, developing a strategic plan, fostering a positive school culture, managing resources effectively, and promoting professional development for staff. Educational leaders, such as principals, deans, and superintendents, play a crucial role in shaping educational policies, curriculum standards, and teaching methodologies. They also serve as role models, inspiring and motivating both educators and students to reach their full potential. Supriyono et al. [19] added that effective educational leadership is characterized by a commitment to continuous improvement, collaboration, and the ability to adapt to changing educational landscapes and diverse student needs.

Student achievement refers to the measurable performance outcomes of students in their academic pursuits, typically evaluated through standardized tests, grades, and other assessments [20]. It encompasses a range of skills and knowledge that students acquire over a specific period, reflecting their understanding, proficiency, and mastery of the subject matter. Student achievement is often used as an indicator of educational effectiveness, guiding educators, policymakers, and institutions in assessing the quality of education and implementing necessary improvements. It also serves as a critical benchmark for comparing the performance of students across different demographics, schools, and educational systems, aiming to identify gaps and promote equity in education [14]. Student achievement in education refers to the measurable learning outcomes and academic performance of

students, typically assessed through standardized tests, grades, and other evaluative criteria. It encompasses the extent to which students have acquired the knowledge, skills, and competencies outlined in the educational curriculum. High levels of student achievement indicate that students are meeting or exceeding the expected academic standards, demonstrating proficiency in various subjects, and are well-prepared for subsequent educational or career pursuits. Factors influencing student achievement include the quality of instruction, availability of resources, student engagement, parental involvement, and socio-economic conditions. Ultimately, student achievement serves as a critical indicator of the effectiveness of educational systems and the potential for student success in broader societal contexts [21].

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Educational leadership plays a crucial role in shaping student achievement, yet there is a notable disparity between urban and rural schools. This study aimed to investigate the impact of educational leadership on student achievement by comparing urban and rural school settings. In urban schools, leaders often have access to more resources, professional development opportunities, and support systems, which can directly influence the academic performance of students [22]. Conversely, rural school leaders frequently face challenges such as limited resources, fewer professional growth opportunities, and geographic isolation, which can hinder their effectiveness and, subsequently, student achievement. By examining these differences, the study sought to identify specific leadership practices that contribute to improved student outcomes in both contexts, providing insights into how to bridge the achievement gap between urban and rural schools.

### **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to examine how educational leadership influences student achievement in both urban and rural school settings. By conducting a comparative analysis, the study aimed to identify and understand the differences in leadership practices and their effects on academic outcomes across these distinct environments.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

- To evaluate the influence of educational leadership practices on student achievement in urban vs. rural schools.

- To compare the challenges faced by educational leaders in urban and rural schools and their effect on student achievement.

#### **1.4 Conceptual Framework**

The study's framework revolves around understanding how different styles and practices of educational leadership affect student outcomes in varying school settings. Educational leadership is crucial in shaping the learning environment, setting academic goals, and motivating both students and teachers. This framework posits that effective leadership practices such as setting a clear vision, fostering a supportive and collaborative school culture, and implementing evidence-based instructional strategies are directly linked to enhanced student achievement [23]. In urban schools, where resources might be more readily available and student diversity is often high, the impact of leadership could manifest through different challenges and opportunities compared to rural schools. Urban educational leaders may focus on addressing diverse student needs and leveraging community resources, while rural leaders might emphasize overcoming geographical and infrastructural limitations. This framework suggests that urban educational leaders might employ more innovative and collaborative approaches due to higher availability of resources, while rural leaders might focus on resourcefulness and adaptability to improve student outcomes. The framework also considers the role of leadership styles; transformational, transactional, and instructional in influencing student performance. Transformational leaders, who inspire and motivate their staff and students towards a shared vision, might enhance student achievement by fostering a positive and engaging learning environment. Transactional leaders, who focus on performance and rewards, might impact student outcomes through structured and goal-oriented approaches [24]. Instructional leaders, who concentrate on curriculum and teaching practices, could directly affect student achievement through effective teaching and learning strategies.

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The study's significance lies in its potential to provide valuable insights into how different styles

and approaches of educational leadership can affect student outcomes in varied settings. Educational leadership plays a critical role in shaping the learning environment, setting goals, and influencing teacher performance, which directly impacts student achievement. By comparing urban and rural schools, this study aims to uncover specific leadership practices that are effective in different contexts, offering a nuanced understanding of how leadership strategies can be tailored to meet the needs of diverse educational environments. This study is particularly relevant for policymakers, school administrators, and educational leaders who are seeking evidence-based strategies to improve student performance. Urban and rural schools often face distinct challenges and opportunities, and understanding how leadership impacts student achievement in these settings can inform targeted interventions and support mechanisms. For instance, urban schools may benefit from leadership practices that address high student diversity and resource constraints, while rural schools might require different strategies that consider geographical isolation and limited access to educational resources. Furthermore, the study contributes to the broader discourse on educational equity by highlighting how leadership can influence achievement disparities between urban and rural schools. By identifying effective leadership practices in various contexts, the findings can help bridge gaps in educational outcomes and promote more equitable access to quality education. Ultimately, the study aims to provide practical recommendations for enhancing educational leadership practices, thereby fostering improved student achievement across different types of schools.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The research design was a comparative study with both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection in order to attain the comprehensive results [25]. This design allowed to compare and contrast the impact of educational leadership on student achievement in urban and rural schools. The study employed stratified to come up with the study population while on the other hand, purposive sampling was used to select schools and respondents. The study was conducted in Lusaka district, the capital city of Zambia and sampled 6 secondary schools; 3 under urban setup and 3 under rural setup to allow for meaningful comparisons. The sample consisted 300 respondents; 10% of the target population 3000 which included; 6 school

head teachers, representing one from each selected school, 48 teachers representing eight from each selected school, and 246 pupils, representing forty-one from each selected school. The study made use of the questionnaires, academic records, and leadership assessment to collect quantitative data while interviews and Focus Groups were used to collect qualitative data from the participants. The quantitative data collected were analyzed using appropriate statistical methods, such as descriptive statistics using SPSS (Statistical package for social sciences) and Microsoft excel whereas the qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The study upheld research ethical considerations such as voluntary participation of the respondents, confidentiality, honesty, and right of privacy.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 The Influence of Educational Leadership Practices on Student Achievement in Urban vs. Rural Schools

According to research findings educational leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the academic environment and influencing student outcomes. This influence can vary significantly between urban and rural schools due to differences in resources, community involvement, and challenges faced by each setting.

##### 3.1.1 Key aspects of educational leadership

The study results identified 5 key aspects to educational leadership. Resource Management was at 30%, Professional Development at 25%, Vision and Goal Setting at 20%, Community Engagement at 20%, and Instructional Leadership at 5%. The findings are summarized in Fig. 1.

According to study results, resource management is a crucial aspect of educational leadership, directly influencing the efficiency and effectiveness of educational institutions. Effective resource management involves the strategic allocation and utilization of physical, financial, and human resources to enhance the learning environment and improve student outcomes [26]. Educational leaders must ensure that resources are distributed equitably, addressing the diverse

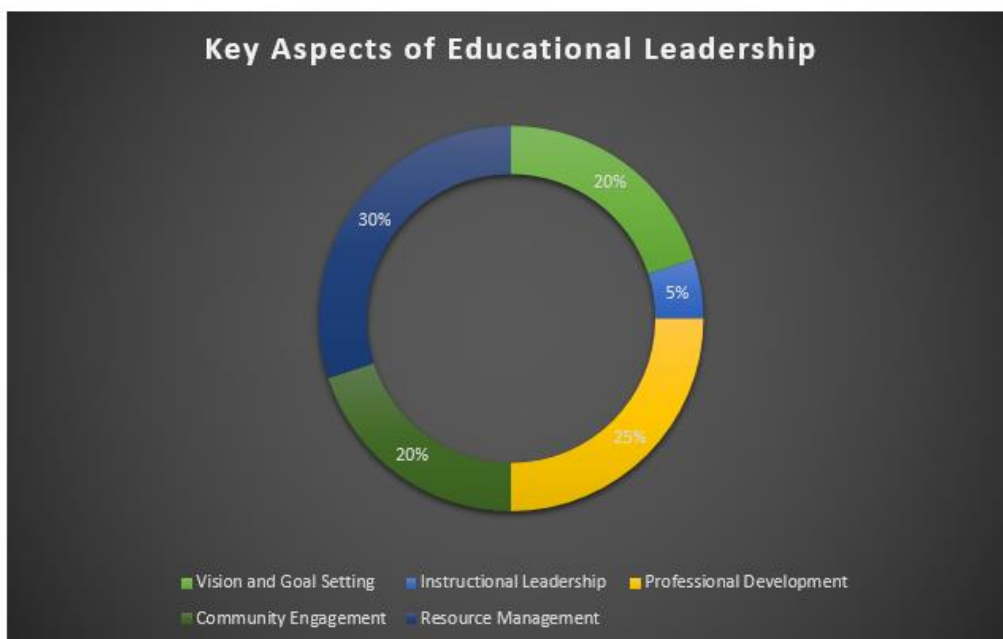
needs of students and staff. This includes managing budgets, maintaining facilities, and providing access to necessary materials and technologies. Additionally, leaders must foster a culture of continuous professional development among teachers and staff, optimizing their skills and capabilities. By implementing robust resource management practices, educational leaders can create a supportive and sustainable environment that promotes academic excellence and operational efficiency [27]. Furthermore, professional development is a crucial aspect of educational leadership, playing a pivotal role in enhancing the skills and competencies of educators, thereby positively impacting student achievement. Effective educational leaders prioritize continuous professional growth by facilitating opportunities for teachers to engage in workshops, seminars, and advanced degree programs. This commitment to professional development ensures that educators stay abreast of the latest pedagogical strategies, technological advancements, and educational research, which they can then implement in their classrooms [28,29]. Additionally, fostering a culture of ongoing learning and collaboration among staff not only improves teaching practices but also contributes to a supportive and innovative school environment. By investing in professional development, educational leaders demonstrate a commitment to excellence, ultimately leading to improved instructional quality and better educational outcomes for students.

The respondents noted that vision and goal setting are pivotal components of effective educational leadership, serving as the foundation upon which successful schools and institutions are built.

One of the head teachers expressed that:

*“A clear vision provides a long-term perspective that inspires and unites stakeholders, guiding the school community towards a common purpose. It articulates the aspirations and values of the institution, creating a shared understanding of what success looks like”.*

Goal setting, on the other hand, translates this vision into actionable and measurable objectives, providing a roadmap for achieving desired outcomes. Effective educational leaders engage in collaborative goal-setting processes, involving



**Fig. 1. Key aspects of educational leadership**

teachers, students, and other stakeholders to ensure buy-in and collective commitment. By aligning goals with the broader vision, leaders can prioritize resources, monitor progress, and make informed decisions that drive continuous improvement [4-16]. Ultimately, vision and goal setting empower educational leaders to create environments that foster student achievement, professional growth, and organizational excellence.

Teachers alluded that community engagement is a vital aspect of educational leadership, playing a significant role in enhancing student achievement and fostering a collaborative school environment. Effective educational leaders recognize the importance of building strong relationships with parents, local organizations, and community members to create a supportive network that contributes to the overall well-being and academic success of students. By involving the community in school activities, decision-making processes, and educational initiatives, leaders can harness diverse perspectives and resources, ensuring that the school's goals align with community needs and values [30]. Furthermore, community engagement promotes transparency, accountability, and a sense of shared responsibility, which can lead to increased trust and support for the school. This collaborative approach not only enriches the educational experience for students but also strengthens the community, creating a positive and inclusive

atmosphere conducive to lifelong learning and civic participation. The respondents also noted that effective instructional leaders guide and support teachers in implementing high-quality instructional practices, ensuring that the curriculum is rigorous and aligned with educational standards. Chanda et al. [4-16] supported this finding by stating that instructional leaders engage in continuous professional development, promoting a culture of collaboration and reflective practice among educators. By setting clear goals, monitoring progress, and providing feedback, instructional leaders create a cohesive vision for school improvement. Their role extends beyond administrative duties, as they actively influence teaching and learning through strategic planning, resource allocation, and the establishment of a positive school climate [31]. In essence, instructional leadership is integral to enhancing the educational experience and outcomes for students, highlighting the crucial link between leadership practices and student success.

### 3.1.2 Differences between urban and rural schools

According to study results, resource availability significantly influences student achievement, creating notable disparities between urban and rural schools. In urban areas, schools often benefit from better funding, resulting in superior infrastructure, access to modern technology, and

a broader range of educational materials. Chanda [4-16] supported this finding by stating that these resources enhance the learning environment, making it more conducive to effective teaching and learning. For instance, urban schools typically have well-stocked libraries, science labs, and computer facilities, enabling students to engage in interactive and hands-on learning experiences. Moreover, urban schools are more likely to attract qualified and experienced teachers due to better living conditions and professional development opportunities. This concentration of resources and skilled personnel directly correlates with higher student achievement, as students have access to a more enriched and supportive learning environment [32]. Conversely, rural schools often face significant challenges in resource availability, which adversely affects student achievement. These schools frequently suffer from inadequate funding, leading to poor infrastructure and a lack of essential educational materials. Many rural schools operate without sufficient textbooks, laboratory equipment, or technological resources, limiting students' ability to engage fully with the curriculum.

Additionally, the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers in rural areas are problematic due to factors such as isolation, lack of amenities, and fewer opportunities for professional growth. As a result, students in rural schools often receive instruction from underqualified or less experienced teachers, which can impede their academic progress [33]. The disparity in resource availability between urban and rural schools underscores the importance of equitable resource distribution to ensure that all students, regardless of their geographic location, have the opportunity to achieve their full academic potential. Furthermore, rural schools often struggle with larger class sizes and multi-grade classrooms, which can dilute the quality of education. The scarcity of specialized staff, such as counselors and special education teachers, further exacerbates the challenges faced by rural students [34]. In contrast, urban schools typically have smaller class sizes and access to specialized personnel who can provide targeted support to students with diverse needs. This discrepancy in student-to-teacher ratios and the availability of specialized support services contributes to the performance gap between urban and rural students.

The study results further revealed that community dynamics play a crucial role in shaping the educational outcomes of students in both urban and rural settings. In urban schools, the community is often characterized by diverse socio-economic backgrounds, higher levels of parental involvement, and greater access to resources. Chanda et al. [4-16] says that these factors can contribute positively to student achievement. For instance, urban schools frequently benefit from better funding, which can translate into more qualified teachers, advanced learning materials, and well-maintained facilities. Moreover, parents in urban areas might have higher educational attainment, which can lead to a greater emphasis on the importance of education and more support for children's learning at home. Additionally, urban students often have access to a wide array of extracurricular activities, including tutoring, sports, and arts programs, which can further enhance their academic and social development [35].

Conversely, rural schools often face unique challenges that can impact student achievement. Rural communities may have limited access to educational resources, including fewer qualified teachers and less funding for school facilities and programs. These schools might struggle with outdated textbooks, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to technology [36-40]. Parental involvement in rural areas can also be affected by factors such as lower levels of educational attainment and economic hardships. Parents in rural communities might work longer hours or multiple jobs, leaving less time to engage with their children's education. Furthermore, rural students might not have the same access to extracurricular activities and educational enrichment programs as their urban counterparts, limiting opportunities for holistic development [41]. The social fabric of urban and rural communities also influences student achievement. Urban areas tend to have more robust social services and support networks, which can help address issues such as poverty, health care, and nutrition, all of which are critical to student success. In contrast, rural areas might lack these support systems, making it harder for students to overcome socio-economic barriers to education. However, rural communities often exhibit strong social cohesion and close-knit relationships, which can provide emotional and social support to students. This sense of community can foster a supportive learning

environment, albeit one that is sometimes constrained by limited material resources.

Additionally, pupils noted that urban schools often benefit from better infrastructure, greater access to educational resources, and a higher concentration of qualified teachers. These advantages contribute to a more conducive learning environment, potentially leading to higher student achievement. One of the pupils stated that:

*“Urban schools also face significant challenges, such as overcrowded classrooms, diverse student populations with varied needs, and social issues like crime and poverty. These factors can hinder the ability of students to achieve their full potential, despite the availability of resources”.*

Conversely, rural schools typically contend with a lack of resources and infrastructure. Many rural schools operate with outdated or insufficient educational materials, limited access to technology, and inadequate facilities. The shortage of qualified teachers in rural areas is a significant issue, as it often leads to larger class sizes and less individualized attention for students [36-40]. Additionally, rural schools frequently struggle with low student enrollment and high dropout rates, which can be attributed to socio-economic challenges, including poverty and the need for children to contribute to household income through labor. These factors collectively create an environment where student achievement is significantly impacted [42].

Furthermore, the disparity in parental involvement and community support between urban and rural schools is notable. In urban areas, parents are more likely to be educated and involved in their children's education, providing additional support and resources. Urban communities often have stronger networks of support, including non-profit organizations and governmental initiatives aimed at enhancing educational outcomes [43]. In contrast, rural communities might lack these support structures, and parents may have less educational background or time to engage with their children's schooling due to work demands. Transportation and accessibility also present distinct challenges. Urban students usually have better access to public transportation, enabling consistent school attendance. In rural areas, students may have to travel long distances on

foot or rely on unreliable transportation methods, leading to higher absenteeism rates. This inconsistent attendance directly affects student performance and achievement, as regular classroom participation is crucial for academic success. Lastly, the differences in socio-economic contexts between urban and rural schools play a crucial role in shaping educational outcomes. Chanda et al. [36-40] supported this finding by stating that poverty poses significant barriers to education at different levels, starting from access to education to educational quality. Urban areas, despite their challenges, often have more economic opportunities and resources that can be leveraged to support education. Rural areas, on the other hand, are frequently characterized by limited economic development and higher levels of poverty, which adversely affect students' ability to focus on their studies and aspire to higher academic achievements [36-40]. The challenges faced by urban and rural schools in influencing student achievement are multifaceted and rooted in a combination of infrastructural, socio-economic, and community-related factors. While urban schools grapple with issues like overcrowding and diverse student needs, rural schools are often hampered by a lack of resources, qualified teachers, and support systems.

## **3.2 Challenges Faced by Educational Leaders in Urban and Rural Schools**

### **3.2.1 Challenges faced by educational leaders in urban schools**

The findings on the challenges faced by educational leaders in urban schools indicated that Disciplinary Issues was recorded to be the highest at 35%, Resource Allocation and Management at 25%, Diverse Student Populations at 15%, Parental Engagement at 15%, and Teacher Retention and Recruitment at 10%.

The findings revealed that disciplinary issues represent a significant challenge faced by educational leaders in urban schools, manifesting in various forms such as absenteeism, disruptive behavior, violence, and substance abuse among students. Chanda et al. [36-40] alluded that discipline in a classroom situation, is the ability to guide and control the class towards the attainment of predetermined objectives of education, while Indiscipline on the other hand entails a situation whereby energy and impulses are uncontrolled by moral



principles or external authority. These issues are often exacerbated by socio-economic factors prevalent in urban settings, such as poverty, family instability, and community violence, which can negatively impact students' behavior and attitudes towards education [44]. Educational leaders in urban schools must navigate the complexities of addressing these disciplinary problems while fostering a safe and conducive learning environment. This requires implementing comprehensive behavior management strategies, providing support services such as counseling, and engaging with parents and the wider community to address the root causes of students' behavioral issues. Additionally, Chanda [4-16] says that educational leaders must balance maintaining discipline with respecting students' rights and promoting a positive school culture. The challenge is compounded by resource constraints, large class sizes, and diverse student populations, making the task of managing disciplinary issues even more demanding. Effective leadership in this context involves not only enforcing rules and regulations but also understanding and addressing the underlying factors contributing to disciplinary problems, thus creating a holistic approach to student well-being and academic success [45].

Additionally, resource allocation and management present significant challenges for educational leaders in urban schools, stemming from various complex factors. Mulyadi [46] noted that urban schools often operate within densely populated areas where the demand for educational services is high, leading to strained resources. One of the head teachers noted that:

*Leaders must navigate budget constraints that limit their ability to provide adequate facilities, instructional materials, and technology, which are essential for a conducive learning environment”.*

Furthermore, they face the challenge of effectively distributing these limited resources to meet the diverse needs of a heterogeneous student population, which includes a mix of socio-economic backgrounds, learning abilities, and language proficiencies. The constant pressure to achieve high academic standards and accountability measures further complicates resource management [47]. Leaders must balance investing in teacher professional development with maintaining infrastructure and supporting student services, such as counseling

and extracurricular programs. Additionally, urban schools often encounter bureaucratic red tape and political pressures that can hinder timely and equitable resource allocation. Overall, the multifaceted nature of resource allocation and management in urban schools requires educational leaders to possess strong strategic planning, financial acumen, and advocacy skills to ensure that all students have access to quality education [48].

The respondents also pointed out that teacher retention and recruitment present significant challenges for educational leaders in urban schools, impacting overall educational quality and student outcomes. Urban schools often face high teacher turnover rates due to factors such as demanding work environments, larger class sizes, and insufficient support. These conditions can lead to burnout and dissatisfaction, prompting teachers to seek employment in more favorable settings [33]. Additionally, recruitment efforts are hampered by competition with suburban and private schools, which often offer more attractive salaries, benefits, and working conditions. Educational leaders must navigate these complexities by implementing strategic measures to improve job satisfaction and create supportive work environments [49]. This includes providing professional development opportunities, fostering collaborative school cultures, and addressing workload concerns. Moreover, targeted recruitment initiatives, such as offering incentives for teachers specializing in high-demand subjects or those committed to urban education, can help attract and retain dedicated educators [50].

Moving on, the findings revealed that educational leaders in urban schools face significant challenges when managing diverse student populations. Chitondo & Chanda [51] says that diversity is about what makes each of us unique and includes our backgrounds, personality, life experiences and beliefs, all of the things that make us who we are. This diversity encompasses a wide range of factors, including cultural backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, languages spoken at home, and varying levels of academic preparedness. Chanda [4-16] added that such diversity requires leaders to implement inclusive practices and tailor educational strategies to meet the distinct needs of each student. For instance, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may require additional support services, such as free or reduced-price meals, access to healthcare, and academic

interventions. Similarly, Madoda et al. [52] supported this finding by stating that students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) need specialized language instruction and resources to help them succeed academically. Additionally, cultural diversity necessitates that educational leaders foster an environment of cultural competence among staff and students, promoting respect and understanding of different cultural perspectives. Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej [53] says that this might involve professional development for teachers on culturally responsive teaching practices and the inclusion of multicultural curricula. Besides, addressing the wide range of academic abilities means that schools must offer differentiated instruction and potentially provide advanced coursework for gifted students while also supporting those who may be struggling. All these factors make the role of educational leaders in urban settings particularly complex, as they must balance equity and excellence while ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Furthermore, parental engagement remains a significant challenge for educational leaders in urban schools due to various socio-economic and cultural factors. Many parents in urban

settings often have demanding work schedules that limit their availability for school-related activities, such as parent-teacher conferences, volunteering, and participation in school governance [4-16]. Additionally, there may be a lack of understanding or awareness among parents about the importance of their involvement in their children's education. Language barriers, especially in diverse urban communities, can also hinder effective communication between parents and school staff [54]. Moreover, some parents may feel disconnected or intimidated by the school environment, particularly if their own educational experiences were negative or if they perceive the school as unwelcoming or unsupportive. This disconnect can lead to a lack of trust and collaboration between parents and educators, ultimately impacting student achievement and well-being. Educational leaders must therefore navigate these complexities and strive to implement strategies that foster a more inclusive and engaging environment for parents, such as flexible meeting times, multilingual communication, and community-building activities that bridge the gap between home and school [55].

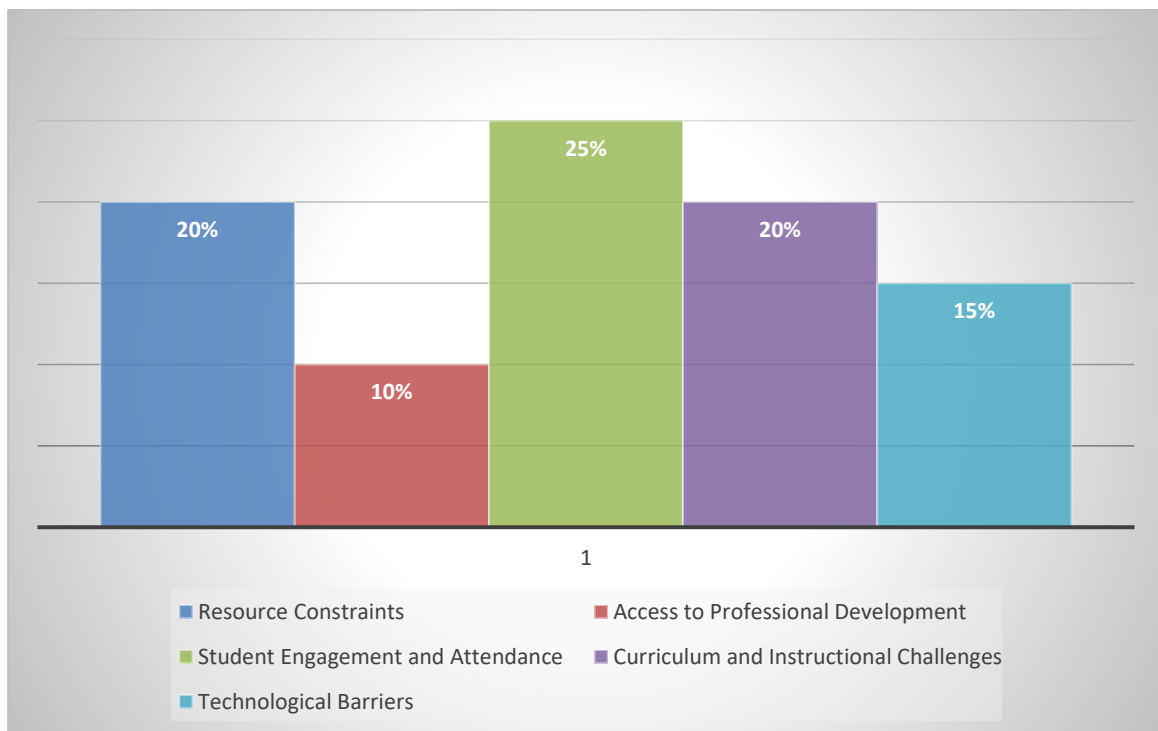


Fig. 2. Challenges faced by educational leaders in urban schools

### 3.2.2 Challenges faced by educational leaders in rural schools

The study results revealed 6 main challenges faced by educational leaders in rural schools. Student Engagement and Attendance was recorded to be at the highest with 25%, Curriculum and Instructional Challenges at 20%, Resource Constraints at 20%, Technological Barriers at 15%, Access to Professional Development at 10%, and Health and Safety Concerns at 10%.

The findings showed that student engagement and attendance are significant challenges faced by educational leaders in rural schools, presenting multifaceted issues that impede academic progress and overall school effectiveness. In many rural areas, socioeconomic factors heavily influence student attendance, with students often required to assist with household chores or work to supplement family income, leading to inconsistent school attendance [39]. Additionally, long distances to school and inadequate transportation infrastructure exacerbate the issue, making it difficult for students to attend regularly. Engagement is further hindered by limited access to resources, including textbooks, technology, and extracurricular activities, which are essential for fostering a stimulating learning environment. Karakose et al. [56] added that the lack of trained and motivated teachers in rural areas also impacts student engagement, as educators may be less equipped to employ innovative teaching methods that captivate students' interest and encourage active participation [57]. Furthermore, cultural attitudes towards education in some rural communities may not prioritize academic achievement, contributing to lower levels of student motivation and engagement. These challenges necessitate comprehensive strategies from educational leaders, including community engagement, improved resource allocation, professional development for teachers, and infrastructure improvements to create a supportive and engaging learning environment for rural students.

Additionally, in rural schools, educational leaders frequently confront significant curriculum and instructional challenges that impact the overall quality of education. One of the head teachers explained that:

*One major issue is the limited availability of resources and materials, which hampers the*

*ability to deliver a well-rounded and up-to-date curriculum”.*

Teachers in these settings often lack access to modern teaching tools and technology, which can stifle innovative instructional methods and limit students' exposure to diverse learning experiences [28,29]. Additionally, the curriculum may not always be tailored to the specific needs and contexts of rural students, leading to a disconnect between educational content and real-life application. Instructional challenges are further compounded by difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified educators, who may be deterred by remote locations and inadequate professional development opportunities. These factors contribute to disparities in educational outcomes, as rural students may not receive the same level of instruction or support as their urban counterparts [4-16]. Addressing these challenges requires targeted strategies to enhance resource allocation, professional development, and curriculum relevance to better meet the needs of rural communities.

The respondents further pointed out that educational leaders in rural schools often grapple with significant resource constraints that hinder their ability to provide high-quality education. These constraints manifest in various forms, including inadequate financial resources, insufficient infrastructure, and limited access to educational materials and technology [58]. Budgetary limitations often result in underfunded schools, which struggle to maintain essential facilities, purchase updated textbooks, or invest in modern teaching tools. Infrastructure issues such as dilapidated buildings, lack of safe drinking water, and unreliable electricity further exacerbate the challenges [59]. Moreover, rural schools frequently face difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified teachers due to lower salaries and fewer professional development opportunities. This shortage of skilled educators can lead to larger class sizes and reduced individual attention for students. Additionally, the limited availability of technology and digital resources can impede the implementation of innovative teaching methods and restrict students' exposure to broader educational opportunities [16]. Consequently, these resource constraints create a cycle of disadvantage that affects the quality of education and overall student outcomes in rural areas.

Teachers alluded that technological barriers represent a significant challenge for educational

leaders in rural schools, impacting both the implementation and efficacy of modern educational strategies. These barriers often stem from inadequate infrastructure, including unreliable electricity and poor internet connectivity, which hinder the integration of technology into the curriculum [60]. The limited access to digital devices and software further exacerbates the situation, creating a disparity between rural and urban educational environments. Additionally, the lack of technical support and training for educators can impede their ability to effectively utilize technology, thereby affecting instructional quality and student engagement. These challenges are compounded by financial constraints, which restrict the ability of rural schools to invest in necessary technological resources. Consequently, educational leaders must navigate these obstacles to ensure that technology can enhance learning outcomes rather than reinforce existing educational inequalities. The respondents added that rural schools often face issues such as limited access to training programs and workshops, which are frequently concentrated in urban centers. This geographical isolation means that leaders in these areas may struggle to attend important development opportunities, impacting their ability to stay updated with the latest educational strategies and innovations [61]. Additionally, financial constraints can limit

the ability of rural schools to invest in professional development programs or to support leaders in attending external training. This lack of access can result in a gap in leadership skills and knowledge, potentially affecting the quality of education and the effectiveness of school management in rural areas. Furthermore, the scarcity of local experts and mentors exacerbates the problem, as rural schools might not have access to the same level of guidance and support available in more populated areas. As a result, addressing these professional development challenges is crucial for enhancing the leadership capabilities and overall educational outcomes in rural schools.

Pupils on the other hand revealed that health and safety concerns represent a significant challenge for educational leaders in rural schools, often exacerbated by limited resources and infrastructure. Huang et al. [62] noted that in these settings, inadequate facilities for sanitation and hygiene, including insufficient access to clean water and proper waste management, heighten the risk of health-related issues among students and staff. Chanda & Chitondo [12,13] alluded that waste management refers to the systematic process of collecting, transporting, processing, recycling, and disposing of waste materials in a manner that is environmentally

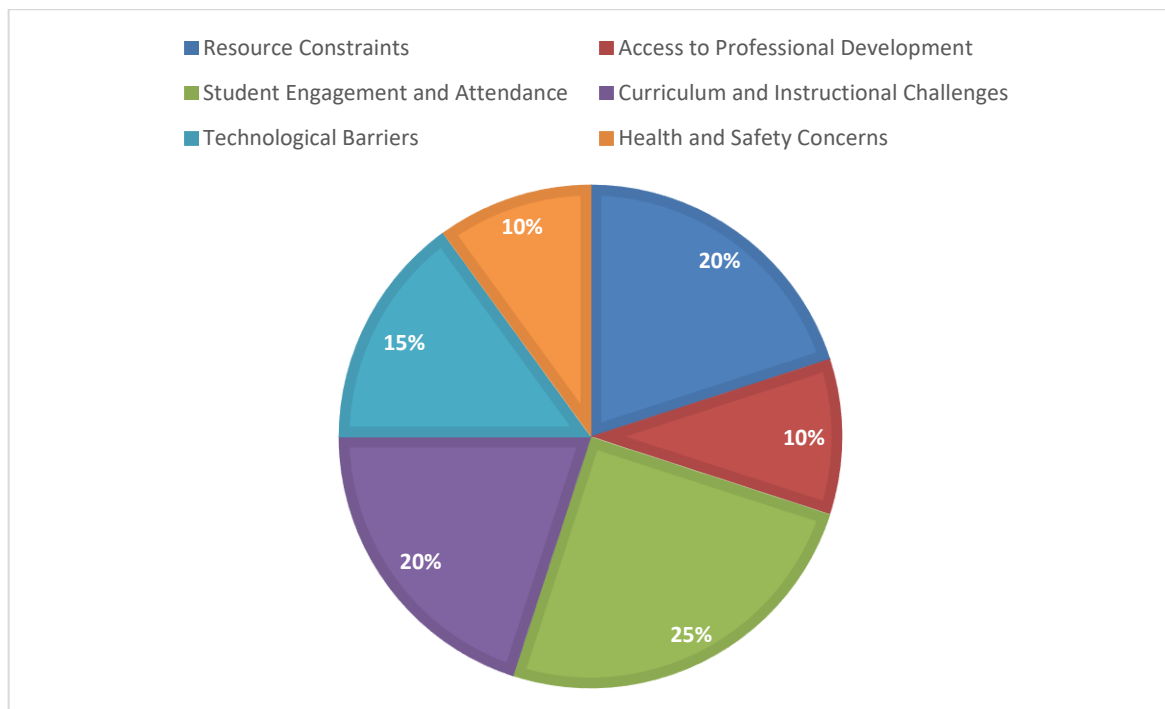


Fig. 3. Challenges faced by educational leaders in rural schools

friendly, socially responsible, and economically viable. The background and significance of waste management stem from various interconnected factors such as environmental protection as improper waste disposal can lead to pollution of land, water, and air. One of the pupils narrated that:

*“Limited access to healthcare services can affect students’ and staff’s well-being, leading to higher absenteeism and health-related issues. Also rural schools may face unique safety concerns, such as long distances to emergency services and lack of proper safety protocols”.*

The lack of qualified health professionals and emergency medical services further compounds the problem, making it difficult to address health crises effectively. Additionally, rural schools frequently face challenges in implementing comprehensive health and safety protocols due to budget constraints and a shortage of training for staff [63]. This situation can lead to increased absenteeism, decreased student performance, and heightened vulnerability to both communicable and non-communicable diseases. Herranen et al. [64] says that addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including investment in infrastructure, training for staff, and partnerships with local health agencies to enhance the overall health and safety standards in rural educational settings.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study established evidence that the quality of educational leadership significantly influences student outcomes across both urban and rural settings, though the impact manifests differently depending on the context. In urban schools, where resources are often more abundant and the student population is diverse, effective leadership is crucial in navigating complex social dynamics and implementing innovative practices that cater to varied needs. Urban leaders face challenges such as high student turnover and socio-economic disparities but have access to more support networks and professional development opportunities. Conversely, rural schools, which frequently grapple with limited resources and less frequent professional training, benefit immensely from strong, visionary leadership that can foster community engagement, resourcefulness, and resilience. Rural educational leaders play a

pivotal role in overcoming geographic isolation and often drive significant improvements by leveraging local resources and building strong community ties. The comparative study underscores that while the specific challenges differ, the effectiveness of educational leadership in both settings is integral to enhancing student achievement. Strong leadership practices, tailored to the unique needs of each environment, are essential for driving positive educational outcomes and ensuring equitable opportunities for all students.

#### 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are actions that should be taken on the basis of the findings of this study;

##### 1. Enhance Leadership Training and Development:

- **Urban Schools:** The ministry of education should focus on equipping school leaders with advanced skills in managing diverse and high-pressure environments. This could include training in data-driven decision-making, conflict resolution, and stakeholder engagement.
- **Rural Schools:** The ministry of education should provide support for developing leadership skills that address unique challenges such as resource constraints and community engagement. Training could include strategies for resource management, community partnership building, and innovative problem-solving.

##### 2. Implement Tailored Support Systems:

- **Urban Schools:** The government should develop support systems that address the specific challenges of urban settings, such as high student turnover and diverse student needs. This could involve creating mentorship programs for new leaders, or establishing networks for sharing best practices.
- **Rural Schools:** The government should establish support mechanisms that address the isolation and limited resources often found in rural settings. This might include virtual communities

of practice, partnerships with nearby institutions, or mobile resource units.

### 3. Promote Collaboration and Best Practice Sharing:

- **Urban and Rural Schools:** The ministry of education should encourage collaboration between urban and rural schools to share successful strategies and practices. This could be facilitated through cross-school workshops, joint professional development sessions, and collaborative projects that address common challenges.

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Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of manuscripts.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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