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The trust-Ubuntu nexus: redefining collaboration in school leadership in the Free State Province

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Introduction: The world has undergone significant economic, social, and political changes over the past decade, resulting in paradigmatic shifts in leadership structures that influence trust. In South Africa, trust has been affected by the shifts in national, provincial and school leadership structures. This reality shifts the issue of trust into focus, but its relationship to Ubuntu and collaboration in school leadership is scarcely explored. The primary objective of this paper is to investigate the relationship between trust and Ubuntu in selected schools in the Free State Province, specifically in the context of collaboration in school leadership. The paper explores the trust-Ubuntu nexus by analyzing the conceptualization, experiences, and practices of school principals, departmental heads, and teachers. Conceptually, the nexus is formed by linking two key theoretical frameworks, providing a framework that is used analytically with both rational and ethical dimensions.

Methods: This qualitative multiple case study, grounded in social constructivism, explored trust and Ubuntu in four selected schools and collected data through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The data, after being analyzed using the six steps of thematic analysis, and the theoretical frameworks of Trust Theory, as well as Ubuntu, an African Philosophy, resulted in several key findings.

Results: Among the findings was the indication that contestation of professional and personal views, communication, leadership styles and ethics were the main components in the nexus between trust and Ubuntu. Open communication by school leaders was shown to promote trust and, as a tenet of Ubuntu, enhanced collaboration. For its theoretical contribution, the combination of Trust Theory and Ubuntu forms the trust-Ubuntu nexus, where Ubuntu's emphasis on communal responsibility, ethical values, and collective wellbeing aligns with socio-cognitive needs for reliability and good alignment in trust relationships. The limitations, however, are that Ubuntu interpretations vary across different contexts and that trust is a dynamic concept.

Conclusion: We recommend that schools focus on Ubuntu beyond policy expectations to foster trust and promote collaboration. Conclusively, the trust-Ubuntu nexus is interactive such that trust without Ubuntu is compliance-based and brittle, while Ubuntu without trust is idealistic and ineffective.

KEYWORDS

collaboration, collaborative leadership, ethical leadership, school leadership, trust, Trust Theory, Ubuntu philosophy

1 Introduction

Trust is widely recognized in international scholarship as a foundational condition for effective collaboration and sustained improvement within school environments. Research consistently demonstrates that trust enables shared decision making, strengthens professional relationships, and underpins the functioning of high-performing schools' commitment to collective improvement (Parviainen et al., 2025; Tschannen-Moran, 2020; Vikaraman et al., 2021). Leaders who compromised trust inevitably weakened their capacity to inspire, influence and mobilize others, underscoring the centrality of ethical leadership in educational settings. Ethical leadership and trust are thus closely intertwined forming the cornerstone of effective school leadership fostering accountability, integrity and positive school performance (Tschannen-Moran, 2020; Hallinger, 2011). However, much of the existing literature continues to foreground the role of the principal, with comparatively limited attention given to how trust is cultivated and sustained through distributed and shared leadership practices among educators. Contemporary leadership theory emphasizes that leadership is not confined in a single role but is embedded in instructional relational and ethical practices and acted collectively across the school (Leithwood et al., 2020; Hallinger, 2011). This gap highlights the need for further investigation into how trust operates within collaborative leadership structures and everyday professional interactions in schools.

Ethical leadership not only builds trust between principals and teachers but also strengthens relationships among learners, educators, and communities (Covey and Merrill, 2006). In the South African schooling context, trust has been identified as particularly significant due to the complex social, historical, and hierarchical school management structures, which often contribute to strained relationships and limited professional collaboration (Muyambi and Ahiaku, 2025). As a result, trust building becomes a strategic requirement rather than an incidental process, helping to address the challenges in schools. We have always prided ourselves on Ubuntu, an African Philosophy that is premised on respect for human dignity and embodies respect and integrity from all (leaders and the led). Khoza (2012) suggests that Ubuntu can be viewed as spiritual in its intent, yet practically applicable. Furthermore, he illustrates that being kind, generous, being conscious of our dependence on one another, the need for competence and caring from leaders, and humanism are spiritual in their intent and practice. Ubuntu, therefore, presents an under-researched ethical framework that resonates with ethical leadership studies in an African context and is the core of relational leadership

(Chibaya, 2021; Cohen et al., 2017; Matupire, 2016; Mthiyane and Mudadigwa, 2021). Studies examining the relationship between Ubuntu and trust remain limited, indicating a need for greater conceptual clarity and scholarly attention to how these constructs are related.

In any working environment, such as schools, fostering a culture of Ubuntu encourages open communication, mutual respect, and shared goals, which in turn build trust among team members and trust creates a safe environment for collaboration (Sesinyi and Gcelu, 2023). Embracing Ubuntu can transform organizational dynamics, driving not only productivity but also a sense of belonging and shared purpose among employees. This could engender trust in workplaces. Trust is the foundation of school leadership, as research shows that effective leadership depends on trust. Besides, Ubuntu is cast as a leadership ethic that centers on reciprocity and mutual belonging, which builds trust (Matupire, 2016). How this works in a context of collaboration is still a gap in the literature, though there is a growing amount of research that links trust in principals to ethical leadership (Vikaraman et al., 2021). The ethical principal is trusted by teachers, and the learners and the community trust teachers because they are perceived as ethical (Farnsworth et al., 2019; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 1998). However, once trust is lost, often due to unethical practices, it is not easy to restore.

There is an opportunity to facilitate social change by maintaining trust and adhering to ethical leadership practices, as ethical leadership can bring about positive social change (Brown et al., 2005). Brown et al. (2005) define ethical leadership as the ability to influence people to behave ethically. Appropriate conduct, discipline and influence of the behavior of followers are related to the functions of an ethical leader in every context (Chibaya, 2021). However, unethical leadership practices are perpetuated among leaders, destroying morality and potentially exacerbating turbulence, which can lead to a loss of trust (Gross and Shapiro, 2015). Ethical leadership remains an area that needs further exploration, particularly in Africa (Mangena, 2019), which is how Ubuntu comes to light. Hence, this study explored the relationship between trust and Ubuntu in selected secondary schools in the Free State Province, as Ubuntu is an African philosophy that underpins ethical leadership. The study explored the conceptualization, practices, and experiences of principals, departmental heads, and teachers in schools to enhance/improve leadership and management, with a sharp focus on trust and Ubuntu.

2 Research aim and critical question

The study aimed to explore the conceptualizations, practices, and experiences of principals, departmental heads, and teachers regarding the trust-Ubuntu nexus in collaborative school leadership. The study was underpinned by the question: What are the conceptualizations, practices, and experiences of principals, departmental heads, and teachers regarding the trust-Ubuntu nexus in collaborative school leadership?

3 Theoretical frameworks

Underpinning this study were two theoretical frameworks: [Castelfranchi and Falcone's \(2010\)](#) model of Trust Theory and Ubuntu, an African Philosophy ([Khoza, 2012](#)). The theoretical frameworks are integrative.

3.1 Trust Theory/socio-cognitive model of trust

[Castelfranchi and Falcone \(2010\)](#) systematize a general Trust Theory in a user-friendly book, providing an organic model of this complex and dynamic phenomenon on cognitive, affective, and social (interactive and collective) levels. They employ the Cognitive and Behavioral Sciences point of view, as well as the Artificial Intelligence (AI) domain, as approaches to the project. The theory of trust is presented in the book as an essential concept, as trust is unavoidable and a crucial subject for social interaction, as well as collective and institutional phenomena. Trust is a vital cognitive “mediator” of sociality and integration of mind and interaction. Therefore, the socio-cognitive model proposed here is based on the mental state of trust, which is defined by the combination of beliefs and goals. School leaders operate based on their beliefs and goals, which are significant components of the socio-cognitive model of trust. The theoretical model was chosen because it considers trust as a complex socio-cognitive phenomenon allowing us to examine trust in the selected school, considering it a socio-cognitive phenomenon that encompasses various affective and cognitive aspects.

By assuming an “Accommodation” attitude, [Castelfranchi and Falcone \(2010\)](#) simplified factual data to adjust concepts and schemes to the complexity and richness of the trust phenomenon, thereby developing the Trust Theory. They chose to use “Accommodation” because trust is ontologically complex, there is a solid separation of notions regarding trust, and there is a need to give attention to aspects that have been ignored ([Castelfranchi and Falcone, 2010](#)). They propose a trust model with the following main features: an integrated model, a socio-cognitive model, an analytical and explicit model, a multi-factor and multi-directional model, a dynamic model, a structurally related model and a non-prescriptive model. They aimed at a unified, covering, general and possibly shared definition of trust.

Considering the multidimensional nature of trust and an effort to simplify [Castelfranchi and Falcone's \(2010\)](#) model, broad categories of their work, such as competence and sincerity, can be evaluated. The categories are shown to change across

different domains, and this is common in school leadership, where complexities abound. Accordingly, this study drew on [Castelfranchi and Falcone's \(2010\)](#). Trust Theory as an analytical foundation to examine how trust is formed, sustained, and disrupted within educational contexts. Evaluating school leaders' belief in competence and sincerity provided a way to calibrate trustworthiness using the data collected for this study, highlighting the conceptualizations, experiences, and practices of trust in the selected schools.

3.2 African philosophy of Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a deeply rooted African ideology that captures the spirit of community, interdependence, and humanity. The name “Ubuntu” is derived from several Bantu languages and translates to “I am because we are,” emphasizing the idea that relationships with others shape individual identity. This philosophy emphasizes social relationships and collective responsibility, advocating for a worldview that prioritizes community wellbeing over individual gain. Ubuntu serves as a guiding concept for moral and ethical behavior, emphasizing the realization of shared humanity and the development of compassion and empathy in human interactions ([Tutu, 1999](#)). Ubuntu is one of the most fundamental aspects of living a life of courage, compassion and connection, and it is seeing yourself in others ([Matupire, 2016](#); [Ngomane, 2019](#)). Moreover, to us, this is so profound.

Ubuntu brings about kindness, caring, togetherness, solidarity, cooperation and sharing among the school leadership teams, which all promote positive relationships ([Ukpokodu, 2016](#), p. 154). Therefore, the African philosophy of Ubuntu provides a perfect lens to explore the trust-Ubuntu nexus in a South African context. As a theoretical framework for the study, Ubuntu was used because it provides an alternative to the notion of individualism that pervades many Western philosophies. It contends that people are innately social beings whose identities are inextricably linked with those of others ([Samuel, 2024](#)). Ubuntu promotes people to constructively contribute to their communities by instilling a sense of belonging and mutual respect, thus strengthening social cohesion and peace.

The use of the two theoretical frameworks, [Castelfranchi and Falcone's \(2010\)](#) model of Trust Theory and the African Philosophy of Ubuntu ([Khoza, 2012](#)), allowed both calibration of trust as a complex socio-cognitive phenomenon and its link to ethical leadership in an African context, hence the use of an African theory on ethical leadership. The link between the two theoretical frameworks is clearly shown in [Table 1](#) that conceptualizes the trust-Ubuntu nexus. The theoretical frameworks chosen demonstrate how the ethical values of Ubuntu, including reciprocity, dignity, and communal responsibility, map onto the Trust Theory's components of sincerity, competence, reliability, and goal orientation. The combination of these two concepts forms the “trust-Ubuntu nexus.” The trust-Ubuntu nexus conceptualizes trust as a socially embedded relational construct grounded in Ubuntu, rather than an individual psychological state or a mere contractual mechanism ([Matupire, 2016](#)). The nexus responds to the gaps in the mainstream literature, which rank individual rationality highly over relational ethics and undertheorized collective morality, dignity, and communal accountability, while

TABLE 1 Conceptualizing the trust-Ubuntu nexus.

Framework	Core principles	Linkage within the nexus
Ubuntu (African philosophy)	Focuses on respect for human dignity, which includes ethical values such as respect, integrity, caring, togetherness, solidarity, cooperation, reciprocity, dignity and communal responsibility. This is an ethical framework for leadership.	The ethical values of Ubuntu are relational. They, in this way, map onto the socio-cognitive components of the Trust theory, and they build trust
Trust Theory (Socio-cognitive model)	Trust is conceptualized as a complex socio-cognitive phenomenon that hinges on the combination of beliefs and goals. The key components are sincerity, competence, reliability and goal orientation.	The socio-cognitive model allows for the calibration of trust with beliefs and goals that can be traced back to ethical values, which are significant components.

emphasizing control, monitoring, and compliance (Cheteni and Shindika, 2017; Castelfranchi and Falcone, 2010). In this way, Ubuntu introduces a relational ontology, reframing trust as co-produced, morally situated, and systematically sustained, providing coding and theme construction that were useful in the findings and discussion.

Three interlinked analytical dimensions were theorized to assess the dynamics within the selected schools regarding the trust-Ubuntu nexus. The three dimensions were relational integrity, communal accountability and ethical leadership and stewardship. Relational integrity refers to how individuals experience trustworthiness in day-to-day interactions, as affirmed by a key Ubuntu lens that says “A person is a person through other persons,” as explained by Matupire (2016). The analytical indicators included integrity, respect, ethical decision making and safe interpersonal exchanges. These could be identified from the participants’ responses during the semi-structured interviews. The second dimension of communal accountability encompasses how trust is maintained or eroded within teams, departments, or committees. The key Ubuntu lens in this regard involves collective responsibility and shared destiny, attributes that also relate to collaboration (Sesinyi and Gcelu, 2023). The indicators are shown to be shared ownership of outcomes (success or failure), transparency in decision-making, fairness in conflict resolution, and willingness to correct harm. The third dimension of ethical leadership and stewardship views leadership as a form of stewardship, rather than a matter of authority. The indicators include alignment with ethical values and policies, equity in resource allocation, responsiveness to the community’s needs, and demonstrating moral courage in complex and risky decisions. Consequently, the trust Ubuntu nexus provides a rigorous, culturally grounded lens for understanding how trust emerges, erodes and regenerates within a schooling environment. Trust is treated not as a tool but as a rational condition to be understood.

4 Literature review

4.1 Nature of trust

There are definitional debates and confusion regarding the crucial ingredients of trust; however, an effort can be made to unify these ingredients. The incorporation of the dimensions mentioned earlier and leaning heavily on the definition developed by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998), the multidimensional definition of trust is:

Trust is one party’s willingness shown by intention and behavior to be vulnerable to another party based on confidence developed cognitively and effectively that the latter party is (a) benevolent, (b) reliable, (c) competent, (d) honest, and (e) open.

Considering the definition given, trust in a leader becomes the willingness of the subordinate to be vulnerable to the actions, decisions and actions of the leader. This suggests that internal attributions toward the trustee originate from external cues (Castelfranchi and Falcone, 2010; Searle et al., 2024). In their literature review on trust, the facets shown in the definitions of trust from the literature indicate and agree with the multidimensional nature of trust. The multidimensional nature of trust aligns with the notion that trust is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon, adapting to time and context, rendering it a complex concept that requires exploration in various contexts.

Farnsworth et al. (2019) conceptualize trust as focusing on the willingness of one party to accept vulnerability and risk due to a perception of another party. While this definition foregrounds vulnerability, it becomes analytically productive when read alongside Castelfranchi and Falcone’s (2010) Trust Theory, which emphasizes that such a willingness is not spontaneous and emerges from underlying cognitive and relational assessments of the other’s characteristics, intentions, and reliability. Trust, in this sense, functions as a mediating mechanism that transforms perceptions of the other into a decision to suspend control and accept risk. Hence, there is an understanding that the willingness or decision of one party has a background, in this case, the perceived characteristic. Synthesizing these perspectives, trust will be conceptualized as relational, interpersonal, and organic in this study. The emphasis of trust as a relational practice aligns with Leithwood et al.’s (2020) revised conceptualization of leadership influence, which posits that trust constitutes a critical mediating condition for leadership success. The study will utilize Castelfranchi and Falcone’s (2010) Trust Theory.

Previous research has highlighted the characteristics of trustworthiness, including benevolence, competence, honesty, integrity, reliability, predictability, good judgment, concern, and openness (Ellison and Firestone, 1974; Butler and Cantrell, 1984; Mishra, 1996; McKnight et al., 2002), as vital for any relationship. What was evident from this study was that words such as “trustworthiness,” “honesty,” “reliability,” “integrity,” and “good judgment” are linked to the characteristics of an ethical leader, which focus on doing the right things right. Trust is clearly an indicator of ethical leadership. Highlighting trust, Yuki et al. (2013) suggest that high trust and respect characterize high-quality exchange relationships, which can be interpreted as indicating collaboration. The standard terms in discussions

involving collaborative school leadership are trust and respect. The trusted leader will be adored and respected, influencing followers to become committed and loyal.

4.2 Ethical leadership and its antecedents

Ethical leadership is defined as the “demonstration of a normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and the promotion of such conduct to followers through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown et al., 2005, p.120). It is a leadership style sought after because it can bring about positive social change and has been shown to improve employee performance and reduce misconduct and absenteeism (Sam, 2021). Therefore, ethical leaders can be trusted as they are seen to be fair, honest, reliable, brave, virtuous, and trustworthy role models (Chibaya, 2021). The core characteristics associated with ethical leadership include integrity, honesty, fairness, accountability, dignity, cultural and moral values, diversity, and respect for individuals. These core characteristics are also present in the African Philosophy of Ubuntu, which is covered as one of the theoretical frameworks. This links ethical leadership to the mechanism of Ubuntu and trust.

What constitutes ethical leadership is not a set of isolated moral actions, but rather it emerges from the interaction between a philosophical foundation, individual conduct, and environmental conditions. Rather than functioning as a discrete leadership style, ethical leadership operates as a relational and normative mechanism through which leaders interpret moral obligation, enact values and shape the ethical climate of their environment. Early formulations of ethical leadership within transformational and servant leadership theories (Ahmed, 2025; Ahmed et al., 2023) highlight this mechanism by demonstrating how moral influence is exercised through relational engagement, modeling, and shared purpose rather than positional authority. The relational mechanism is further illuminated through Ubuntu philosophy.

Ubuntu philosophy conceptualizes leadership ethics as inherently communal (Samuel, 2024). The link to leadership styles can be explained by how ethical leadership influences personal and interpersonal relationships, which are also vital for collaboration and are evident in Ubuntu values – “I am because we are.” Another theoretical framework that has been used to understand ethical leadership is the Multiple Ethical Paradigms (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2021), which helps analyze complex ethical dilemmas. The complexity of school leadership can be analyzed through the lens of Multiple Ethical Paradigms. In African contexts, the philosophy of Ubuntu is preferred because it embodies values such as communal independence and shared responsibility, which provide the foundation for collaborative settings. The institutional and environmental factors indicate how external and institutional contexts significantly influence the ability to practice ethical leadership. Research has highlighted several factors, including economic, political, support systems, involvement, and motivation (Matupire, 2016; Vikaraman et al., 2021), to influence the practice of ethical leadership. At the individual level, ethical leadership is enacted through personal actions that involve self-responsibility, leading the way, and role modeling (Cheteni and Shindika, 2017),

which also affects how one is trusted and the institution as a whole.

4.3 Trust in collaborative school settings

Trust is widely recognized as a fundamental element in enabling effective collaboration within school environments. Internationally, scholars argue that trust functions as the social glue that supports shared decision-making, professional cooperation and the collective pursuit of school improvement (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2020). Leithwood et al. (2020) caution against seeing leadership practices as context-free and argue that effectiveness depends on how leaders adapt core practices to local conditions. In collaborative school settings, trust fosters ethical leadership practices, such as open communication, and reduces interpersonal risk, promoting a culture where teachers and stakeholders can work interdependently toward common goals. Scholarship on successful school leadership converges on the argument that leadership effectiveness is mediated through relational, organizational and motivational conditions rather than direct instructional control (Keravnos and Symeou, 2024; Leithwood et al., 2020). This not only highlights the power of collaboration but also underscores how trust becomes a central leadership outcome and a key means of influencing school improvement.

South African leadership research highlights that trust is central to collaborative school improvement, particularly within professional learning communities (PLCs) (Bhengu and Blose, 2022). Since 2020, the Department of Basic Education has promoted PLCs as a means to enhance teacher collaboration, but studies reveal that the effectiveness of PLCs is strongly linked to relational trust (Hudson, 2024). Hudson (2024) emphasizes that PLCs encourage collaboration and depend on relational trust. When teachers trust one another and trust their leaders, they participate openly, reflect honestly, engage meaningfully and are motivated. This aligns with Keravnos and Symeou's (2024) recurrent leadership practices, namely: fairness, respect, consistency and reliability, trusting teachers, setting the example, competence and organization, and open-door support. Therefore, at the institutional level, collaboration, just like ethical leadership, is constrained by broader socio-economic and organizational conditions.

Recent scholarship emphasizes the relational dimensions of leadership as pivotal in cultivating trust. Transformational, distributed, and participatory leadership approaches are shown to create conditions for shared decision-making and a collaborative culture (Keravnos and Symeou, 2024; Bouwmans et al., 2017; Nadeem, 2024). These leadership styles are built on consistent communication, transparency in decision-making, recognition of teacher expertise, emotional support for staff, and modeling ethical behavior. These attributes are also tenets of ethical leadership; however, there is a scarcity of literature that links ethical leadership to trust, especially in a collaborative context. Furthermore, there is a need for further research in contexts marked by historical injustice, socio-economic inequality, and institutional challenges (Leithwood et al., 2020). We note that successful school leadership cannot be adequately understood without paying attention to trust as a relational, moral and organizational condition.

4.4 South African context

South Africa's contemporary educational landscape is shaped by sustained political, economic, and social volatility, which has profound implications for how school leadership is enacted and perceived. Rather than functioning as a neutral backdrop, this context actively structures conditions under which trust in leadership is formed, eroded or contested. Pillay's (2017) research suggests that many leaders today struggle to earn public trust due to their lack of ethical leadership and inability to demonstrate effective leadership in times of crisis. South Africa has faced its fair share of crises, whether artificial, such as state capture and load shedding, or natural disasters like floods (Gibson, 2009), the "lost years" of State Capture, when corrupt activities were exposed in government (Jonas, 2019). Or the threats and opportunities at the dawn of a Government of National Unity (GNU), which envisaged a collective pursuit for improvement (Thwala and Vilakazi, 2025). The formation of a GNU illustrates how collective, inclusive leadership can serve as a trust-repair mechanism, signaling a reorientation toward shared responsibility and ethical renewal.

Within schools, these broader societal dynamics intersect with internal ethical challenges, including financial misconduct, chronic lateness, bullying and sexual harassment (Chibaya, 2021). Such practices operate as micro-level trust disruptors, particularly when they are involved in or tolerated by school leaders. Observed unethical behavior by leaders triggers relational evaluation by staff, learners and communities, through which trust is withdrawn or cautiously extended. In these instances, trust functions as an interpretive judgment, shaped by perceived consistency between espoused values and enacted conduct. Ethical breaches within schools are not interpreted in isolation; they are filtered through a broader societal context marked by ethical fatigue and institutional skepticism.

A problematic legacy of unethical practices in South African schools is assumed to lead to the breakdown of trust. What is clear is that trust is conceptualized as a relational and enacted phenomenon that is produced through daily leadership behaviors and interpersonal interactions (Keravnos and Symeou, 2024). The noted unethical practices affect trust, which is dynamic and contingent, influenced by experiences of the school leadership's ethical practices. A breakdown of trust would further exacerbate the occurrence of unethical practices in school. Some of these problems include a lack of support from parents, teachers being absent from work and learners due to conflict and economic issues, and other professional and social misdemeanors (Mthiyane and Mudadigwa, 2021). For a leader to be trusted, he/she must be accountable for his or her decisions and behavior and must also make his or her subordinates accountable to influence them to behave ethically (Mishra and Mishra, 2013). What is clear is that school leaders must strive to improve trust by being ethical and democratic.

Taken together, this context highlights that trust in schools is not solely contingent on individual leaders' behavior but is also mediated by historical legacies, crises, conditions, and institutional ethical climates. Ethical leadership thus emerges as a context-sensitive trust mechanism capable of entrenched mistrust or initiating the process of trust repair. This study contributes to the understanding of trust and ethical leadership, which will help improve school leadership practices by examining

how trust influences school leadership. School environments are often dynamic and complex, undergoing constant change. As school leadership is a social issue, this study aims to explore ethical leadership in a South African context and contribute value to society.

5 Research plans and procedures

Grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, this study aimed to investigate the experiences of principals, department heads, and teachers while preserving the authenticity of the phenomenon being examined (Cohen et al., 2017). An interpretivist paradigm was chosen because it views reality as subjective, multiple, and socially constructed, focusing on understanding human behavior through the meanings people assign to their experiences, rather than objective facts (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022). This aligns directly with the study's focus on trust and Ubuntu concepts that are inherently relational, context-bound, and shaped through social encounters within school communities. By adopting this paradigm, the study can foreground how trust is built, negotiated, or constrained, and how Ubuntu manifests in everyday leadership practices.

A qualitative research approach, which focuses on non-numerical data such as words, images, and observations, was adopted for this study to gain an in-depth understanding of concepts, experiences, and meanings. This approach is particularly well-suited for exploring the "why" and "how" of a phenomenon, rather than quantifying its occurrence (Mulisa, 2022). This approach enables a nuanced exploration of collaborative dynamics in schools, acknowledging that such dynamics cannot be objectively measured but must be understood through the subjective experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making of educational stakeholders.

To further deepen this inquiry, a multiple-case study design was employed, involving four high schools in the Free State Province of South Africa. According to Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), multiple cases enable broader exploration of research questions and facilitate theoretical advancement. A multiple case study was employed because it enabled the researchers to collect detailed data from two or more cases; in this study, each of the four schools served as a case. Moreover, it supports comparison, replication, and the identification of recurring patterns across different contexts, thereby enhancing the transferability of findings and strengthening theory-building beyond what a single case study can offer (Gustafsson, 2017; Yin, 2012). Therefore, four schools in the Free State Province were purposefully chosen based on accessibility, shared district location for comparable socio-educational environment and contextual relevance of applying collaboration and Ubuntu.

Purposive sampling ensured that individuals with relevant knowledge and direct experience of the trust-Ubuntu nexus, resulting in four principals, four deputy principals and 12 teachers being selected as participants from the four schools. However, learners and parents, who are part of the stakeholders in the school and could have also been participants in this research, were excluded due to limiting factors, such as time and access to professional information regarding trust and ethical leadership in

schools, thereby prioritizing those who directly shape, enact, and experience leadership processes daily. Principals, deputy principals, and teachers occupy formal organizational roles where trust, collaboration, and Ubuntu are operationalized in decision-making, school governance, staff relations, and the creation of a conducive school climate. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

Following the piloting of the interview protocol to enhance clarity and reliability, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants from each school (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 to 60 min and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. All recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate rigorous qualitative data analysis. The process ensured accuracy and allowed for iterative engagement with the data coding and interpretation.

Document analysis identified the specific documents to be reviewed and analyzed, including school codes of conduct, staff circulars, meeting minutes, reports, legislative documents, and policies relevant to trust and ethical leadership in South African schools. The importance of seeking approval for document usage underscores ethical considerations in research. Documentary evidence provided an additional layer of data that supported triangulation, enhanced analytical depth and contributed to the robustness of the cross-case analysis (Yin, 2012). This assisted in refining codes and validating emerging themes, situating the narratives of participants in a broader context. Despite limitations such as the lack of follow-up opportunities, such as interviews, document reviews provide a meticulous interpretation of findings through coding for analysis, ensuring rigor and validity in the research process.

Thematic data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step framework. The process began with familiarization, during which the researchers immersed themselves in the data through repeated reading of transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding. This was followed by the generation of initial codes, where significant features of the data relevant to the study were systematically identified. The third step involved searching for themes by collating related codes into broader patterns of meaning. These themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the dataset. Thereafter, the themes were clearly defined and named to capture their core meanings. Finally, the analysis was written up by integrating the themes into a coherent narrative supported by illustrative data extracts. Cross-case analysis was conducted through systematic comparison of perceptions of the trust-Ubuntu nexus across the four schools, with special attention given to participants' positional roles. Patterns of similarities and differences were used to identify convergence and divergence of data. These patterns informed the interpretive analysis and strengthened analytical generalization by demonstrating how trust and Ubuntu relate and are understood across different schools. Trustworthiness in this study was ensured through the application of credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024).

Table 2 shows the triangulation of data source and analytical purposes. Credibility was achieved through the use of semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their authentic experiences. This was further enhanced

by prolonged engagement with the data through repeated readings of transcripts and the use of verbatim quotations, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected participants' views. Dependability was addressed by providing a clear and detailed description of the research design, data collection procedures, and analytic process, enabling the study to be audited and replicated. An audit trail of decisions made during data analysis further strengthened dependability. Confirmability was ensured by maintaining researcher reflexivity and grounding interpretations in the data through systematic coding and theme development, thereby minimizing the potential for researcher bias. Collectively, these strategies enhanced the overall trustworthiness of the study. Furthermore, the document review coding and analysis process was inherent (Neuman, 2014).

Analytically, the documents from the multiple-case study contributed to corroborating, extending, and challenging the interview evidence through different roles. Table 3 is an analytical table that illustrates the triangulation of interview data and document evidence across cases.

The study was conducted in the Free State Province. Permission to conduct research was sought from the Free State Province's Department of Education, and ethical clearance was applied for and granted at the University of the Free State. The ethical issues, specifically human dignity, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity, were emphasized throughout the research project. The study was conducted within a local boundary of space and time, in a natural context, and with an ethic of respect for participants (Scott and Morrison, 2005). Four Principals, deputy principals and three teachers who were departmental heads from four different high schools were interviewed. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the schools and participants.

6 Research findings

Several findings were unearthed from the critical question of this study, which read: What are the conceptualizations, practices, and experiences of principals, departmental heads, and teachers regarding the trust-Ubuntu nexus in collaborative school leadership? In answering the critical question, this section covers the findings regarding the intersection of trust and Ubuntu, as conceptualized, practiced, and experienced by the participants. All participants emphasized the importance of trust in schools and suggested how they perceive it in relation to the African philosophy of Ubuntu (Khoza, 2012). This study identifies the following key themes in relation to trust and Ubuntu in the selected schools: the contestation between professional and personal views, communication as both a key and a lock, trust and leadership styles, trust and ethics, as well as a cross-case comparison. As Ubuntu is often aligned with the ethical values of African society, the golden thread of this theory runs through the findings, serving as the forebear of ethical standards and its focus on collaborative approaches to school leadership.

In the sections that follow, pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the schools and participants. Table 4 indicates the pseudonyms for the four schools and the participants.

TABLE 2 Triangulation of data source and analytical purposes.

Data source	Purpose of use	Trustworthiness criterion
Semi-structured interviews	Captured participants' perceptions and lived experience of the trust-Ubuntu nexus	Credibility
Document analysis	To corroborate, extend and challenge interview data	Credibility and confirmability
Cross-case comparison	To identify patterns of convergence and divergence across schools	Dependability

TABLE 3 Analytic triangulation of interview and document data across cases.

Analytic theme	Interview evidence	Document evidence	Analytic contribution
Ethical leadership and trustworthiness	Principals and teachers described trust as grounded in fairness, consistency, and moral conduct	Codes of conduct, disciplinary policies, and staff circulars on ethical behavior	Documents corroborated desired ethical norms and clarified how ethical expectations were formalized in the schools
Transparency and communication	Participants emphasized open communication as central to trust	Meeting minutes, policy dissemination records	Documents confirmed the frequency and formal channels of communication, strengthening the credibility of interview claims
Shared responsibility and collaboration	Teachers reported collective decision-making and shared accountability	School development plans, committee structures, SMT role descriptions and PLCs	Documentary data extended interview findings by showing how collaboration was structurally embedded
Tensions between policy and practice	Some participants noted gaps between ethical ideals and everyday practice	Meeting minutes, incident reports, school policies, and codes of conduct	Documents challenged interview narratives, prompting deeper cross-case interpretation

TABLE 4 The four schools and participants.

Name of school	Principal	Deputy principal	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3
Unne High School	Ms Pillay	Mr Pete	Ms Lebelo	Mr Marais	Mr Toni
Pedi High School	Mr Ritz	Ms Tau	Mr Mbhele	Ms Mazwi	Mrs Gudla
Tharu High School	Ms Ndaba	Mr Tobela	Ms Moeti	Ms Bada	Ms Pela
Nne High School	Mr Motaung	Ms Tabi	Mr Mabaso	Ms Radebe	Mrs Moroka

6.1 Contestation of professional and personal views

The three classes of participants, through the data collected from them, emphasized how sometimes the dictators of the profession conflict with their personal views. When professional dictates are pitted against personal views, the participants indicated that the most noble thing is to abide by the professional code. Following the professional code of conduct promotes trust and maintains decorum in schools.

As a professional, I trust my other colleagues to be professional, and I put aside my personal views as they may not be in line with what the profession needs of me. We adhere to a professional code of conduct outlined by SACE to maintain trust with stakeholders.

Mrs Moeti: Teacher at Tharu High School: A principal with a professional orientation will not emphasize bureaucratic mechanisms for control (Tschannen-Moran, 2020). Tschannen-Moran (2020) reasons that these principals trust their teachers to exercise sound judgment in responding to the needs of students and would go beyond what is governed by the rules and regulations to do their duties. This eliminates the need for close supervision of teachers and eliminates micromanagement, which most teachers have shown to be ineffective. Although micromanagement may be eliminated, clear guidelines must be in place to ensure order, trust,

and professionalism. Trust fosters professionalism in teaching, allowing mistakes to be seen as opportunities for learning and improvement rather than focusing on blame and retribution, while nurturing honesty and openness (Hoy and Sweetland, 2001). The involvement of teachers as professionals in trust issues in collaborative school leadership is also underscored by research.

Another participant said:

In my view, personal views may be correct but may be based on a selfish approach and may vary from person to person, therefore there must be a standard on which school leadership is grounded on.

Mrs Moeti: Teacher at Tharu Secondary School: Mrs Moeti clearly shows that the standards in school leadership must not be based on personal views. South Africa, the School Management Team comprises the principal, the deputy principal, departmental heads (HoDs) and co-opted post-level 1 teachers. What is portrayed here is a high level of collaboration, which Tutu (1999) describes as Ubuntu in how it brings a sense of unity and celebration of diversity. Teachers are the individuals who are primarily in immediate contact with learners, more so than the principal, and hold a leadership role due to the autonomous nature of their job. At a personal level, it is essential to emphasize the importance of personal actions, such as leading the way and role

modeling, in enacting ethical leadership (Cheteni and Shindika, 2017), which also involves relating to others. In agreement, Falcone and Castelfranchi (2002) perceive trust as a relational construct involving a trustor, a trustee and the act or performance. This aligns with the relational dimension of leadership, as emphasized by Hudson (2024), which relies on consistent communication and ethical behavior to foster trust (Bouwman et al., 2017; Nadeem, 2024). In this case, stakeholders in various contexts, individually and/or collectively, assume the roles of the trustor and trustee. This helps explain why teachers and principals are, in this study, viewed as vital components of collaborative school leadership.

What becomes more apparent in the findings regarding the contestation of professional and personal values is the complexity of trust. According to Falcone et al. (2022), trust is a complex socio-cognitive phenomenon that comprises mental attitudes, such as those expressed by the participants, as well as the affective and cognitive aspects reflected in this study through the participants' beliefs, purposes, intentions, and expectations. Those mental attitudes and affective and cognitive aspects can also be expressed in the form of the values of Ubuntu, which, as a philosophy, involves cognitive aspects and is based on African beliefs regarding ethics.

6.2 Communication as a key and a lock

Some participants specified that where there is communication that hints at transparency, trust is possible. The opposite is true, as the lack of transparency may be interpreted as though something is being hidden.

To illustrate the importance of communication in establishing trust, one of the participants said:

... like maybe the colleague is having a rough time during family gatherings over there... but at least if you open up that free communication, the colleague will come and say, "Actually, I am struggling with this and this and this."

Mrs Gudla: Teacher at Pedi High School: The participant claims that if a leader communicates openly, they will be trusted enough to be informed of one's personal struggles. Communication fosters trust, and this finding aligns with Farnsworth et al. (2019), who demonstrate that trust is established when one shows a willingness to be vulnerable to another. Therefore, open communication, characterized by mutual respect and shared goals, fosters trust among team members and cultivates a safe environment for collaboration (Sesinyi and Gcelu, 2023). A leader whom one feels at ease communicating with is shown here to be informed of challenges that people are struggling with. Open communication is even more critical in times of crisis (Gallup, 2016), where collaboration must be intense to enable the school to navigate successfully.

Highlighting the importance of communication, other participants had this to say:

... the more you communicate, it gives them that they feel free. Also not to disappoint you but all the time to do their best.

We have open communication and it helps establish trust which make us succeed in our goals.

Ms Pillay: Principal at Unne High School: *I think it's very important that the leaders must build trust and to build trust one needs to communicate effectively, be open, let the colleagues be free to communicate, not as a leader you always talking, but you don't want people maybe to ask questions or what.*

Mr Mabaso: Teacher at Nne High School: The participants emphasized the importance of communication in building trust and demonstrated that effective communication is a two-way street, where the leader initiates communication. This is underscored by trust being a vital cognitive "mediator" of sociality and integration of mind and interaction in an organization. In organizations where there is no trust, communication is condensed and summarized (Tschannen-Moran, 2020), but in environments that foster trust, communication is consistent and transparent (Hudson, 2024). Rather than accurately transmitting information, a subordinate prioritizes their own interests and is hesitant to take risks that could lead to trouble. Similarly, teachers in low-trust schools described communication as hampered by mistrust and admitted to frequently obstructing or altering communication to prevent confrontation. Furthermore, teachers deliberately limited interactions with the principal, which hindered access to crucial information necessary for proactive problem-solving (Tschannen-Moran, 2020). The ensuing absence of trust in such circumstances renders whatever form of Ubuntu may be present idealistic and ineffective.

6.3 Trust and leadership styles

The findings demonstrate the participants' conceptualization of trust and its relationship to leadership style. One of the interview questions required participants to share their understanding of what trust means. Some of them had this to say:

... trust is believing that someone will complete the task that is given to them, OK? ... maybe the colleagues that are in my department are to set the target or let the target know them, or if you are teaching the subject, this is the target that you need to achieve. By doing so, I know I can trust my colleagues and that they will do their best.

Ms Tau: Departmental Head at Pedi High School: Part of the definition of trust from Ms Tau shows trust as an expectation, belief, willingness and attitude in agreement with (Castaldo, 2002). When she refers to the roles that people in her department have in meeting specific targets, the identification of targets and roles, which also lead to the functions of her colleagues, relates to the integrated model in defining trust (Castelfranchi and Falcone, 2010). The integration of a person's belief with motivation and action defines the level of trust, as shown by the socio-cognitive model of trust. What was also clear from the data was the link between trust and leadership styles. Due to the differences in human characteristics, leaders tend to adopt various leadership styles. The differences in leadership styles were shown to influence trust. One of the participants said:

How am I expected to trust a person who constantly imposes their authority on me? He does not consider the views of others and runs the school with an iron fist, being undemocratic in the school's affairs. I cannot trust such.

Mr Pete: Deputy Principal at Unne High School: The participant struggles with an autocratic leadership style. Mr Pete finds it difficult to trust such a leader. Another participant, the head of the department at Pedi High School, Mr Ritz, said.

Specific attributes make people trust you easily because you show that you have their best interests at heart. When you demonstrate that you care and are upright in your undertakings, particularly in your operations and responsibilities in your position, they will trust you.

Mr Ritz: Departmental Head at Pedi Secondary School: The above quotation highlights some attributes of a leader that foster trust. Following the analysis of the work done by Bryk and Schneider (2002), Farnsworth et al. (2019), it can be inferred that the antecedents of relational trust include competence, benevolence, openness, and integrity, which are related to the core components and critical processes associated with learning-centered leadership. While literature clearly links transformational and servant leadership to styles of leadership that create trust (Ahmed, 2025; Ahmed et al., 2023), the attributes mentioned by Mr Ritz concur with the antecedents of ethical leadership highlighted by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2021), encompassing the ethics of care and justice. When a leader acts in the “best interest” of others, as mentioned by Mr Ritz, they practice servant leadership, which is envisioned as both a product and an antecedent of leader and organizational trust. Doing things focusing on the best interest of others is in line with utilitarianism, an attribute of Ubuntu, which is known as the greater good (Tutu, 1999). A leader with the people's interests at heart, showing Ubuntu, will be trusted. This underscores the trust-Ubuntu nexus. However, the occurrence of trust without Ubuntu is simply compliance-based and will not stand the test of time; it is fragile.

Leadership becomes effective when it is needed (Leithwood et al., 2010); hence, in this era, where ethics are rationalized and the relative application of ethical values is emphasized, there is a need for ethical leadership. There is more effect of leadership where it is needed most. There is sufficient documentation that speaks to school leadership, but one of the critical questions facing practicing leaders and leadership scholars is about “how” (Leithwood et al., 2020). How does school leadership influence student learning?

6.4 Trust and ethics

The heads of schools, departmental heads, and teachers agreed on what constitutes an ethical individual who is perceived as deserving trust. According to Farnsworth et al. (2019), one is perceived to be trustworthy if he/she is open and reliable. There is a perceived character trait that one attributes to another before trusting them. Castaldo (2002) refers to specific actions and behaviors from a leader that contribute to them being trusted. Could these be ethics?

If a leader is not perceived as ethical in their conduct, they will not be trusted. Let us say the principal or the teacher in the school is wayward in their conduct, such as excessive drinking, womanizing, or being rude; they will not be trusted.

Ms Motaung: Principal at Nne High School: The participant highlighted the issue of trustworthiness as one of the reasons why school leaders can be trusted or not. What is clear is that the school leader is subject to a judgment process influenced by public opinion, which may render the leader trustworthy or untrustworthy. The socio-cognitive perception of trust (Falcone and Castelfranchi, 2002) characterizes the notion of trust. When a school leader is perceived as ethical, stakeholders trust and support the school leader's vision, which in turn leads to successful collaboration. In this way, it becomes clear that trust, though multidimensional (Farnsworth et al., 2019), has a strong correlation with ethics.

What was evident from this study was that words such as “trustworthiness,” “honesty,” “reliability,” “integrity,” and “good judgment” are linked to the characteristics of an ethical leader, which focuses on doing the right things right. On doing the right things which is related to ethics, Mrs Moroka said:

So now if we trust someone, it's easier for us to follow because we know that person is doing the right thing, so we are trusting that person or is going to maybe take the school very far because we say no in two years, maybe want our school to have achieved this and we wait for the achievement of it.

Mrs Moroka: Teacher at Nne High School: Mrs Moroka hints at some way of following up on the goals set when she says, “We wait for the achievement of it,” which means someone must account. One of the essential attributes of ethical leadership is accountability. Literature links accountability to transparency. Ethical leadership will be shown to be a vital antecedent of trust. At an individual level, ethics are enacted through observable practices such as self-responsibility, moral courage and consistency between values and behavior (Cheteni and Shindika, 2017). What was evident from this study was that words such as “trustworthiness,” “honesty,” “reliability,” “integrity,” and “good judgment” are linked to the characteristics of an ethical leader, which focus on doing the right things right. Doing the right things is related to ethics. Mrs Moroka, a teacher at Nne High School, hints at a way to follow up on the goals set when she says, “We wait for the achievement of it,” which means someone must be held accountable. One of the essential attributes of ethical leadership is accountability. Literature links accountability to transparency. Ethical leadership will be shown to be a vital antecedent of trust. Considering this:

... trust fosters a set of structural and social-psychological organizational conditions that make it more conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain the activities necessary to affect productivity improvements (Bryk and Schneider, 2002, p.116).

Theoretically, the combination of Castelfranchi and Falcone's (2010) Socio-cognitive Model Trust Theory and the African

Philosophy of Ubuntu show a linkage that forms the trust-Ubuntu nexus, making a theoretical contribution. This nexus is a conceptual linkage of the two theoretical frameworks in which Ubuntu's ethical-relational values map onto the socio-cognitive components of the Trust Theory. Ubuntu embodies a leadership ethic characterized by reciprocity, mutual belonging, and collaboration, which fosters trust. The Trust Theory, combined with the socio-cognitive model, calibrates trust and links it to ethical leadership by utilizing the concept of Ubuntu in an African context. This was illustrated by how some participants have been shown to emphasize ethics in relation to trust. Ultimately, the integrated framework allowed the researchers to conclude that the values inherent in Ubuntu enhance trust, thereby forming the trust-Ubuntu nexus and making a significant conceptual contribution.

7 Cross-case analysis of data

The four schools used in this multiple-case study were Unne High School, Pedi High School, Tharu High School, and Nne High School. A cross-case analysis of the data reveals consistent themes regarding the conceptualization, experiences and practices related to the trust-Ubuntu nexus. Within the four schools, the interviews conducted provided findings structured around four main components: contestation of views, communication, trust and ethics, and trust and leadership style.

All the schools provided an understanding of the conceptualization of trust. There were terms like *"believing in someone to complete a task assigned to them,"* as mentioned by a participant from Unne High School, and is supported by terms like *"feeling safe and comfortable"* and *"trust as part of a leader's key personal trait."* The views align with the socio-cognitive model, which posits that trust is based on beliefs and goals (Castelfranchi and Falcone, 2010). The emphasis on *safety* and *comfort* aligns with Ubuntu values of caring and dignity (Khoza, 2012; Samuel, 2024).

The leaders in the four schools in this study recognized the intertwined nature of ethical conduct with an emphasis on accountability, fairness and leading by example. On leading by example, Tharu High School's deputy head stressed that the school leader should be exemplary and said that in their school, they not only talk, but they also lead. Similarly, in Pedi High School, one of the departmental heads emphasized that leaders must lead by example, and the principal from Unne High School talks about leading from the front. In emphasizing how to lead their schools ethically, the participants highlighted the importance of fairness and accountability. The attributes highlighted by participants align with the tenets of Ubuntu outlined by Matupire (2016). These tenets are clearly and effectively expressed through open communication.

8 Discussion

The primary objective of the study was to explore the relationship between trust and the African philosophy of Ubuntu within the context of collaborative school leadership, conceptually framed as a trust-Ubuntu nexus. The findings revealed four interconnected themes which serve to confirm the viability of this integrated framework, demonstrating how Ubuntu's

ethical-relational values map onto the socio-cognitive dimensions of Trust Theory.

The data confirmed a profound correlation between trust and ethical leadership, establishing that trust must be at the core of all school processes for them to run smoothly. When ethical leadership principles are not practiced, it can lead to loss of trust, and the participants' experiences indicate that stakeholders constantly judge a leader's conduct; a leader perceived as ethical in their behavior, demonstrating trustworthiness, honesty, reliability, integrity, and sound judgment, is ultimately trusted (Farnsworth et al., 2019). Conversely, unethical conduct, such as being "wayward in their conduct, such as excessive drinking, womanizing, or being rude," immediately leads to a loss of trust.

Practically, trust was revealed to operate through relational mechanisms, whereby perceived integrity, benevolence, and competence generated expectations of future behavior, which in turn enabled cooperation under conditions of uncertainty. These expectations are sustained or eroded through ongoing social exchange, rendering trust both fragile and adaptive. The relational understanding of trust aligns with Leithwood et al.'s (2020) revised conceptualization of leadership influence that shows trust as a critical mediating condition between leadership actions and outcomes, rather than exerting direct causal influence. Ethical practices by the leadership shape trust by signaling care, fairness and moral consistency. This mediates educators' and learners' willingness to engage, collaborate, and exercise professional agency.

The interpretation strongly aligns with the socio-cognitive model of trust, where a leader's trustworthiness is calibrated based on external cues and internal attributions (Searle et al., 2024). When a school leader is perceived as ethical, stakeholders trust and support their vision, which is a prerequisite for successful collaborations. Crucially, Ubuntu serves as the forebear of ethical standards in this context. By underpinning ethical leadership, Ubuntu, based on African beliefs regarding ethics, focuses on the responsibility of "doing the right things right," which is vital in building trust (Matupire, 2016). Furthermore, the need for leaders to be fair and accountable in their decisions, relying on established policies rather than personal feelings, is a measure of ethical conduct.

Communication emerged as pivotal to both the manifestation of Ubuntu and the creation of trust. Open communication by school leaders was shown to promote trust and enhance collaboration. Participants emphasized the importance of open communication, which allows colleagues to feel free and comfortable enough to be vulnerable, sharing personal struggles that can impact their performance. Castelfranchi and Falcone (2010) highlight the importance of communication by elaborating on the Trust Theory, which demonstrates that trust is essential for social interaction and is a collective and institutional phenomenon. As a result, a socio-cognitive model emerges that is based on a mental state of trust that is defined by beliefs and goals agreeing with how the philosophy of Ubuntu holds in high esteem values like transparency (openness and honesty), consultation (key during collaboration), sharing (which encompasses care), being selfless, showing care and being respectful (Chibaya, 2021; Matupire, 2016).

As for the choice of leadership styles, they are shown to influence the establishment of trust in schools directly. Autocratic leadership actively inhibits trust. In contrast, styles that foster trust are those where the leader is exemplary, showing compassion, being democratic, and demonstrating that the staff's best interests

are at heart. The findings collectively demonstrate that the trust-Ubuntu nexus is organically developed through leadership practices that embed Ubuntu's values. Ubuntu, with its emphasis on interconnectedness, mutual respect, and collective wellbeing, not only encourages trust but also creates the conditions necessary for its organic development and institutional entrenchment, thereby enhancing collaboration. Successful collaboration is promoted through the resulting high ethical standards, transparency, and open communication that align with Ubuntu's relational imperative. The synthesis of the frameworks confirms that trust, calibrated as a socio-cognitive phenomenon, is powerfully facilitated and sustained by the ethical and relational components provided by the African philosophy of Ubuntu.

Theoretically, this synergy enables positive social change by mitigating abuse and fostering a morally grounded school climate where every member upholds the dignity and wellbeing of others as a shared ethical responsibility. Combining the Trust Theory and Ubuntu forms the trust-Ubuntu nexus, where communal responsibility, ethical values, and collective wellbeing align with socio-cognitive needs for reliability and good alignment in trust relationships. However, the institutional constraints, particularly the lack of time and dedicated professional development for building relational trust, pose significant challenges to fully realizing the potential of this nexus.

9 Conclusion and recommendations

While the analysis of the data highlighted the challenge of contestation between professional and personal views regarding the trust-Ubuntu nexus, there was a clear indication of how Ubuntu can facilitate trust for collaborative school leadership. Aspects of Ubuntu, such as open communication (a natural phenomenon where there is oneness), the link between trust and leadership styles (Ubuntu underpins ethical leadership in the African context), and the demand for ethical values in a trust relationship, emphasized the importance of Ubuntu in establishing trust in the schools under study. Additionally, Ubuntu's ethical-relational values align with the socio-cognitive dimensions of trust, as reflected in the communal responsibility of school leaders through reliability and goal alignment. Consequently, collaborative leadership is promoted through the tenets of Ubuntu, which enable high-quality exchanges facilitated by the SMT structures. The leadership functions and attributes create safe environments and build trust. Successful leadership collaboration is based on high ethical standards that include transparency and open communication. The synthesis of the findings underscores the pivotal role of open communication in fostering trust within institutional and social structures. Effective communication catalyzes the socio-cognitive model of trust, reinforcing principles such as consultation, transparency, and shared decision-making—principles deeply embedded in the philosophy of Ubuntu. Ubuntu, with its emphasis on interconnectedness, mutual respect, and collective well-being, not only facilitates trust-building but also sustains it as an ethical and relational imperative. Thus, the values inherent in Ubuntu do not merely encourage trust; they create the conditions necessary for its organic development, institutional entrenchment and enhance collaboration. This forms the Trust-Ubuntu nexus, making a significant conceptual contribution in a collaborative context.

By embedding Ubuntu in school policies and leadership practices, schools can re-establish trust, ensuring that the school system is run through dialogue, reconciliation, and ethical responsibility rather than through exclusionary or retributive means. Additionally, the emphasis on care and collective responsibility reinforces a zero-tolerance approach to abuse, advocating for proactive measures such as peer support systems, teacher mentorship programs, and inclusive governance structures that prevent and effectively address misconduct.

The methodological design and scope of this qualitative multiple-case study present certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the study was conducted within a local boundary (the Free State Province), which restricts the transferability of the findings beyond this specific South African context. The interpretation of the study remains tied to the subjective and contextual reality of the participating schools. Secondly, the scope is limited to the exclusion of key stakeholders in the school community (learners and parents). The exclusion was due to limiting factors, such as time and access to professional information, including trust and ethical leadership. Finally, the data collection procedures imposed constraints, notably the lack of follow-up opportunities such as subsequent interviews.

Future research can be built upon the acknowledged limitations and gaps identified in this study. These studies can be aimed at stakeholder expansion, which incorporates the perspectives of learners and teachers to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the trust-Ubuntu nexus. Additionally, they may involve longitudinal studies of leadership styles that have been shown to create trust, as well as an exploration of the African context. As ethical leadership remains an area that needs further exploration, future studies can extend the trust-Ubuntu nexus framework to other African educational contexts.

In conclusion, the theoretical implications of Ubuntu in the school system suggest that ethical leadership must extend beyond compliance with legal frameworks to actively foster a culture of respect, care, and community-driven accountability. This approach not only mitigates abuse but also cultivates a morally grounded school climate where every member—students, teachers, and administrators—upholds the dignity and well-being of others as a shared ethical duty. The study makes a significant conceptual contribution by demonstrating the integration of the African philosophy of Ubuntu with the Socio-cognitive Model of Trust theory.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by University of the Free States Ethics Committee (GHREC). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent

was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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