

# Conceptualising leadership for inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support in South African rural secondary schools

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**Abstract:** South African rural secondary schools operate under conditions characterised by persistent socio-economic inequality, limited access to specialist services, and elevated levels of learner psychosocial vulnerability. Although national policies advocate for inclusive education, psychosocial support, and the integration of digital technologies, these agendas are frequently pursued in isolation, resulting in fragmented and uneven responses at the school level. The objective of this conceptual study is to develop a leadership framework that elucidates how inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support can be coherently organised and sustained in South African rural secondary schools. The study utilises a conceptual research design, drawing upon an integrative review of the literature across inclusive education, school-based psychosocial support, digital and assistive technologies, the school-community service interface, and educational leadership, informed by decolonial and social justice perspectives. The main outcome of the study is a conceptual framework that comprises five interrelated leadership domains: values and vision for inclusive care; cultures of care and digital confidence; structures and processes

for psychosocial support; digital and assistive ecosystems; and partnerships with distributed leadership. This framework illustrates how leadership mediates relationships, resources, technologies, and community knowledge to support learner well-being and participation. The study concludes that leadership functions as the critical integrative mechanism through which inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support becomes feasible in resource-constrained rural schools. The framework offers a practical, context-sensitive guide for policymakers and practitioners to design and implement inclusive, digitally enabled psychosocial support systems in rural South African secondary schools that are coherent, sustainable, and responsive to local realities.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education, psychosocial support, digital and assistive technologies, educational leadership, decolonial perspective.

## 1. Introduction

South African rural secondary schools are widely recognised as sites of significant educational, social, and psychosocial challenges. Learners in these contexts are disproportionately affected by poverty, food insecurity, family disruption, exposure to violence, and gender-based violence, conditions that intersect with the enduring legacies of historical marginalisation to shape everyday experiences of distress and vulnerability in schools (Ngobeni et al., 2023; Bhana et al., 2021). Many rural secondary learners encounter additional barriers related to disability, learning difficulties, and language, often receiving education in languages that differ from those spoken at home, despite South Africa's strong policy commitment to inclusive education (van Rensburg et al., 2024; Mahlaule et al., 2024). These intersecting forms of exclusion place significant demands on schools to respond not only to academic needs but also to learners' psychosocial well-being and participation. National education and social policies explicitly recognise these challenges. Frameworks such as Education White Paper 6, the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy, and national psychosocial support guidelines advocate for inclusive, barrier-free learning environments and coordinated systems of learner support (van Rensburg et al., 2024).

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Policy discourses increasingly promote the integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance access, participation, and learner well-being; however, in practice, psychosocial vulnerabilities in rural secondary schools often remain inadequately addressed, and the translation of inclusive and digital policy aspirations into everyday practice is uneven and constrained (van Rensburg et al., 2024). Within this context, digital tools and assistive technologies are becoming more prevalent, albeit unevenly and informally. During the COVID-19 pandemic, platforms such as WhatsApp, radio lessons, and offline content facilitated learning and psychosocial connections (Mangena, 2023; Jordan, 2023), highlighting digitally mediated forms of care while also revealing inequalities in access and usage. Although scholarship on inclusion, psychosocial support, digital technologies, and rural leadership is expanding, these domains are predominantly examined in isolation (Johnson, 2024; Ossiannilsson, 2025; Ramango, 2021; Ndlovu, 2019). This paper addresses this conceptual gap by conceptualising leadership for inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support in South African rural secondary schools from decolonial and social justice perspectives, offering a leadership framework as a conceptual lens rather than a prescriptive or empirical model.

### **1.1 The South African context**

South African rural secondary schools operate within a complex interplay of historical, structural, and contemporary conditions that fundamentally shape the possibilities for inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support. These schools are typically situated in communities characterised by chronic poverty, unemployment, spatial isolation, and limited access to public services (Ngobeni et al., 2023; Bhana et al., 2021). Common features of rural secondary schooling include overcrowded classrooms, shortages of qualified teachers, inadequate infrastructure, long travel distances between learners' homes and schools, and persistent patterns of absenteeism and dropout. These conditions reflect the enduring legacy of apartheid-era spatial planning, which systematically under-resourced black rural communities, compounded by ongoing economic marginalisation in the post-apartheid period (Mahosi, 2025; Hungwe & Mukonza, 2025). Empirical studies indicate that rural secondary schools, such as those in the Eastern Cape, often operate with small staff complements responsible for large, diverse learner populations, dilapidated hostels, unreliable water sources, and limited or unstable electricity (Moleko, 2024; Chirowamhangu, 2024; Magwaca, 2021).

In these constrained environments, rural adolescents encounter intersecting psychosocial challenges, including poverty, food insecurity, labour migration, orphanhood associated with HIV/AIDS, exposure to violence, gender-based violence, harmful social norms, and substance abuse (Ngobeni et al., 2023; Bhana et al., 2021; Marongwe et al., 2016). Formal psychosocial services are scarce, necessitating that support is often informal and improvised by teachers, principals, peers, and community members, who are rarely trained or recognised (Marongwe et al., 2016). Policy frameworks such as Education White Paper 6, SIAS, psychosocial support guidelines, and national e-education and ICT policies advocate for inclusive education, coordinated support, and the use of technology (Ayaya, 2018); however, a persistent tension exists between these aspirations and rural realities, including intermittent connectivity, non-functional laboratories, limited ICT training, and distant specialists (Chisango & Marongwe, 2021; Mangena, 2023; Moleko, 2024; Chirowamhangu, 2024). Nevertheless, digital and assistive technologies are increasingly, albeit unevenly, integrated: mobile phones, WhatsApp, radio lessons, printed and offline digital materials, and simple assistive tools are employed to sustain learning and psychosocial connection (Ajayi et al., 2020; Jordan, 2023; Mangena, 2023; Munienge et al., 2020; Elebiju, 2024; Chirwa, 2021). These conditions impose significant demands on principals, School Management Teams (SMTs), and districts (Mphosi & Chauke, 2025; Mncube & Ngema, 2023; Sibuyi et al., 2024) and underscore the necessity for conceptual clarity regarding how rural leadership can orchestrate inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support grounded in decolonial and social justice perspectives. By foregrounding the specific social, infrastructural, and cultural conditions of rural South African secondary schools, these contextual factors directly shape and inform the leadership framework's objective of elucidating how

inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support can be coherently organised and sustained in these settings.

## **1.2 Conceptual and theoretical foundations**

The conceptual foundations of this paper are informed by several interrelated bodies of scholarship that, when synthesised, elucidate the understanding of leadership for inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support in South African rural secondary schools. Rather than treating inclusion, psychosocial support, digital technologies, and leadership as discrete domains, this paper adopts an integrative conceptual framework, positing that leadership represents the central locus through which these elements are aligned, mediated, and sustained within their contextual environments.

The scholarship on inclusive education provides the initial foundational lens. Within this body of work, inclusion is articulated as the elimination of barriers to learning and participation, the provision of appropriate and flexible support, and the design of learning environments based on principles of universal design rather than the retrofitting of individualised "special" solutions (Ayaya, 2018; Ramango, 2021; Mahlaule et al., 2024). Inclusive education is increasingly conceptualised as a whole-school initiative, wherein psychosocial well-being, belonging, and participation are integral to the learning process, rather than being regarded as ancillary services. Frameworks such as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), social-emotional learning (SEL), and trauma-informed schooling underscore layered approaches that amalgamate universal preventive strategies, targeted group-based interventions, and individualised support for learners with more intensive needs (Guest et al., 2024; Goodman, 2025). Across these approaches, there is a deliberate shift away from deficit-oriented explanations that attribute difficulties solely to learners, towards systemic and relational perspectives that foreground school cultures, pedagogical practices, power dynamics, teacher capacity, and collaboration. This shift is particularly significant in rural contexts, where formal psychosocial services are scarce, and the responsibility for learner support is frequently distributed among teachers, school leaders, peers, families, and community stakeholders.

A second strand of literature concerns the role of digital and assistive technologies in education and mental health. International and South African scholarship documents the expanding use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and assistive tools for mental health promotion, counselling, peer support, and educational accessibility (Jordan, 2023; Chirwa, 2021; Guest et al., 2024). These include mobile- and messaging-based supports, online and blended counselling services, digital resource hubs for educators, and low-cost assistive technologies, such as text-to-speech and screen-reading functions. In rural and resource-constrained settings, such tools offer opportunities to extend the reach of limited professional services, facilitate flexible and asynchronous forms of support, and provide multimodal pathways for participation (Jordan, 2023; Mangena, 2023). However, this literature also cautions against techno-solutionist assumptions. Persistent inequalities in connectivity, device access, data affordability, language, and digital literacy, alongside concerns about privacy, surveillance, and cultural relevance, indicate that digital tools can inadvertently reproduce or deepen exclusion if adopted uncritically (Allen, 2024; Sætra, 2023). As such, technology is best understood not as a solution but as a digitally mediated practice whose value depends on how it is selected, adapted, governed, and embedded within existing psychosocial and relational ecosystems. This insight foregrounds leadership as central to ethical decision-making, contextual adaptation, and the alignment of digital tools with inclusive and psychosocial aims.

Educational leadership theory provides a third foundational lens. Leadership scholarship encompasses a range of perspectives, including transformational, instructional, distributed, relational, pedagogical, and social justice leadership, each highlighting different mechanisms through which leaders influence school culture and practice (Ramango, 2021; Johnson, 2024; Ossiannilsson, 2025). Research in rural and inclusive education contexts consistently points to the importance of context-responsive, relational, and distributed forms of leadership. In rural secondary

schools, principals and SMT often operate with small staff complements, multiple and competing role expectations, and limited proximity to district-level support. Under such conditions, highly centralised leadership is neither feasible nor effective. Instead, leadership is enacted through networks that include SMT members, teacher leaders, School-Based Support Teams, district officials, health and social services, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and community leaders (Johnson, 2024; Ramango, 2021). These networked arrangements enable schools to mobilise diverse forms of expertise and support, including digitally mediated practices such as messaging-based check-ins or peer support groups, while distributing responsibility for inclusion and psychosocial care.

A decolonial and social justice perspective further shapes the conceptual framework by interrogating dominant, Eurocentric assumptions embedded in schooling, leadership, and psychosocial support. Decolonial scholarship critiques deficit discourses that pathologise rural, Black, and impoverished communities, instead advocating for the recognition of local knowledges, languages, and relational forms of care that have long existed outside formal education systems (Gum, 2021; Makoelle, 2022; Okoli, 2023; Omodan, 2024). From this perspective, legitimate psychosocial support may encompass peer support circles facilitated in local languages, storytelling and collective meaning-making practices, and collaboration with community elders, faith leaders, and other trusted figures (Ndlovu, 2019; Makoelle, 2022). Similarly, appropriate digital mediation may involve the locally meaningful use of widely available tools, such as WhatsApp voice notes in African languages, rather than reliance on imported platforms designed for urban or Global North contexts. Decolonial leadership thus prioritises listening, shared authority, and responsiveness to local contexts, while cautioning against the uncritical adoption of externally designed technological or psychosocial interventions that fail to resonate with local realities (Okoli, 2023).

Finally, insights from technology acceptance and adoption models, particularly the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), provide additional conceptual resources for understanding digitally mediated psychosocial support at the organisational level. These models highlight factors such as perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, facilitating conditions, and social influence in shaping whether technologies are embraced or resisted (Dwivedi et al., 2019; Alyoussef, 2022). In this paper, these constructs are extended beyond individual users to encompass leadership and organisational contexts. School leaders influence whether digital tools are perceived as meaningful contributions to psychosocial care, whether time, training, and support are allocated, and whether institutional norms legitimise or marginalise digitally mediated practices. Leadership plays a critical role in creating the conditions under which inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support can emerge, stabilise, and evolve in rural secondary schools. Taken together, these theoretical strands justify a conceptual focus on leadership as the integrative site where inclusion, psychosocial care, digital mediation, and contextual realities converge. They provide the foundation for the leadership framework proposed in this paper, which seeks to explore how leadership practices can enable or constrain inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support in South African rural secondary education.

## **2. Methodology**

This paper employs a conceptual research design, informed by both empirical and theoretical scholarship, yet it does not report new empirical findings (Campbell et al., 2014). Its primary purpose is to develop and articulate a conceptual leadership framework that elucidates how inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support can be organised and sustained in South African rural secondary schools. Conceptual research of this nature seeks to synthesise, reinterpret, and integrate existing bodies of knowledge to generate new understandings of complex social and educational phenomena, rather than to test hypotheses or produce generalisable empirical results (Cohen et al., 2018; Noyes et al., 2017). The conceptual development presented in this paper is informed by insights

generated through a broader, collaborative decolonial research project focused on reimagining psychosocial learner support in South African rural secondary schools. That project employed qualitative, participatory, and co-design approaches, including workshops, focus group discussions, and reflective dialogues with principals, teachers, parents, district officials, and community-based practitioners in selected rural districts. While the present paper does not analyse or present data from that study, the patterns, tensions, and priorities that emerged from those engagements have sensitised the author to key contextual realities. These include the central role of school–community relationships, the informal yet critical involvement of teachers in psychosocial support, and the pragmatic use of low-bandwidth digital tools, such as WhatsApp, to sustain communication and care. These insights inform the assumptions and emphases underpinning the conceptual framework proposed herein, but do not constitute an empirical dataset in this paper (Cohen et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the paper draws on a selective and integrative review of the literature across five interrelated domains: inclusive education; school-based psychosocial support; digital and assistive technologies in education and mental health; rural schooling; and educational leadership, including decolonial and social justice leadership perspectives. The literature was identified through database searches, citation tracking, and analysis of relevant policy documents, with particular attention to scholarship from South Africa and the broader Global South, and, where conceptually appropriate, to influential international studies (Elliott, 2011; Campbell et al., 2014). The intention was not to conduct a systematic or exhaustive review, but to engage deeply with conceptually rich, theoretically generative, and contextually relevant sources that could be synthesised to inform the development of the proposed framework (Elliott, 2011). The conceptual framework advanced in this paper emerges through an interpretive process of synthesis (Cohen et al., 2018; Campbell et al., 2014), in which insights from inclusive education, psychosocial support, digitally mediated practices, rurality, and leadership theory are brought into dialogue with participatory and experiential knowledge generated in related research. This approach facilitates the articulation of leadership as an integrative practice through which inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support is shaped, governed, and sustained in resource-constrained rural secondary schools. The outcome is a theoretically informed and contextually grounded framework intended to guide future empirical research, leadership development initiatives, and policy-oriented reflection, rather than to prescribe a fixed model or evaluate existing interventions.

## **2.1 Ethical considerations**

This article is a conceptual paper; no human or animal participants were directly involved in the study, and no new empirical data were generated. The work is based entirely on secondary sources, all of which have been properly cited and acknowledged in accordance with academic integrity and copyright requirements. In developing the conceptual arguments, care was taken to accurately represent the authors' positions and to avoid misattribution or plagiarism. The paper draws conceptually on a larger empirical project that received ethical clearance from the North-West University Research Ethics Committee and was assigned the ethics number NWU-01185-25-A2. That project adheres to NWU's policies on informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, data security, and the protection of vulnerable groups. Although the present paper does not report primary data, it remains aligned with those ethical principles and with broader guidelines for responsible, respectful scholarship in decolonial and rural education research.

## **3. Key Contextual Domains**

This paper proposes a conceptual framework for understanding leadership for inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support in South African rural secondary schools. The framework organises insights from inclusive education, psychosocial support, digital mediation, the school-community service interface, and educational leadership literature into five interrelated domains of context. These domains are not discrete or hierarchical; rather, they function as analytical lenses through

which leadership practice can be examined and reimaged in relation to historically produced inequalities, material constraints, epistemic exclusions, and community resources. Each domain captures a distinct but interconnected set of conditions, including policies, cultural, organisational, technological, and relational factors that influence the possibilities for inclusive psychosocial support in rural secondary schools. Leadership is conceptualised as the practice through which these domains are aligned, mediated, and transformed in contextually responsive ways. The five domains serve as a heuristic for thinking critically about how leadership can redistribute resources, legitimise diverse forms of knowledge and care, and integrate digital and community-based supports into a coherent, ethical, and inclusive school response.

### **3.1 Inclusive education**

Within this framework, inclusive education is conceptualised as a structural and epistemic context that shapes whose identities, knowledge, languages, and psychosocial needs are recognised as legitimate within the educational system. In the South African context, inclusive education is formally anchored in international commitments and national policy, particularly the Education White Paper 6, which positions learners with diverse needs within ordinary schools (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024). Conceptually, inclusion extends beyond mere policy compliance or the physical placement of learners. It encompasses the transformation of school cultures, curriculum orientations, language practices, assessment regimes, and power relations that historically privilege white, urban, English-speaking norms of "ability" and "success" (Okoli, 2023; Omodan, 2024). From a decolonial and social justice perspective, this domain foregrounds how apartheid and colonial legacies continue to shape educational knowledge systems, often reproducing exclusion even within formally inclusive policy frameworks. Inclusive education is therefore understood as a systemic and justice-oriented project that seeks not merely to accommodate difference but to disrupt deficit discourses and reconfigure the knowledge project of schooling itself. This includes recognising the intersectional ways in which disability, poverty, race, gender, language, and rurality compound exclusion, positioning inclusion as a broader social justice concern rather than a narrow special needs agenda (Singal & Muthukrishna, 2014; Snyder, 2025).

Recent scholarship on inclusive systems reinforces this shift by emphasising whole-school cultures, teacher agency, and collaborative problem-solving over individualised remediation (Ainscow, 2020; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024). In rural secondary schools, where resource constraints and limited specialist services are common, inclusive education, as a contextual domain, is shaped by how schools mobilise internal capacities, community knowledge, and relational forms of support to respond to learner diversity and psychosocial vulnerability. Within this domain, leadership functions as a mediating and transformative practice that aligns policy, pedagogy, and community knowledge to advance inclusion and psychosocial well-being. Key leadership functions include school leaders actively framing inclusive education as a response to historical and structural injustice, rather than as mere technical compliance with policy mandates. Leadership involves disrupting narratives that pathologise rural learners, African languages, disability, or poverty, and affirming diversity as a resource for learning and well-being. Leaders influence everyday practices by promoting flexible curricula, inclusive assessment approaches, and language practices that support participation and psychosocial safety.

Drawing on the principles of social justice leadership, leaders prioritise the allocation of time, professional learning, and support structures for learners and educators who are most affected by exclusion. Such leadership cultivates mechanisms through which learners, families, and community members can actively participate in decision-making processes. This includes the establishment of learner representative councils, parent forums, and partnerships with local organisations (Moorosi & Bush, 2019). Leaders are responsible for ensuring that digitally mediated practices, including

communication platforms and assistive tools, are utilised to enhance participation and support, rather than to perpetuate existing inequities.

As the primary contextual domain, Inclusive Education provides the normative and ethical framework for the leadership of inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support. It informs the recognition of learner vulnerability, the selection and governance of digital tools, and the equitable distribution of care within the educational setting. Leadership within this domain guarantees that digitally mediated psychosocial practices are integrated into a comprehensive commitment to educational justice, rather than serving as isolated or technocratic solutions to issues of exclusion.

### **3.2 School-based psychosocial support**

Within this framework, school-based psychosocial support is conceptualised as a relational and systemic context through which learner well-being, emotional safety, and social participation are either fostered or constrained within educational settings. In the South African context, this domain is influenced by intersecting conditions of poverty, food insecurity, gender-based violence, HIV and AIDS, family disruption, and community-level trauma, all of which have a profound impact on learners' mental health, behaviour, and engagement with learning (Ngobeni et al., 2023; Bhana et al., 2021). National frameworks such as the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) programme and the Integrated School Health Policy formally position schools as sites for prevention, early identification, referral, and coordination of psychosocial care (DBE, 2018; Menziwa, 2019). Conceptually, however, psychosocial support extends beyond mere service delivery or referral mechanisms to encompass the everyday relational, cultural, and organisational practices through which care is enacted in schools. From a decolonial and social justice perspective, learner vulnerability is understood not as an individual pathology but as the consequence of historical and ongoing structural inequalities rooted in colonialism, apartheid, and neoliberal socio-economic arrangements (de Sousa Santos, 2018; Sayed & Sing, 2020). Psychosocial support, therefore, constitutes a justice-oriented domain concerned with how schools recognise distress, allocate care, and respond ethically to suffering. This perspective highlights how school rules, disciplinary practices, language norms, and institutional routines can either mitigate or exacerbate psychosocial harm, positioning psychosocial support as inseparable from broader questions of power, dignity, and belonging within educational environments.

Contemporary scholarship emphasises multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) as a conceptual framework that integrates universal preventive practices, targeted group-based interventions, and individualised support for learners with elevated levels of need (Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2021; Guest et al., 2024). When examined through a social justice lens, MTSS serves as a mechanism for interrogating which needs are prioritised, how stigma and language barriers hinder access to support, and how institutional responses may inadvertently pathologise behaviours shaped by poverty and violence (Furman, 2012). In rural secondary schools, where formal psychosocial services are limited, this domain is further influenced by reliance on informal care practices and community-based networks, which coexist with, but are often marginalised by, formal policy frameworks. Within this context, leadership functions as a coordinating, ethical, and relational practice that shapes the conceptualisation, distribution, and sustainability of care. Key leadership functions include positioning learner well-being as a fundamental educational concern and an entitlement grounded in dignity and social justice, rather than as an optional or remedial service. Leadership entails mediating national policy expectations (e.g., CSTL, Integrated School Health Policy) in manners that are feasible and responsive within rural constraints, avoiding procedural compliance that undermines meaningful care. Leaders organise layered systems of care that combine universal school-wide practices, targeted group interventions, and individual support, while acknowledging the limitations of formal services in rural contexts.

Drawing on decolonial perspectives, leadership acknowledges the contributions of elders, community health workers, faith-based groups, and other local actors as legitimate participants in the provision of psychosocial support, whilst ensuring ethical safeguards and learner protection. Social justice leadership entails safeguarding time for pastoral care, cultivating safe spaces for support, and recognising the emotional labour borne by teachers, accompanied by appropriate support and professional development. Leaders steer the ethical application of digitally mediated tools, such as messaging platforms for check-ins or coordination with service providers, to enhance care without supplanting relational support or exacerbating exclusion. Leadership facilitates forums through which learners and caregivers can influence the establishment of psychosocial priorities, including learner support committees, caregiver advisory groups, and intersectoral partnerships (Moorosi & Bush, 2019; Snyders, 2025). Within the overarching conceptual framework, the Psychosocial Support domain emphasises the relational core of inclusive, digitally mediated schooling. It elucidates how leadership shapes the moral and organisational conditions under which care is recognised, resourced, and enacted in rural secondary schools. By positioning psychosocial support within a justice-oriented, community-embedded, and digitally mediated context, this domain ensures that leadership practices extend beyond individual coping interventions to embrace collective, culturally responsive, and ethically grounded responses to learner vulnerability.

### **3.3 Digital and material mediation in education and mental health**

Within this framework, digital and material mediation refers to the infrastructural, technological, and material conditions through which inclusion and psychosocial support are enabled, constrained, or reshaped in schooling. This domain encompasses access to electricity, connectivity, devices, data, physical spaces, assistive technologies, and low-tech or offline resources, as well as the social practices and power relations that govern their use. In South African rural secondary schools, digital mediation is characterised by uneven infrastructure, high data costs, variable digital literacy, and linguistic and cultural mismatches between available technologies and local realities (Chisango & Marongwe, 2021; Spaul & Van der Berg, 2020). Digital and assistive technologies are increasingly promoted as mechanisms for expanding access to learning and mental health support. Research indicates that mobile devices, messaging platforms, radio, offline digital resources, and assistive features such as text-to-speech, captioning, and visual supports can enhance inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, and psychosocial outreach in low-resource contexts (Alper & Goggin, 2017; Chirwa, 2021; Jordan, 2023; Mangena, 2023; Naslund et al., 2019). Conceptually, however, this domain highlights the insight that technologies are not neutral tools. They embody assumptions about language, knowledge, privacy, and care, and can reproduce existing inequalities where access, design, and governance are misaligned with local conditions.

Decolonial and critical scholarship cautions that digitally mediated education and mental health initiatives often reinscribe colonial hierarchies by privileging English-only content, imported platforms, individualised therapeutic models, and data-extractive practices (Gum, 2021; Makoelle, 2022; Okoli, 2023; Omodan, 2024). From this perspective, digital mediation becomes a site of struggle over whose knowledges, values, and interests are embedded in technological systems. In rural contexts, this domain is shaped not only by material scarcity but also by epistemic exclusion and ethical risks related to surveillance, consent, and data protection (Ndlovu, 2019). An inclusive and psychosocially responsive approach to digital mediation requires participatory design, linguistic plurality, cultural relevance, and the deliberate integration of digital tools with relational, face-to-face forms of care rather than their substitution (Chan et al., 2025). Within this domain, leadership functions as an ethical, strategic, and redistributive practice that governs how digital and material resources are selected, adapted, and embedded within school-based psychosocial ecosystems. Key leadership functions include prioritising low-bandwidth, mobile, and offline-capable solutions that align with rural infrastructure realities instead of adopting one-size-fits-all digital platforms.

Leadership frames digital tools as enablers of relational care and inclusion, not as substitutes for human support or quick fixes for structural inequality.

Drawing on decolonial perspectives, leaders scrutinise whose languages, knowledge, and values are foregrounded in digital tools and advocate for African-language content and culturally resonant designs. Leadership involves safeguarding privacy, informed consent, data protection, and learner dignity, particularly in the context of digital mental health and psychosocial communication. Social justice-oriented leaders prioritise the most excluded learners in decisions regarding devices, data access, training, and assistive technologies, recognising digital access as a matter of equity. Leaders support professional learning, peer mentoring, and collaborative experimentation that build digital confidence among teachers and learners while strengthening collective care practices. Leadership ensures that digital and assistive technologies complement, rather than replace, in-person relationships with teachers, peers, families, and community-based support structures. Within the overall conceptual framework, the Digital and Material Mediation domain explains how technological and material conditions shape the possibilities for inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support in rural secondary schools. It highlights leadership as the critical agent that aligns infrastructure, ethics, cultural relevance, and relational care. By repositioning digital innovation as a decolonial and social justice project, this domain ensures that digitally mediated psychosocial practices expand capabilities, amplify marginalised voices, and support learner well-being without reproducing exclusion or erasing local knowledge.

### **3.4 School community service interface**

Within this framework, the school community service interface refers to the relational and institutional context through which schools connect with families, communities, and external service providers to support learner inclusion and psychosocial well-being. This domain encompasses formal and informal partnerships with caregivers, community-based organisations, health and social services, faith-based groups, traditional authorities, and non-governmental organisations, as well as the norms, power relations, and communication practices that shape collaboration among these stakeholders. In South African rural secondary schools, this interface is particularly significant because schools often function as central social institutions within communities characterised by spatial isolation, limited-service provision, and the enduring effects of apartheid-era underdevelopment (Bhana et al., 2021). Conceptually, this domain emphasises the insight that inclusive, psychosocially responsive education cannot be achieved by schools acting in isolation. Learner well-being is influenced across multiple social spaces, and psychosocial support relies on coordinated responses that bridge education, health, and social development systems. However, access to psychologists, social workers, and specialised services in rural areas is often limited or intermittent, resulting in fragmented referral pathways and inconsistent support (Mangena, 2023). From a social justice perspective, these gaps are not inherent to “rurality” but rather reflect historical and ongoing patterns of structural neglect and unequal resource allocation, positioning collaboration and advocacy as essential dimensions of leadership rather than optional extras (Sayed & Sing, 2020).

Decolonial scholarship further reframes the school–community–service interface by challenging the deficit constructions of rural communities as passive recipients of support. Instead, rural communities are recognised as knowledge-rich and care-rich spaces, characterised by long-standing traditions of collective responsibility, healing, and mutual aid that have been marginalised by colonial and urban-centric models of schooling and service delivery (Chilisa, 2019; Ebersöhn, 2019). Within this domain, legitimate psychosocial support encompasses not only formal professional services but also indigenous practices, communal rituals, storytelling, and relational forms of care embedded in local histories, languages, and livelihoods. The interface thus becomes a site of epistemic negotiation concerning whose knowledge is regarded as legitimate and how care is organised. Within this context, leadership functions as a relational, coordinating, and political

practice that shapes how schools engage with communities and services to pursue inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support. Key leadership functions include school leaders cultivating respectful, reciprocal relationships with families, community leaders, and service providers, recognising communities as co-educators and co-carers rather than peripheral stakeholders. Leadership involves organising and maintaining functional referral and collaboration pathways across education, health, and social development sectors while acknowledging and working within the limitations of rural service availability.

Utilising decolonial perspectives, leaders acknowledge the role of elders, faith leaders, traditional healers, and community-based organisations as legitimate contributors to psychosocial support, ensuring the implementation of ethical safeguards and learner protection. Leaders actively resist top-down or extractive partnerships by ensuring that collaborations are participatory, transparent, and responsive to community priorities and knowledge systems. Leadership fosters the ethical utilisation of digital tools, such as messaging platforms and shared communication channels, to coordinate care, maintain contact with families, and bridge distances without supplanting face-to-face relationships. Social justice leadership encompasses the identification of structural injustice, the challenge of policies that disadvantage rural schools, and the mobilisation of partnerships and evidence to secure additional resources and services. Leaders establish forums through which learners and caregivers can shape psychosocial priorities, including caregiver advisory groups, community dialogues, and intersectoral clusters that amplify rural voices in district and provincial planning (Moorosi & Bush, 2019). Within the overarching conceptual framework, the school-community-service interface domain elucidates how relationships and coordination beyond the school gate are central to inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support in rural secondary schools. It positions leadership as the integrative force that aligns institutional mandates with community knowledge, formal services with informal care, and digital mediation with relational trust. By reframing rural communities as partners and knowledge holders, this domain ensures that psychosocial support bolsters collective agency and dignity rather than perpetuating dependency or deficit narratives.

### **3.5 Educational leadership**

Within this conceptual framework, educational leadership is understood as the normative, relational, and organisational practice through which inclusion, psychosocial care, digital mediation, and community engagement are deliberately aligned to pursue social justice in rural secondary schools. Rather than existing as a stand-alone domain, leadership functions as the integrative force that shapes the interactions among the other four domains in everyday school life. This understanding transcends managerial or technical notions of leadership to emphasise it as a moral, political, and epistemic practice embedded within the historical contexts of colonialism, apartheid, and ongoing inequality in South African education (Furman, 2012; Sayed & Sing, 2020; Omodan, 2024). South African leadership scholarship increasingly prioritises social justice and decolonial perspectives, particularly within historically marginalised and rural schools (Ramango, 2021; Johnson, 2024; Ossiannilsson, 2025). From a social justice perspective, leadership entails making visible and actively challenging the ways in which institutional routines, policies, and resource allocations reproduce exclusion. Principals and other leaders are positioned as agents who interrogate the allocation of time, staffing, budgets, recognition, and disciplinary practices, and who deliberately redistribute these resources towards learners and communities confronting intersecting disadvantages related to poverty, disability, language, gender, race, and geography (Furman, 2012; Sayed & Sing, 2020). Exclusion is thus framed not as an individual failure but rather as a consequence of historical and policy choices that leadership can either reinforce or resist.

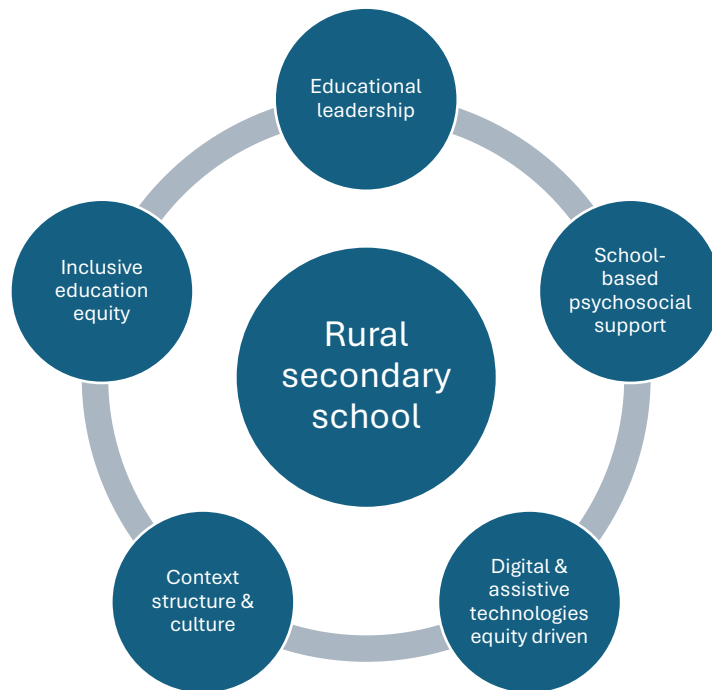
Decolonial perspectives enhance this analysis by foregrounding epistemic injustice. Decolonial leadership critically interrogates whose knowledge, languages, and values are legitimised in decisions regarding school leadership, curricula, assessment practices, and psychosocial responses

(de Sousa Santos, 2018; Chilisa, 2019; Omodan, 2024). This entails challenging Eurocentric and urban-normative assumptions embedded within leadership standards and accountability regimes, as well as actively re-centring African languages, indigenous knowledges, communal ethics, and relational understandings of wellbeing within school cultures (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010; Akoli, 2023). Consequently, leadership is conceptualised as a process of navigating the demands of national policy while simultaneously transforming the epistemic foundations of schooling. Within this framework, leadership is enacted through an interconnected set of functions that span all other domains: leaders integrate inclusive education, psychosocial support, digital and assistive technologies, and community partnerships into a coherent school-wide approach, rather than permitting these to operate as fragmented initiatives. Leadership involves making value-laden decisions regarding whose needs are prioritised, how scarce resources are allocated, and which forms of knowledge and care are legitimised. Leaders utilise practical levers, including timetabling, staff deployment, budgeting, professional development, and disciplinary systems, to safeguard time and space for psychosocial support and inclusion, particularly for the most vulnerable learners.

Leaders contest prevailing knowledge hierarchies by advocating for African languages, indigenous conceptions of wellbeing, and culturally relevant forms of care within education, counselling, and digital content. In rural contexts, leaders function as mediators between bureaucratic policy requirements and the realities of the community, negotiating flexible arrangements that accommodate seasonal labour, migration, and caregiving responsibilities without forsaking learners. Leaders critically assess digital platforms and mental health technologies, examining issues of access, language, surveillance, data privacy, and cultural relevance, thereby ensuring that digital tools augment rather than supplant human relationships (Makoelle, 2022; Johnson, 2024). Leadership is distributed among principals, senior management teams (SMTs), teachers, learners, caregivers, and community stakeholders, cultivating shared responsibility for inclusion and psychosocial care rather than promoting individual heroism. Within this framework, educational leadership serves as the enabling condition that determines whether inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support remains a rhetorical abstraction or becomes embedded in practice. In rural secondary schools, leadership transcends mere adaptation to context and involves actively transforming the circumstances under which teaching, learning, and care take place. From a decolonial and social justice standpoint, educational leadership is therefore an ongoing initiative focused on redistribution, epistemic repair, and relational care, aiming not only to enhance learner outcomes but to affirm dignity, strengthen collective agency, and contribute to broader movements for educational and social justice.

#### **4. Proposed Framework**

Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual framework, which represents the central contribution of this study to the body of knowledge. It integrates inclusive education, psychosocial support, digital mediation, rural schooling, and decolonial social-justice leadership into a coherent model aimed at understanding and guiding leadership practices in South African rural secondary schools.



*Figure 1: Leadership framework for inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support*

The proposed framework conceptualises leadership for inclusive, digital psychosocial support in South African rural secondary education as a web of mutually reinforcing practices rather than a single programme or role. It unites five interrelated domains to elucidate how leadership can facilitate inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support in rural South African secondary schools. Inclusive education and school-based psychosocial support determine who should be supported and the forms such support should take; digital and assistive technology indicates how this support can be extended and adapted; context, structure, and culture describe where and under what conditions the support must operate; and educational leadership acts as the integrative force that aligns these domains, mobilising resources, individuals, and practices to function coherently within a specific school context.

At the foundation of this framework lie the contextual layers of rurality, policy, socio-economic conditions, and historical inequities: schools exist within communities shaped by apartheid spatial planning, chronic poverty, and unequal access to services, while being governed by policies advocating for inclusive education, psychosocial support, and ICT integration (Ngobeni et al., 2023; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024). Within this framework, five interconnected leadership domains are identified. Leaders must ground their work in a clear value base that perceives psychosocial support as integral to learning, recognises inclusion as a matter of dignity and belonging, and positions digital and assistive tools as means of care rather than substitutes for human relationships. They are responsible for nurturing everyday cultures of care, inclusion, and digital confidence, creating classrooms where learners' distress is addressed without stigma, diverse identities and languages are honoured, and staff feel secure to experiment with simple technologies, such as WhatsApp, radio, or offline applications in ethical manners.

Leaders are tasked with establishing and maintaining structures and processes for psychosocial support, for instance, by strengthening School-Based Support Teams, clarifying referral and crisis-response pathways, and embedding multi-tiered support into routines such as assemblies, Life Orientation lessons, and parent meetings, sometimes utilising digital tools for monitoring or follow-

up. They curate a 'digital and assistive ecosystem' that creatively leverages available resources, including basic phones, community internet points, and low-cost assistive devices, while also addressing concerns of accessibility, language, privacy, and capacity building. The framework emphasises partnerships and distributed leadership, involving principals, School Management Teams (SMTs), teacher leaders, School-Based Support Team members, district officials, health and social workers, NGOs, community leaders, parents, and learners themselves, all of whom share responsibility for inclusion and psychosocial care, potentially through youth well-being ambassadors or community-based support networks coordinated using simple digital platforms.

These domains are understood as dynamic and adaptive; leadership practices evolve in response to changing conditions, such as policy shifts, local crises, or emerging technologies, and feedback from learners, families, and communities continually reshapes priorities. Thus, the framework provides a flexible, context-sensitive guide for how leadership can orchestrate inclusive, digitally enabled psychosocial support that enhances learner well-being, participation, resilience, and academic engagement in rural secondary schools. For example, a rural principal who facilitates coordination among teachers, parents, and local health workers through WhatsApp groups and an offline learning platform to monitor learners' wellbeing and refer at-risk students is implementing this framework in practice. Similarly, a school that trains peer-support leaders to utilise simple assistive applications on shared devices to assist classmates facing learning and emotional difficulties exemplifies how inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support can be effectively organised and led in a resource-constrained context.

## **5. Implications and Future Research**

The proposed conceptual framework has implications for research, practice, and policy in South African rural secondary education. It recommends that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and provincial policymakers ensure that inclusion, ICT, and psychosocial care are integrated rather than treated as distinct areas. This integration should make leadership for inclusive, digital psychosocial support a clear focus within policy directives and leadership development programmes. ICT in education policies, White Paper 6, SIAS, and psychosocial support guidelines should be better aligned to communicate effectively, with specific attention to the lived realities of rural schools.

District offices should provide rural principals and SMTs with tailored training, mentoring, and practical support for leading across the five domains of the framework, and invest in cluster networks to enable neighbouring rural schools to share practices in low-tech digital innovation and school-based psychosocial support. Principals and SMTs can map their current activities against the domains of vision and values, cultures of care, structures and processes, digital/assistive ecosystems, and partnerships to identify strengths, gaps, and priorities.

The framework can guide school-level strategies such as digital well-being initiatives, trauma-informed teacher development, and learner well-being ambassador programmes, clarifying the roles of teachers and SBSTs within distributed leadership. As a conceptual framework, it provides a structured outline for future empirical inquiry, including case studies, action research, and comparative studies across provinces or contexts in the Global South. However, the challenge of unequal access to reliable digital infrastructure and devices in rural areas may limit schools' capacity to enact and sustain inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support as outlined in the framework.

## **6. Limitations**

This conceptual framework has significant limitations that should be acknowledged. At this stage, the model is proposed and has not yet been empirically tested or fully validated, although it is informed by existing literature and insights from a specific collaborative project. The framework is grounded in the conditions of South African rural secondary schools, shaped by the legacies of

apartheid and contemporary marginalisation; its direct applicability elsewhere may be limited without adaptation. It is explicitly informed by a decolonial and social-justice stance, intentionally foregrounding specific values and practices, which may introduce biases or blind spots. It should therefore be understood as a heuristic and generative starting point, to be revised and refined in light of empirical evidence and stakeholder feedback.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Leadership plays a critical integrative role in shaping how inclusive, digitally mediated psychosocial support is conceptualised and enacted in South African rural secondary schools. This paper argues that, although substantial bodies of scholarship exist on inclusive education, psychosocial support, educational leadership, and digital technologies, these literatures often operate in parallel and provide limited guidance for understanding how leadership navigates their intersection under conditions of rural marginalisation. Rather than proposing a prescriptive solution or claiming empirical efficacy, the conceptual framework advanced in this paper offers an interpretive lens for examining how leadership practices can align values, relationships, material conditions, and institutional arrangements to support learner well-being and participation in contextually responsive ways. The primary contribution of the framework lies not in introducing new leadership categories, but in theorising leadership as a site of integration in which inclusion, psychosocial care, digital mediation, and community engagement are actively negotiated. By foregrounding five interconnected domains, such as vision and values, cultures of care, support structures and processes, digital and assistive ecosystems, and partnerships with distributed leadership, the framework repositions leadership as an ongoing practice of mediation rather than a set of discrete roles or competencies. It highlights the relational, ethical, and epistemic work required in rural contexts marked by historical inequality, limited resources, and uneven access to psychosocial and digital infrastructures, and it offers a shared analytical language to interrogate existing arrangements and to surface often implicit assumptions about care, technology, and inclusion.

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