Advancing Educational Equity Through Sustainable School Partnership: A Qualitative Systematic Literature Review Towards a Conceptual Framework for South Africa

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Abstract: Educational inequality remains one of the most significant barriers to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) in South Africa. While disparities between well-resourced and under-resourced schools are well documented, limited research has synthesised how sustainable school partnerships, underpinned by sustainable leadership, can advance educational equity through collaborative resource mobilisation and stakeholder engagement. This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review to examine the role of school partnerships in promoting educational equity within the framework of Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 17. Literature was identified through systematic searches of Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Sabinet and analysed using thematic analysis. Six interconnected themes emerged from the review: collaborative resource mobilisation, teacher development, leadership collaboration, learner support through community engagement, sustainability factors, and challenges to partnership implementation. The findings demonstrate that sustainable school partnerships extend beyond resource sharing to encompass professional learning, leadership development, stakeholder collaboration, and community engagement, thereby strengthening institutional capacity and creating more inclusive learning environments. Drawing on Sustainable Leadership Theory, the study proposes a conceptual framework illustrating how sustainable leadership enables collaborative partnerships that facilitate educational equity and support the achievement of SDG 4 through SDG 17. The framework offers a practical and theoretical contribution for educational leaders, policymakers, and researchers seeking sustainable strategies to reduce educational disparities and strengthen inclusive education in South Africa.

Keywords: Educational Equity; Sustainable Leadership; School Partnerships; SDG 4; SDG 17; Collaborative Resource Mobilisation; Inclusive Learning Environments.

1. Introduction

Quality education remains a persistent challenge in South African education, particularly in relation to SDG 4 (Quality Education). Although educational inequalities in South Africa are well documented, limited research has synthesised how sustainable school partnerships, underpinned by sustainable leadership, may facilitate collaborative resource mobilisation and advance educational equity in support of SDGs 4 and 17. The aim of this study is to explore how partnerships between well-resourced and under-resourced schools can contribute to educational equity and the achievement of SDG 4 in South Africa. Educational equity is not achieved through schools acting in isolation, but through a network of relationships involving principals, communities, district offices, and external partners. Effective leadership enables these partnerships, transforming schools into centres of community development and thereby advancing SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Educational equity is also more likely to be achieved when partnerships are embedded within a culture of sustainable leadership characterised by collaboration, trust, professional growth, and distributed leadership (Elkaleh et al., 2025).

Prew (2007) investigated how principals in South African township schools responded to innovation and change. Through a case study of four schools involved in the Soshanguve School Development Project, the author compared two successful schools with two unsuccessful schools to understand why some principals embraced transformation while others resisted it. Zulu, Bhengu, and Mkhize (2019) investigated the leadership challenges faced by township schools and found that the relationship between the School Governing Body and the school leadership also influenced the success of the school. Leading a school involves more than managing teaching and learning. Principals must also address the social challenges affecting their learners and communities.

This study contributes to the literature by synthesising evidence on sustainable school partnerships and proposing a conceptual framework that explains how collaborative leadership, resource mobilisation, teacher development, and community engagement collectively promote educational equity and inclusive learning environments in support of SDGs 4 and 17.

2. Literature Review

Sustainable leadership focuses on improving learner outcomes and creating positive results that extend beyond the tenure of individual leaders. It emphasises long-term effectiveness, continuous improvement, and inclusivity. Inclusive learning environments need to be created to provide learners with equal opportunities to thrive and succeed, regardless of the school they attend or their individual abilities (Debasu & Yitayew, 2023). Sustainable leadership also adopts a future-oriented perspective that balances present educational needs with long-term societal development. Such an approach aligns closely with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 and SDG 17, which emphasise quality education and collaborative partnerships (Al-Khamaiseh et al., 2025).

Sustainable educational improvement depends not only on access to resources but also on the development of leadership capacity. Mestry (2017) found that many principals, especially in under-resourced schools and urban areas in South Africa, enter leadership positions without adequate preparation and often rely on self-initiated professional development and collaborative networks to enhance their skills. The study further highlights the importance of professional learning communities and opportunities to share good practice. These findings suggest that school partnerships can serve as mechanisms for leadership development, mentoring, and capacity building. Such collaboration is consistent with the principles of sustainable leadership and contributes to the creation of inclusive learning environments and the advancement of educational equity. Prew (2007) found that transformational school leaders were more successful in mobilising stakeholders and establishing productive relationships with communities and district offices. Inclusive leadership practices enabled schools to adapt to change and sustain innovation, whereas authoritarian approaches undermined collaboration and school development. These findings suggest that leadership plays a critical role in facilitating partnerships that support equitable and sustainable educational outcomes.

Generic interventions are often insufficient to address the complex realities facing schools. Mestry (2017) found that many principals perceived professional development initiatives as standardised and disconnected from their specific needs. Sustainable school partnerships may provide more contextually relevant forms of support that respond to local challenges and priorities. Resources for school improvement should not be viewed solely in financial terms. Human expertise, leadership capacity, teacher time, and community partnerships constitute equally important resources that contribute to sustainable school improvement (Willis et al., 2019). This broader understanding of resources reinforces the value of school partnerships as mechanisms for sharing expertise, expanding support structures, and promoting educational equity.

Peng et al. (2024) argue that sustainable leadership is fundamental to improving educational quality and ensuring the resilience and adaptability of educational institutions. Their systematic review highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement, community collaboration, and interdisciplinary partnerships in promoting sustainable educational development. The authors further contend that sustainable leadership cultivates ethically responsible change agents capable of advancing the Sustainable Development Goals. These findings suggest that leadership serves as a catalyst for collaborative partnerships and resource mobilisation, thereby strengthening efforts to achieve educational equity and quality education. Consequently, sustainable leadership may be viewed as a key mechanism through which SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) facilitates the attainment of SDG 4 (Quality Education).

3. Conceptual Framework

Sustainable Development Goal 17 focuses on Partnerships for the Goals. This conceptual framework aligns with the aim of this research, namely, to explore how partnerships between well-resourced and under-resourced schools can contribute to educational equity and support the achievement of SDG 4 in South Africa. Sustainable leadership is characterised by stakeholder engagement and collective responsibility. Educational improvement is not solely the responsibility of government but requires collaboration among schools, communities, and other stakeholders to create enduring value for present and future generations (Al-Khamaiseh et al., 2025).

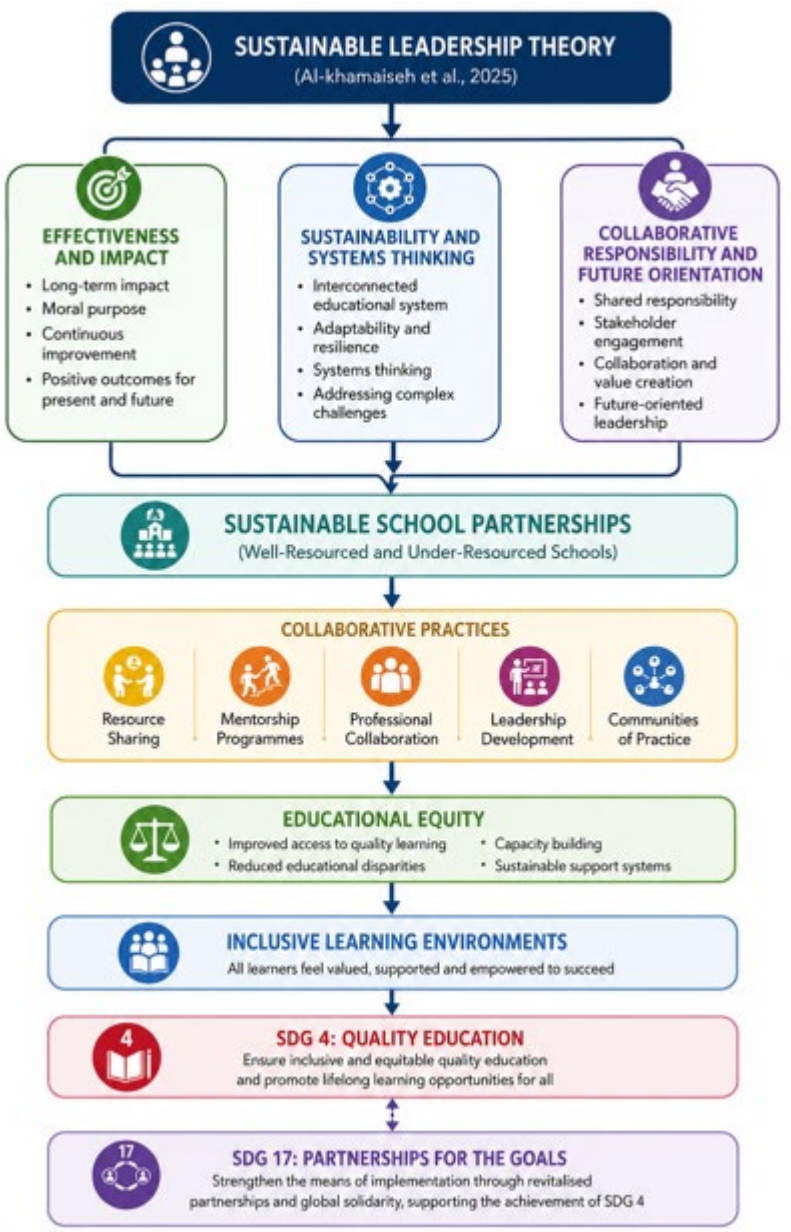


Figure 3.1: Adapted from Al-Khamaiseh et al., 2025. and design by ChatGPT5.5

Figure 3.1 illustrates the conceptual framework underpinning this study. Sustainable Leadership Theory provides the overarching lens through which educational equity is viewed. The framework proposes that effectiveness and impact, systems thinking, and collaborative responsibility collectively facilitate sustainable school partnerships. These partnerships enable resource sharing, professional collaboration, and mentorship initiatives that contribute to educational equity and support the achievement of SDG 4 (Quality Education) through SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Ultimately, the framework positions school partnerships as vehicles for creating inclusive and equitable learning environments in South Africa.

3.1 Effective Impact

Effective impact can only be achieved when leaders advocate a shift from authoritarian approaches to school leadership towards greater participation by various stakeholders. As Zulu et al. (2019, p. 206) note, “Holding constant dialogue with the stakeholders and the community around the school is a very useful technique to address social challenges in schools.” Leadership in schools, especially those in poor and under-resourced communities, is characterised by complexity and involves far more than simply managing the school. Professional development improves school effectiveness not only at the management level but also among the wider staff complement (Mestry, 2017). The effectiveness of schools is also influenced by the manner in which the Senior

Management Team (SMT) operates. Under-resourced schools may experience poor academic performance, learner ill-discipline, demotivated teachers, poverty, and high levels of unemployment among parents or guardians, among other challenges. Nevertheless, with appropriate support, knowledge, and development, some schools operating in similarly challenging contexts demonstrate that principals and SMTs can function with a degree of effectiveness (Zulu et al., 2019).

3.2 Systems Thinking

Sustainable leadership adopts a systems-thinking approach in which schools are viewed as interconnected entities rather than isolated institutions. Addressing educational inequalities therefore requires collaborative and systemic solutions that acknowledge the interdependence of schools and communities (Al-Khamaiseh et al., 2025). School leaders need to ensure that collaborative relationships exist among staff and stakeholders. Effective stakeholder participation and collaboration among the different parties contribute to staff development and school improvement (Mestry, 2017). When collaboration and synergy occur among school stakeholders and between different schools within a community, the empowerment of school leaders and the achievement of common goals become more attainable (Ndwandwe, 2016).

3.3 Collaborative Responsibility

Engagement and collective responsibility are among the characteristics of sustainable leadership (Al-Khamaiseh et al., 2025). Principals who network with universities and other schools' benefit from exposure to best practices and opportunities to learn from successful approaches. Mestry (2017) found that principals benefited from professional networks that facilitated the exchange of ideas and good practices and contributed to the development of school leadership and staff. Such partnerships enable schools to learn from one another and strengthen collective capacity. Although the principal remains central to school leadership, shared responsibility among the SMT and School Governing Body (SGB) contributes to a culture of collaborative and collective responsibility (Zulu et al., 2019).

3.4 Future Orientation

Sustainable leadership adopts a future-oriented perspective that balances present educational needs with long-term societal development. Such an approach aligns closely with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 and SDG 17, which emphasise quality education and collaborative partnerships (Al-Khamaiseh et al., 2025). Capacity building and leadership succession can be strengthened through shared responsibilities and resources (Mestry, 2017). Future-oriented leadership prioritises long-term capacity building, continuous professional learning, institutional resilience, and sustainable partnerships that remain effective beyond individual leadership tenures. Through sustained collaboration, continuous professional development, and long-term resource mobilisation, school partnerships can contribute to enduring educational equity and create inclusive learning environments that support current and future generations of learners.

3.5 Sustainable School Partnerships

Sustainable school partnerships extend beyond the sharing of material resources and encompass the development of leadership capacity. Mestry (2017) argues that principals require continuous professional development and support structures to respond effectively to the changing demands of education. Consequently, collaborative relationships between schools may provide opportunities for mentorship, knowledge sharing, and leadership development that contribute to long-term educational improvement. Networking and support structures can also be established to support school leaders and educators in the classroom.

According to Willis et al. (2019), effective school improvement requires meaningful stakeholder engagement. Collaboration among schools, families, community organisations, and local businesses enables leaders to identify needs more accurately and align resources with learner outcomes. Such partnerships foster shared responsibility and support sustainable approaches to educational improvement. Willis et al. (2019) distinguish between equality and equity, arguing that resources should be allocated according to the needs of learners and schools rather than distributed equally. Schools serving disadvantaged communities often require additional support and differentiated interventions. Consequently, school partnerships represent an important mechanism for addressing inequalities and promoting more equitable educational opportunities. The framework further contributes a specifically South African perspective by illustrating how partnerships between well-resourced and

under-resourced schools may facilitate collaborative resource mobilisation and sustainable educational improvement.

4. Method

A qualitative systematic literature review was used to synthesise existing knowledge regarding how school partnerships may contribute to educational equity in South Africa and support the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 17. Qualitative systematic literature reviews are particularly useful for integrating and interpreting findings from previous studies to develop a deeper understanding of inequalities and identify themes across the literature (Grant & Booth, 2009). This methodology includes several stages, namely defining the research questions, developing a search strategy, selecting databases, establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria, screening and selecting studies, and synthesising the findings through thematic analysis (Carlos, Reses, & Soares, 2024).

The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

- How is educational equity conceptualised within the context of school partnerships?
- What forms of school partnerships have been identified in the literature?
- What collaborative practices and resource-sharing strategies contribute to educational equity?
- How does sustainable leadership facilitate school partnerships?
- What challenges and enabling factors influence sustainable school partnerships?
- How do school partnerships contribute to the achievement of SDG 4 (Quality Education) through SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)?

Relevant literature was identified through searches conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Sabinet. Searches were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2026. To implement this strategy, a Boolean search string was developed and applied. The search string used was: (“educational equity” OR “equitable education”) AND (“school partnerships” OR “inter-school partnerships” OR “collaboration”) AND (“sustainable leadership”) AND (“resource sharing” OR mentorship OR “professional learning communities”) AND (“SDG 4” OR “quality education”) AND (“SDG 17” OR partnerships) AND (South Africa OR “township schools”). Peer-reviewed articles written in English were included in the review. Full-text articles had to be available and relevant to the study.

The study selection process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The process consisted of four stages, namely identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Duplicate studies were removed, and titles, abstracts, and full texts were assessed against predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The database searches initially identified 356 records. After removing 74 duplicates, 282 records remained for title and abstract screening. Following screening, 87 articles were selected for full-text review. Application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria resulted in 42 studies being retained for the final synthesis. Figure 4.1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages.

Table 1

Stage	Number
Records identified	1356
Duplicates removed	174
Records screen	87
Full-text articles assessed	60
Studies included in review	42

5. Findings and Discussion

The literature review revealed six interconnected themes that collectively explain how sustainable school partnerships contribute to educational equity. While the findings identify specific partnership mechanisms, the conceptual framework proposed by the author extends these findings by illustrating the relationships between sustainable leadership, collaborative resource mobilisation, teacher development, community engagement, and educational equity.

5.1 Collaborative Resource Mobilisation

A recurring theme across the literature is that sustainable school partnerships facilitate the mobilisation of diverse resources to address educational inequalities and promote equitable learning opportunities. Rather than focusing solely on financial support, the literature conceptualises resources as including leadership expertise, professional knowledge, mentoring opportunities, social capital, stakeholder networks, community support, and collaborative learning opportunities. Effective school improvement depends on the strategic mobilisation of human capital, leadership expertise, community services, stakeholder engagement and collaborative partnerships. Resources are therefore viewed as multidimensional and should be allocated according to the need rather than distributed equally (Willis, Krausen, Caparas and Taylor, 2019).

The reviewed studies collectively suggest that resource mobilisation functions as the primary mechanism through which partnerships address educational inequities. Importantly, the literature indicates that human capital, professional expertise and social networks may be more influential than financial resources alone. This finding highlights a shift from deficit-focused interventions towards capacity-building approaches that emphasise reciprocal collaboration and sustainability. Peng et al. (2024) and Elkaleh et al. (2025) identify collaboration, stakeholder engagement, professional growth, distributed leadership, and community participation as essential components of sustainable educational improvement. Sustainable leaders create conditions that encourage the sharing of expertise, collective problem-solving and mutual support.

5.2 Teacher Development

The literature consistently identifies teacher development as a critical outcome of sustainable school partnerships. Partnerships provide opportunities for professional learning, mentorship, collaborative problem-solving, and sharing of pedagogical expertise, thereby strengthening teaching quality and supporting educational equity. Willis et al. (2019) advocate for a continuous improvement approach in which leaders and teachers collaboratively analyse data, review practices and refine interventions. Such collaborative processes strengthen professional learning communities and support sustainable educational change. For teachers to adopt different teaching strategies to accommodate the diversity of learners could also contribute to the promotion of learner development but would also promote an attitude towards lifelong learning for teachers. The development of the learners as well the development of the teachers fosters a positive learning environment where everyone can develop according to their own abilities (Hammond, 2014).

Teacher development should be viewed not merely as an individual professional activity but as a collaborative and relational process that is strengthened through partnerships. By facilitating mentorship, professional learning communities, shared expertise, and continuous learning opportunities, school partnerships contribute to teacher capacity building, which in turn enhances educational quality and promotes educational equity. The literature also suggests that teacher development contributes directly to educational quality and learner success. Willis et al. (2019) argue that human capital and professional expertise constitute critical resources for school improvement. Partnerships enable schools to access expertise that may not be available within individual institutions, thereby supporting instructional transformation and capacity building. Teacher development within school partnerships is supported through the mobilisation of multiple forms of resources rather than financial resources alone. The literature indicates that partnerships facilitate access to professional expertise, mentoring relationships, training opportunities, teaching materials, leadership support, professional learning networks, and collaborative problem-solving processes. Collectively, these resources contribute to the development of teachers' knowledge, skills, confidence, and instructional practices. This suggests that collaborative resource mobilisation functions as a key mechanism through which school partnerships strengthen teacher capacity. As teachers gain access to a broader range of human, social, and professional resources, they are better equipped to respond to diverse learner needs, implement innovative teaching strategies, and contribute to improved learning outcomes. Teacher development therefore emerges not only as an outcome of school partnerships but also as a critical pathway through which partnerships promote educational quality and educational equity.

5.3 Leadership Collaboration

Leadership collaboration is not a sub-theme of teacher development. Rather, it serves as a critical mechanism through which sustainable partnerships are established, maintained, and leveraged to promote educational equity. Educational transformation requires leaders to move beyond isolated decision-making and engage in collaborative relationships with teachers, principals, district officials, communities, and external stakeholders. Leadership collaboration functions as an enabling mechanism that supports the development and sustainability

of school partnerships. By fostering shared responsibility, stakeholder engagement, distributed expertise, and collective decision-making, collaborative leadership creates the conditions necessary for resource mobilisation, teacher development, and educational equity. Consequently, leadership collaboration serves as a critical bridge between sustainable leadership and the achievement of SDG 4 and SDG 17.

Partnerships do not emerge by chance. Sustainable and transformational leaders create the conditions that enable schools, communities, parents, and external stakeholders to collaborate in pursuing educational improvement (Peng et al., 2024). Mestry (2017) recommends strengthening professional learning communities within schools and encouraging collaboration among educators and school leaders. Professional learning communities and collaborative networks contribute significantly to school improvement by promoting shared learning, collective efficacy, and mutual support. Mestry (2017) further argues that schools should establish communities of practice and engage in collaborative learning processes to strengthen both leadership and instructional practices.

Leadership collaboration is also facilitated through the mobilisation of multiple resources that extend beyond financial support. The literature suggests that successful partnerships provide access to human resources, professional expertise, leadership knowledge, mentoring relationships, social networks, community support, and organisational capacity. Collectively, these resources enable leaders to share experiences, address common challenges, coordinate improvement initiatives, and develop sustainable solutions to complex educational problems. The mobilisation of diverse resources strengthens leadership capacity across partner schools and creates opportunities for shared learning and innovation. As a result, collaborative resource mobilisation and leadership collaboration operate in a mutually reinforcing manner, supporting both school improvement and educational equity. The literature further suggests that collaborative leadership strengthens the ability of schools to respond effectively to contextual challenges by drawing on the collective expertise of multiple stakeholders. Rather than relying on the knowledge and capacity of a single leader, partnerships encourage distributed leadership approaches in which responsibility and decision-making are shared across individuals and organisations. This collaborative approach increases organisational resilience, strengthens stakeholder commitment, and enhances the long-term sustainability of partnership initiatives. Through collaborative leadership, schools are better positioned to establish meaningful relationships with communities and external stakeholders, creating supportive environments that enhance learner development and contribute to educational equity.

5.4 Learner Support Community Engagement

Learner support and community engagement emerge as another important theme. This theme is particularly relevant because it links school partnerships directly to educational equity, inclusive learning environments, and the achievement of SDG 4 through the collaborative partnerships promoted by SDG 17. The literature highlights the important role of community engagement in strengthening learner support and promoting educational equity. The reviewed studies suggest that sustainable school partnerships extend beyond collaboration among educational institutions and include meaningful engagement with parents, communities, local organisations, businesses, and other stakeholders. Such partnerships create support systems that contribute to improved learner outcomes and more inclusive learning environments. Willis et al. (2019) emphasise that instructional transformation requires schools to identify and address both school-based and external barriers to learning. Community organisations that provide health, nutrition, psychosocial, and social support services are therefore viewed as strategic partners in promoting learner success. Such collaborations demonstrate the interconnected nature of the Sustainable Development Goals and highlight the importance of SDG 17 in advancing SDG 4.

Learner support and community engagement are strengthened through the mobilisation of multiple resources that collectively address the diverse needs of learners. The literature indicates that partnerships provide access to a wide range of resources, including professional expertise, mentoring and counselling services, health and nutrition programmes, learning materials, technological resources, community knowledge, parental support, and social networks. The sustainable leadership literature further highlights the importance of stakeholder participation in educational improvement. Peng et al. (2024) identify community engagement, collaboration, and stakeholder involvement as essential elements of sustainable educational leadership. Sustainable leaders actively create opportunities for communities to participate in educational processes and contribute to learner success. Through collaborative leadership approaches, stakeholders become partners in educational improvement rather than passive recipients of educational services. This shared commitment strengthens relationships between schools and communities, enhances the sustainability of support initiatives, and contributes to more equitable and inclusive learning environments. By leveraging diverse resources and fostering

meaningful stakeholder participation, schools are better positioned to address barriers to learning and create conditions in which all learners have opportunities to succeed.

5.5 Sustainability Factors

Sustainable leadership emerges as a key factor influencing the longevity of partnerships. Peng et al. (2024) argue that sustainable leadership promotes resilience, adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and long-term educational improvement. Leaders play a critical role in fostering collaborative cultures that support ongoing partnership activities and ensure that initiatives continue beyond individual leadership tenures. The literature indicates that the success of school partnerships depends not only on the establishment of collaborative relationships but also on the effective mobilisation and integration of a variety of resources. These resources include human capital, professional expertise, leadership capacity, social networks, stakeholder knowledge, professional learning opportunities, community support, and organisational resources. Collectively, these resources contribute to the development of shared responsibility, trust, leadership commitment, continuous professional learning, stakeholder engagement, and a shared vision for educational improvement. The literature further suggests that trust and strong relational networks are critical sustainability factors, as they enable the effective exchange of resources, strengthen collaboration among partners, and support the long-term success of partnership initiatives. Pew (2007) found that successful schools developed strong relationships with communities, district offices and stakeholders. The relationships promoted community ownership, strengthening social capital, and enhanced the sustainability of school improvements initiatives.

5.6 Challenges and Barriers

Although the literature highlights the significant potential of school partnerships to promote educational equity, several challenges and barriers may hinder their effectiveness and sustainability. These barriers operate at organisational, relational, contextual and systematic levels and influence the extent to which partnerships contribute to inclusive learning environments. One of the most frequently identified challenges relates to leadership capacity and leadership continuity, Prew (2007) found that ineffective or authoritarian leadership practices often undermine collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and innovation. Similarly, Mestry (2017) notes that many educational leaders assume leadership positions without adequate preparation and support, limiting their ability to establish and sustain collaborative partnerships. Leadership turnover may further disrupt established relationships and partnership initiatives. Resource disparities between schools also present significant challenges. While partnerships aim to address educational inequalities, substantial differences in infrastructure, staffing, technology and financial resources may create power imbalances between participating schools. Such disparities may result in relationships that are perceived as dependent rather than collaborative, thereby undermining the principal of mutual benefit. Collectively, the literature suggest that sustainable school partnerships require intentional efforts to address leadership challenges, resource disparities, deficits, stakeholder disengagement, organisational resistance and systemic constraints. Failure to address these barriers may limit the ability of partnerships to contribute meaningfully to educational equity and inclusive learning environments.

6. Conclusion

Educational inequality remains one of the most persistent challenges facing South African education and continues to undermine efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). While disparities between well- resourced schools have been widely documented, this study sought to move beyond describing inequality by exploring how sustainable school partnerships can contribute to educational equity through the lens of Sustainable Leadership Theory and interconnected goals of SDG4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for Goals). Using qualitative systematic literature review, the study synthesised evidence from national and international literature relating to educational equity, sustainable leadership, school partnerships, collaborative resource mobilisation, teacher development, learning support through community engagement, sustainability factors, and challenges and barriers to partnership implementation.

The findings demonstrate that sustainable schools' partnerships provide an important mechanism for addressing educational inequities. Partnerships facilitate the mobilisation of resources that extend beyond financial support and include leadership expertise, professional learning opportunities, mentoring, social capital, stakeholder networks, and community assets. Through collaborative leadership practices, schools can strengthen institutional capacity, promote professional growth, and enhance learner support systems. The findings further

indicate that sustainable partnership is most effective when underpinned by trust, shared vision, stakeholder engagement, distributed leadership, and ongoing professional learning.

The study also highlights that educational equity cannot be achieved through isolated interventions. Rather, meaningful progress requires collaborative and reciprocal relationships among schools, communities, educational leaders, district officials, and other stakeholders. In this regard, SDG 17 functions as a critical enabling mechanism through which SDG 4 can be advanced. School partnerships therefore represent not only strategy for resources sharing but also a means of fostering collective responsibility for educational improvement and social justice. Based on findings, the study proposes a conceptual framework for sustainable school partnerships that positions leadership collaboration as the catalyst for partnership development, collaborative resource mobilisation as the primary mechanism of support, and teacher development and community engagement as key drivers of educational equality and inclusive learning environments. The framework contributes to the growing body of literature on sustainable leadership and offers a contextual relevant perspective for addressing educational inequalities in South Arica.

Future research should explore the practica implementation of partnership models within South African township and under-resources schools through empirical case studies. Further investigation is also required into the long-term sustainability of partnerships, the role of policy in supporting collaboration, and the perspectives of educators, learners, communities, and school leaders involved in partnership initiatives. Ultimately, the study argues that educational equity is not solely the responsibility of individuals schools but a collective endeavour that requires sustainable leadership and mobilising diverse resources and expertise, South African schools can create more inclusive learning environments and make meaningful progress towards achieving the aspirations of SDG 4 through SDG `7. The study proposes that sustainable leadership enables leadership collaboration, which facilitates school partnerships and collaborative resource mobilisation. These processes strengthen teacher development and learner support, ultimately contributing to educational equity, inclusive learning environments, and the achievement of SDG 4 through SDG 17.

AI Declaration

During the preparation of this article, the author used ChatGPT 5.5 from December 2025 to June 2026 to generate ideas in response to prompts such as transformative discipline, restorative justice, and community engagement. Grammarly was used for grammar and language checks.

Ethics Declaration

Since this is a desktop study, the Institution has granted an ethics waiver: Reference Number: CI00071120259

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