

## Creating and Sustaining Conditions for Improved Teaching and Learning: An Ethnographic Case Study of One Secondary School

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**ABSTRACT** There are substantive external demands for improved learner achievement, particularly in secondary schools in South Africa. Increasingly, school principals have to bear the pressures that accompany these demands. Given this background, a qualitative case study was undertaken to explore the instructional leadership practices in Umlazi District in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study sought to understand how the principal who had recently joined the school, managed to create conditions wherein improved learner outcomes could be achieved. It also sought to ascertain strategies the principal used to sustain the conditions for improved academic achievement of the learners. Purposive sampling was used to identify the school. A school principal, a head of department and a teacher participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data. A documents review was also conducted to triangulate data from semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest that the principal enacted instructional leadership in five dominant ways, and also that learner outcomes improved.

### INTRODUCTION

Current scholarship on the role of school principals in supporting teaching and learning puts more emphasis on them to focus on instructional activities of the teachers in the classroom (Bush 2013; Chikoko et al. 2015; Lumby 2015; Maringe and Moletsane 2015). The focus on effective teaching and learning is of utmost importance in view of the fact that more than three quarters of schools in South Africa are described as dysfunctional (Maringe and Moletsane 2015). It is against this backdrop that a small-scale qualitative study was conducted in a secondary school in Umlazi District in the south of Durban, South Africa between June and October 2012. In particular, this paper narrates lessons that were learnt from an ethnographic case study of one school where dramatic changes had been observed since the arrival of the new principal.

The principal in a school is mandated by the South African Schools Act of 1996 (Republic of South Africa 1996), particularly Section 16a and its amendments (Republic of South Africa 2007), to provide professional management and leadership for a school. This Act further stipulates that the principal of a public school has to pre-

pare a plan, implement it and report on progress on how academic performance of the school will be improved (Republic of South Africa 2007). Furthermore, *the Action Plan to 2014 – Towards the Realization of Schooling 2025* (Action Plan) (Republic of South Africa 2011: 47) states that by 2025 a principal must be a person who is able to “ensure that teaching in the school takes place as it should, according to the national curriculum, and understands his or her role as a leader whose responsibility is to promote harmony, creativity and a sound work ethic within the school community and beyond”. However, the schooling system is too large and complex for everything to be captured within one plan (Fullan 2008; West-Burnham 2009; Marishane and Botha 2011). To that end, MacBeath and Dempster (2009) argue that there is unlikely to be a golden rulebook for effective leadership.

Given a short background presented above, the study aimed to achieve the objectives presented in this section. The study sought to understand how the principal who had recently joined the school manage to create conditions wherein improved learner outcomes could be achieved. It also sought to ascertain strategies the principal used to sustain the conditions for improved academic achievement of the learners. One major assumption underpinning the study was the view that instructional leadership by the school principal is the main ingredient that can ensure effective teaching and learning in the schools.

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The assumption expressed in the above paragraph is shared by scholars such as Robinson et al. (2008), Louis et al. (2010), Bush (2013), Chikoko et al. (2015), and Lumby (2015). These scholars argue that schools improve their overall performance when they focus on their core business, that is, the provision of effective teaching and learning. This occurs more effectively where there is effective leadership, which prioritizes an effective teaching and effective learning environment (Bhengu and Mthembu 2014). However, the corpus of research from South Africa suggests that there are many barriers that undermine effective teaching and learning. In their study on barriers to principals enacting instructional leadership in schools, Bhengu et al. (2014) highlighted six factors. While this point is beyond the scope of this paper, it does indicate that many principals still face a number of difficulties in ensuring improved learner achievement.

Scholars such as Mestry and Pillay (2013) as well as Tan (2012) argue that effective leaders use instructional leadership. These scholars further contend that instructional leadership is a complex, socially constructed phenomenon used by leaders and practitioners in their specific educational contexts. Proponents of this paradigm argue for the creation of contextualized knowledge that impacts teaching and learning for the unique student population they serve (Tan 2012). As a result, principals act according to the school context as well as in response to the particular needs of the staff and the learners, as they race to keep up with change and innovation within the steadfast framework of their own personal core values (Reppa and Lazaridou 2008). Therefore, the meaning of successful instructional leadership must be seen in relation to the context in which people are located and the values underpinning the school as an institution in society (Tan 2012).

### **Key Theoretical Constructs**

A number of theoretical constructs are used to broadly examine the role of principals in ensuring that their schools are efficiently managed. These are instructional leadership, effective leadership, school improvement and school effectiveness.

#### ***Conceptualizing Instructional Leadership***

Expectations from the role of principals as instructional leaders have undergone significant changes in recent years resulting in gaps in

scholarly literature. In South Africa and the African continent at large, limited literature exists specifically about successful instructional leadership practices at schools in challenging school contexts (Bush and Oduro 2006; Heystek et al. 2008; Kamper 2008; Hoadley et al. 2009; Bush et al. 2010; Naicker et al. 2013). Consequently, the complexities and intricacies around instructional leadership practices in trying school contexts are not fully understood (Naicker et al. 2013). Furthermore, Mestry et al. (2013) posit that in South Africa, the function instructional leadership plays in the principal's organizational management of the school, the daily work lives of principals, how the principals practice instructional leadership, and towards what instructional outcomes they work remains unclear. Educational studies broadly acknowledge and support the view that principals, as instructional leaders are pivotal to the success of their schools (Hoadley 2007; Bhengu and Mkhize 2013; Bush 2013; Grobler and Conley 2013; Naicker et al. 2013). Scholars cited above provide strong evidence that instructional leadership makes a significant difference to learning. The question, which arises, is about how they enact this role, given the dynamics and complexities of the South African schooling system.

Regardless of the variety of models and subsequent debate in the area of instructional leadership, at least two common features emerge. The first relates to positive impact of instructional leadership on school improvement and the second is that it is a multifaceted construct. For example, Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) model, Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) presents instructional leadership as comprising multidimensional features. Their model has three fundamental dimensions, namely, defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate (Hallinger and Murphy 1985; Hallinger 2005). Using a similar set of leadership practices to PIMRS, Robinson et al. (2011) categorize two broad dimensions of instructional leadership, that is, direct instructional leadership (for example, setting and ensuring goals, leading teacher, teaching and instruction) and indirect instructional leadership (for example, organizing instructional programs and protecting instructional time). The multifaceted construct of instructional leadership is used to frame this study. This approach encourages

active participation and collaboration among educators in the school improvement process, facilitated by the principal. Mitchell and Castle (2005) support the view that the educational role of the principal is more appropriately configured as a facilitator of the teaching and learning process. In this regard, Glickman (1989) asserts that the principal is not the sole instructional leader but the leader of instructional leaders.

The researchers' contention is that school principals need to effectively and positively influence the teachers' teaching and learning practices in order to achieve improved learner outcomes.

### *Effective Leadership*

Effective leaders are known to be effective in ensuring that organizational goals are achieved. To maintain high levels of learner achievements, principals need to be effective leaders and should function as instructional leaders (Leithwood et al. 2004; Robinson et al. 2008; Sofu et al. 2012). Scholars such as Reppa and Lazaridou (2008), and Bhengu and Mthembu (2014) argue that in order to move dysfunctional schools to being effective, leadership within the school has to be effective. The views expressed above are based on the assumption that the life and direction that the school takes is driven by the school principal (Clarke 2007; Prew 2007; Ngcobo and Tikly 2010; du Plessis 2013).

## METHODOLOGY

The study reported here utilized a single case study methodology with some elements of ethnography. The study was located within an interpretive paradigm. Burton et al. (2008), as well as, Cohen et al. (2011) regard an interpretive paradigm as a worldview that involves deeper understanding of human behavior and human experiences. Ethnographic inquiry is qualitative and naturalistic (Cohen et al. 2011; Bertram and Christiansen 2014), and is conducted in ways that do not disturb the natural setting of the participants. Purposive selection was utilized in identifying the school. In purposive selection, researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgment regarding their possession of the particular characteristics being sought (Cohen et al. 2011). The selection of the study site was based on the

school's reputation of attaining and sustaining high learner academic achievement after a long history of underachievement and dysfunctionality.

On the first day in the school, the researchers introduced the study to the school principal. On the second day, researchers were given the opportunity to talk to the teaching staff regarding the nature and purpose of the study. Interviews were conducted over two days depending on the availability of each participant. These participants were the principal, one Head of Department and one teacher (referred to as Mr. Ngcobo, Miss Msani and Mr. Khwela, respectively). Each interview lasted for about one hour. The notion of not disturbing teaching during the visits was strictly observed. Once the interviews were completed, document reviews were conducted. These included the minute books kept by the School Management Team and the schedules of results for the past years. This was done in order to obtain a clearer picture about the learner performance over the years. In addition, informal observations were also made throughout the four months period of the study. The researchers were also given freedom to visit the school any time without making an appointment. This was meant to enable the researchers to observe the school life. They came early in the morning and left late in the afternoon, after teaching time had ended. The researchers also used that time to share their interview transcripts with each participant as a means of ensuring correctness. Given the limitations of self-report data for understanding the people's actual practices (Cohen et al. 2011), several steps were taken to enhance trustworthiness of the findings. These strategies included probing high-inference comments intensively for detailed examples of practice during interviews, using direct quotes to support claims, juxtaposing data from interviews, document review and observations.

### **Profiling the Case Study**

The school was built in 1977 in the rural area of Umbumbulu and is regarded by many as one of the oldest schools in Umlazi District. Through the South African government's Reconstruction and Development Project, infrastructural development transformed the area into a mix of houses, comprising urban design houses, low-income subsidy houses, as well as normal rural houses,

which are dominated by rondavels. The majority of the learners come from the local community while others come from other areas, and they use buses and minibus taxis as means of transport.

At the time of this study, the school had 1,444 learners and 44 teachers. There were five HODs and two deputy principals. The principal is a male with 11 years of experience as a principal but has been in this school for 7 years. The school was characterized by dramatic turnaround since the arrival of the principal who had been a deputy principal in another school within the same district. Before he came, the school was virtually dysfunctional, and it is reported that the school had no starting time and finishing time, the staff did whatever they wanted to do, the pass rate in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) ranged between zero percent and thirty percent, the school buildings had signs of disrepair, and the enrolment stood at around 400 learners. All that changed with the arrival of the then new principal (Mr. Ngcobo - *pseudonym*).

Mr. Ngcobo worked very hard to create a culture of teaching and learning in this school. He decided to start by addressing infrastructural problems. He secured sponsorship from the private sector with which he renovated the school buildings, including the administration block and built new classrooms and toilets. The improved physical environment became the impetus for overall change in the school. Overall learner performance in the NSC examination dramatically improved to eighty percent and has exceeded that for the past 5 years. Improvement was observed in all other grades. For instance, for the past 3 years, the pass rate has been around seventy-five percent. Learner enrolment and staff establishment has escalated to the current levels of 1444 and 44 educators, respectively.

The school had a well-defined and visible vision and mission statement that is displayed in the foyer, offices and in the classrooms. The vision statement highlighted open access to the school, addressing the needs of all learners, giving equal opportunity to all learners and being accountable to all stakeholders. The school's stated aims were to provide the best possible education for all learners, according to their needs and abilities, regardless of their race, religion, language or gender. The mission statement expressed the need to develop skills, attitudes, and values of the learners that are conducive to their personal, academic and social development.

In addition, the aims were to develop in their learners, a sense of self-discipline, respect for others, critical thinking and resourcefulness.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main question posed to each participant was about what it is that had contributed to the learners' academic improvement over the first three years. The responses from all three participants painted a positive picture about the principal's leadership practices. They suggested that the principal had created conditions that were conducive to effective teaching. Five themes emerged from qualitative content analysis and these indicate that the principal adopted a five-focus approach to lead teaching. The five themes are, (a) Sharing vision among members of the school, (b) Restoring the culture of teaching and learning, (c) Developing, supporting and nurturing professionalism, (d) Serving as an instructional resource and encouraging effective use of resources, and (e) Monitoring and discussing assessment issues with staff and parents. The five themes form an integral part of instructional leadership practice and are discussed in detail below.

### (a) Sharing Vision Among Members of the School

Since the arrival of Mr. Ngcobo, the principal, to the school in 2006, a new school vision was crafted, and it was based on three main pillars. The first related to organizing the physical environment of the school such as renovations, which entailed constructing face-brick buildings, additional classrooms and ablution facilities. Therefore, the appealing physical environment seems to have created pride among the school community and built an environment that is conducive for teaching and learning. The second entailed enhancing access opportunities to relevant education by the learners. This was done by providing a variety of subjects that give a wide choice for the learners. Thirdly, the principal ensured that the construction of the new vision for the school was done collaboratively. With regards to second pillar, Mr. Ngcobo had this to say:

*Most parents send their children to our school because they cannot afford to take them to big ex-Model C schools. So we needed to give our best to all learners sent to us. We also had to enrich the curriculum so that learners*

*could have a wide choice of subjects to choose from so that they can have a chance in a global world. All learners, irrespective of their home background must have a fair chance to compete in a global market through the education we provide.*

The issues raised in the above extract can be corroborated by the one found in the files that were kept by the HODs which showed amongst other things, all the subjects that are offered in the school. For instance, technical subjects such as Technical Drawing were available in this school. These subjects are usually associated with well-off schools, usually known as ex-Model C schools in South Africa.

Mr. Ngcobo emphasized the need to involve all key stakeholders in the vision creation in order to ensure ownership of the vision. He expressed strong belief that the formulation of a vision was of paramount importance for the school's success. Similarly, communicating it to all stakeholders was regarded as crucial. This is what he said:

*You need to have a vision and sell it to the school community. This enables me to move easily unlike when you are trying to do it alone. You need the muscles of all stakeholders to get going so that the load doesn't rest on your shoulders alone (Mr. Ngcobo).*

The view that the principal created a platform for the involvement of all key stakeholders in the vision creation was emphasized by a teacher, Mr. Khwela (*pseudonym*). He said:

*The principal created an environment in which all stakeholders share a clear purpose and are able to engage collaboratively in activities, which promote the goals of the school. At the beginning there were frequent meetings with stakeholders in which the principal would frequently ask, "Where are we? Where do we want to be? How are we going to achieve that?" The vision you see displayed all over the school came as a result of stakeholder engagement.*

In fact, the vision statement that the teacher was referring to was clearly displayed in the foyer. When the researchers came for the first time to the school, they saw it and read it. The HOD, Miss Msani (*pseudonym*) also acknowledged the fact that the principal made sure that the vision was reinforced and repeated again and again. The review of the minutes of the meetings revealed that the words 'our vision', 'working together', 'all stakeholders', amongst others appeared often in the minutes of the meetings.

It is evident that Mr. Ngcobo shared the vision within the school community, and this was based on the belief that if the vision was shared, it became easier to implement it. This view is shared by Ubben and Hugh (1997) who argue that every good planning starts from the vision and goals. These scholars further propose that the vision of effective teaching is essential to the improvement of teaching and learning. Hallinger and Murphy (1985), Gruenert (2005), Zimmerman (2006) and Whitehead et al. (2013) also affirm that setting the vision and sharing it with all stakeholders so that it is understood and supported is crucial for an instructional leader. In support of this view, Msila (2013) argues that a vision held solely by one person, no matter how powerful it is, becomes invisible to others, whereas collaborative work towards its realization has a positive impact on the school's academic achievement.

### **(b) Restoring the Culture of Teaching and Learning**

The results suggest that the principal had an inexorable commitment to restore the culture of teaching and learning in his school. This is congruent with contemporary conceptualization of instructional leadership (Bush 2013; Mestry and Pillay 2013). In line with this conceptualization, instructional leaders focus their efforts on improving the culture of teaching and learning. When the principal arrived, the school was characterized by a weak culture of teaching and learning, minimal teamwork, and with a lack of work ethic. The principal positioned the restoration and improvement of the culture of teaching and learning in the school at the apex of priorities.

Building collaborative partnerships is a priority of effective principals (Whitehead et al. 2013; Hargreaves and Harris 2015). Involving the teachers as he built the relationships and culture in the school, the principal helped them and the learners develop positive self-concept and self-confidence. The norms, values and beliefs of the stakeholders add up to what is called culture (Blum 2005). These writers further contend that the culture of an organization is essential to its success. Mr. Ngcobo said:

*I believe that leadership is a social process that occurs in and through human interactions. As such, it involves multiple actors who take up leadership roles both formally and infor-*

mally to introduce new initiatives. It was therefore critical for me to build a culture that made everyone feel at home and interact freely with one another in pursuit of achieving our school goal. I could not have done this alone. I had to build relationships with people from all levels and allow them to come with initiatives that aimed at enhancing the school. The sponsorship that renovated and built these new classes was as a result of these relationships and initiatives.

The views expressed above were corroborated by Miss Msani, an HOD when she said:

*The principal welcomes initiatives from across professional boundaries. He believes that success is the outcome of a dynamic network of influence and collective activity of people working in harmony and having a sense of belonging.*

One of the researchers noted as he entered the school premises that the school culture has changed dramatically from what it used to be. He noted welcoming school buildings and school grounds with vegetable gardens, learners wearing the school uniform with pride, and an increased number of visitors to the school. This is in line with the findings of Maringe et al. (2015). That study highlighted the notion that a welcoming school environment can act as a rallying point and source of pride for the entire school, and thus can lead to improved culture of teaching and learning.

### **(c) Developing, Supporting and Nurturing Professionalism**

Mr. Ngcobo's strong background in curriculum and instruction enabled him to improve classroom practice by supporting and nurturing professionalism. For instance, when Mr. Ngcobo arrived, the school had half of its staff under qualified or unqualified and professionalism was lacking. Mr. Ngcobo vowed to root out unprofessional behaviors, which was characterized by absenteeism, late coming, dodging classes, unpreparedness, and unethical behaviors by educators. This would be replaced by developing and nurturing professionalism among the teachers. Mr. Ngcobo described his leadership style as consultative and collaborative, building a common focus and improving decision-making based on data and sharing best practices. Corroborating this statement, Miss Msani said:

*The consultative and collaborative style of the principal ensures that everyone owns the very important core of the existence of the school, teaching and learning. He clearly articulated values, beliefs and vision, focused on providing teachers with individualized support and developing their personal and professional capacity.*

As part of enhancing communication and teamwork among the teaching staff, Mr. Ngcobo set aside time to share ideas and information from workshops which are, from time to time, organized by the provincial education department. He believed that designated staff meetings are more productive when focused on instructional rather than administrative issues. Furthermore, he believed that such sessions gave the teachers an opportunity to develop one another and gain self-confidence. He also encouraged teachers to be abreast with the curriculum developments and acknowledged the need to keep renewing their knowledge for the betterment of their facilitation of teaching and learning. This is what he had to say:

*Teachers are the most valuable asset in the school. We have to provide all the necessary support for their professional development. I wore many hats. I fluidly move from one role to the other. Teachers rely on me to be the source of information related to effective instructional practices and current trends in education. I support people to become self-reliant (Mr. Ngcobo).*

The principal actively supported the use of skills acquired during in-service training in the classroom. He personally involved himself in classroom activities by modeling effective teaching and discussed school issues with teachers and learners. Lesson planning was monitored to ensure curriculum coverage. Steyn (2000) acknowledges the need for teachers to keep renewing their knowledge for the betterment of their facilitation of teaching and learning. Professional development is a powerful tool in developing individuals and organizations and in bringing about educational improvement (Moore et al. 2011). It also allows instructional leaders to provide educators with opportunities to become intellectually engaged with their subject matter, thus ensuring deeper understanding of key concepts and having a chance to try new approaches in environments that support diversity (Sullivan and Glanz 2005).

The focus is on improving the professional practices, beliefs, and the understanding of educators so that there is improved teaching and learning. Mr. Ngcobo's strong inclination towards instructional issues was expressed also by the association he created between the teachers' competencies and training and quality of instruction. The principal's effort to improve the teachers' abilities to perform their duties efficiently was recognized through supporting and providing teachers with professional development through acquiring more knowledge from within the school and elsewhere. Mr. Ngcobo said:

*I seek assistance from the DoE and other schools that have experts in that particular field. I continuously invite experts to come into our school and share their expertise with the teachers.*

The above views were corroborated by Miss Msani who provided a number of examples in which Mr. Ngcobo encouraged his teaching staff to share experiences, views and expertise. This is what she said:

*The principal communicates consistently with CES, DCES and subject advisors, requesting them to visit the school to support and develop our educators. He makes sure that educators attend workshops, and go and teach in other schools and educators from other schools do come to our school to help develop our educators. He also encourages educators to further their studies to keep abreast with the curriculum developments. He encourages educators to remain students all the time since curriculum is changing all the time. This makes educators feel comfortable and enjoy going to the classes (Miss Msani).*

The review of the school log book and staff minutes also show records of a number of professional development activities initiated internally and or externally. There are records of different subject advisors coming to the school to offer development and support on different aspects of the curriculum, and records of internal and external developmental and support workshops attended by educators. There is also a record in the minute book where the principal was saying "...the school may be underperforming for now but I see talented educators whose potential needs to be untapped by giving you an opportunity to develop. I want the best out of you". The researchers also set and observed one developmental workshop, which was orga-

nized internally. Educators were eager to learn and to assist each other with uploading assessment tasks and marks onto the newer computer program that was bought by the principal.

Salo et al. (2014) argue that the principals' participation in teacher learning and development, as co-learners, has the highest impact on student outcomes. According to Supovitz and Poglinco (2001:16), instructional leaders take every opportunity to support teachers in their work and enhance the teachers' skills to improve student learning. Leaders in organizations that perform beyond expectations establish creative learning teams that "turn one's greatest weaknesses into significant triumph" (Hargreaves and Harris 2015: 36). Accordingly, educators are likely to commit themselves to contribute positively and meaningfully to improve and enhance opportunities for quality and effective learning if they are professionally developed.

#### **(d) Serving as an Instructional Resource and Encouraging Effective Use of Resources**

Mr. Ngcobo acknowledged that people with whom he worked had different strengths and capacities and that these had to be harnessed. He expressed the belief that he had to create conditions wherein the resources could be utilized effectively towards enhancing teaching and learning. Mr. Ngcobo regarded communication, coordination, and correct staffing as crucial elements for turning the school around. Myende (2013:81) argues that effective communication serves as a catalyst for ensuring a strong connection between different resources, hence the need for clear lines of communication that enable all involved to be abreast with all school activities aimed at improving learner achievement. The principal was able to bring different communities to tap into their asserts by delegating responsibilities, connecting different facets of the school community, establishing and sustaining ongoing, meaningful and effective school-community connections. Such a practice is congruent with Myende's (2015) approach.

Consistent with the literature on instructional leadership, Mr. Ngcobo perceives instructional time as holy and sacred and does everything he could to safeguard classroom teaching from potential outside interruptions. Mr. Ngcobo emphasized that if schools were to succeed in their mission, they required that the teachers

and the learners focused most of their time and energies on effective teaching and learning. He is vehemently opposed to any interruptions in teaching. He brings with him the experience from the private sector where time-on-task is the name of the game. This is what he had to say:

*Fortunately, I have been in the private sector so instructional time is instructional time. We even go beyond the normal teaching time and have extra classes in the morning and afternoons. This is benefiting learners especially those who would not get the privilege of doing their work at home because of a variety of socioeconomic challenges. Interruptions of instructional time by means of public address announcements during lessons, calling learners to the staffroom or office during teaching time are all prohibited.*

The above view was also shared by Miss Msani and Mr. Khwela who maintained that the principal valued and protected instructional time and other resources. Miss Msani said:

*Mr. Ngcobo remains composed even in vexing times so that he could protect instructional time. People who visit the school sometimes do not understand that the school is about teaching and learning and would not understand why the principal remains tight-fisted when it comes to teaching time.*

Similar sentiments were shared by Mr. Khwela who said:

*There is this relief timetable where we are asked to stand for teachers who are absent due to various reasons. Though I really hate it as it takes my free periods, it works for the school. Most classes are kept occupied and minimum time is wasted.*

The researchers also observed that there were no classes that were left unattended by educators. In some cases teachers would say they were standing in for their colleagues who were either absent or attending workshops. They would monitor learners doing activities left by their respective subject teachers. The instructional time is defined by Leithwood et al. (2004) as the amount of time that teachers spend teaching and providing learning experiences for their students. Similar views are expressed by Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) who maintain that there is a strong connection between instructional time and learner outcomes. Mr. Ngcobo also made sure that learning and teaching support materials (LTSMs) were always available

and that they were effectively used. Contributing to the instructional leadership debate, Krüger (2003) acknowledges that the primary role of the principal in the school is to make sure that all the school's resources are used to make sure that the educative teaching duties are carried out to the desired level. Sindhvad (2009) affirms this view about the use of instructional materials in enhancing learner achievement.

### **(e) Monitoring and Discussing Assessment Issues with Staff and Parents**

Mr. Ngcobo monitored and discussed assessment issues with staff and parents and used assessment analysis to evaluate teaching and learning processes. They also held frequent meetings in which they discuss learner progress. For instance, at one time when researchers were visiting the school, they observed a meeting, which was called to discuss learner results with parents. The principal projected on the screen analysis of June examinations for the whole school, making a cross-reference to two previous years. The HODs were also projecting their departmental analysis, detailing possible causes of decline in some subjects and what may have contributed to improvement in other areas. For example, Mr. Khwela said that since the principal introduced what he called 'adopt a child' project, where teachers play parental roles and check their adopted children's work, the results seemed to have dramatically improved. This is what he said:

*The project of adopting learners improves the learner-teacher relationship as learners develop faith in their teachers and there is a flow of information. The focus is however in NSC students where various teachers adopt learners. We rely on class teachers for the other grades.*

Mr. Ngcobo also insisted on discussing the performance of the learners with their registered parents. They called a parents' meetings quarterly where they requested that only parents registered on their databases should attend. For this reason, they insisted that learners had to bring in registered parents and not just grab anyone to come and represent them. Mr. Ngcobo had this to say about this issue:

*From 2009, I said that reports are no more to be given to the learners. Reports are now given to the rightful parent reflected in our*

database. Parents have got a chance to talk to the educators and educators have an opportunity to discuss with parents how learners are progressing and how to improve (Mr. Ngcobo).

The minutes of meetings revealed among other things, that the principal would thank the teachers and the parents who support and nurture young talents, but would also throw tantrums at those parents who do not attend and to those who do not support their children. The phrase that he commonly used in these meetings goes thus, 'you play your role as a parent regardless of your socioeconomic status and we will play our role as educators'.

This finding is in line with the literature on instructional leadership that monitoring and evaluating learner progress, and discussing results with educators and parents help improve performance of learners (Cotton 2003; Marzano et al. 2005; Robinson et al. 2008). According to Taylor and Prinsloo (2005), the quality assurance of tests and the monitoring of results have shown to be significant in terms of management variables in relation to improved student outcomes. These results are used to provide support to both the teachers and the learners to improve, as well as, to help the parents understand where and why improvement is needed (Krüger 2003) as flexible scheduling that allows parental involvement brings about collective responsibility, shared values and vision necessary for the success of schools (Maringe et al. 2015).

### CONCLUSION

The researchers acknowledge that turning the schools around is complex and a multifaceted process, which cannot be explained by a single case study. This paper aimed at understanding how a principal through instructional leadership practices, managed to turn the school around and sustain the learner achievement levels above the provincial benchmark. The study concludes that the principal has clearly articulated shared values, beliefs and vision and focused on providing teachers with individualized personal and professional support. What has been noticed also is that Mr. Ngcobo has not succeeded in moving beyond eighty percent in terms of learner achievement. Therefore, it can be argued that he has not sufficiently improved to reach one hundred percent pass rates in the NSC as some schools have. Nevertheless, it is

quite an achievement considering the fact that more than three quarters of schools in South Africa are described as dysfunctional.

Evidently, these findings are not novel as various scholars, particularly from the developed world have highlighted similar views. What has emerged strongly in this study is that despite the limitations of deprived contexts, effective leadership can still achieve remarkable results in terms of providing an environment for effective teaching and learning.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the aforementioned practices, which emerged from a single case, and also acknowledging that there are many other similar studies, this study recommends that more research needs to be conducted on successful instructional leadership practices in trying contexts. Given that the majority of schools in South Africa are located in rural disadvantaged environments, and are sometimes not functional, more research is needed to shed more light on specific elements that contribute to effective teaching and learning in schools found in similar conditions.

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