

Paddling not to sink: School management teams' instructional leadership challenges and strategic responses in the decline of students' performance in National Senior Certificate Examinations in South African secondary schools

Remando para no hundirse: Retos de liderazgo pedagógico y respuestas estratégicas de los equipos directivos escolares ante el descenso del rendimiento del alumnado en los exámenes del Certificado Nacional de Educación Secundaria en centros sudafricanos

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the school management teams' (SMTs') instructional leadership challenges and strategic responses to the decline in students' performance on National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations in three South African secondary schools. Anchored in an

interpretive paradigm, the research employed a qualitative multiple-case study design and conducted semi-structured interviews with purposively selected three principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads. In the selected schools, the thematic analysis demonstrated that principals' segregation among stakeholders and SMT members' lack of motivation to engage in academic activities cause a decline in students' academic performance. Despite these challenges, the findings further revealed that SMTs continue to implement strategies such as inviting motivational speakers and providing learner rewards to curb and address students' declining achievement. This study concludes that the SMTs' role in sustaining students' academic performance requires greater dedication, consistent improvement in classroom instruction, genuine collaboration among stakeholders, and the intentional cultivation of learners' intrinsic motivation, for which principals in the SMTs are the focal point. Although this inquiry is grounded in the South African context, it offers lessons for international discussions on how school management can negatively influence student performance and how it can respond to it.

Keywords. School management teams, instructional leadership, secondary schools, Grade 12, national senior certificate.

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza los retos de liderazgo pedagógico a los que se enfrentan los equipos directivos escolares y las respuestas estratégicas que adoptan ante el descenso del rendimiento del alumnado en los exámenes del Certificado Nacional de Educación Secundaria (National Senior Certificate, NSC) en tres centros de educación secundaria de Sudáfrica. Enmarcada en un paradigma interpretativo, la investigación empleó un diseño cualitativo de estudio de casos múltiples y realizó entrevistas semiestructuradas a tres directores, subdirectores y jefes de departamento seleccionados mediante un muestreo intencional. El análisis temático llevado a cabo en los centros seleccionados mostró que la fragmentación entre los distintos grupos de interés promovida por los directores, así como la falta de motivación de los miembros de los equipos directivos para participar en actividades académicas, contribuyen al descenso del rendimiento académico del alumnado. A pesar de estos desafíos, los resultados también revelaron que los equipos directivos continúan aplicando estrategias como la participación de conferenciantes motivacionales y la concesión de recompensas al alumnado para prevenir y abordar el deterioro de sus resultados académicos. El estudio concluye que el papel de los equipos directivos en el mantenimiento del rendimiento académico del alumnado requiere una mayor implicación, una mejora continua de la enseñanza en el aula, una colaboración efectiva entre los diferentes grupos de interés y el fomento deliberado de la motivación intrínseca del alumnado, proceso en el que los directores, como miembros de dichos equipos, desempeñan un papel central. Aunque esta investigación se circunscribe al contexto sudafricano, aporta enseñanzas relevantes al debate internacional sobre cómo la gestión escolar puede influir negativamente en el rendimiento del alumnado y sobre las estrategias que pueden adoptarse para responder a esta situación.

Palabras clave. Equipos directivos escolares, liderazgo pedagógico, centros de educación secundaria, Segundo de bachillerato, certificado nacional de educación secundaria.

INTRODUCTION

In many countries, education plays a critical role in children's lives (Cecelia, Kagema, & Gachahi, 2019). This is because, through it, children get to realise personal goals they have envisioned since growing up. In South Africa, children receive basic education for twelve years before they can advance to higher education. These 12 years include 7 years of primary schooling

(Grades 1-7) and 5 years of secondary schooling (Grades 8-12). The Grade most vital to students' lives in South Africa is Grade 12, the final year of secondary school education. We note that in South Africa, the word "learners" is mostly used to refer to children in primary and secondary education, whereas in other contexts it is "students". Therefore, we use these terms interchangeably. In that regard, Grade 12 is significant because, at the end of the academic year, students write the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations, for which they must pass to access higher education. Apart from Grade 12 holding significant importance for students, it is also crucial to school management teams (SMTs), comprising the principal, deputy principal, and departmental heads (Letuma, Awodiji, & Naicker, 2023). This is because SMTs must ensure that the overall student pass rate in the NSC examinations exceeds a specific threshold set by their provincial education departments. For example, in the KwaZulu-Natal province, secondary schools in the NSC examinations must achieve an overall passing percentage of 40% or above to be deemed performing (Mkhize, 2023), while in the Gauteng province, in which the schools that participated in this inquiry are located, it is 65% (Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), 2025). This suggests that if secondary schools in the NSC examinations perform below the percentage set by their provincial education department, they have underperformed.

Harris and Jones (2022) claim that numerous factors influence schools' academic underperformance. We concur with this assertion, as existing studies (e.g., Bayat, Louw, & Rena, 2014; Idris, 2025; Ramalepe, 2023; Sam et al., 2025; Subramoney, 2022) conducted locally and globally in underperforming schools show this. However, there is limited literature that provides empirical and theoretical insights into schools that transition from high-performing to experiencing consecutive declines in academic performance, leading to underperformance. For example, the secondary schools chosen for this study are in the Gauteng province. These schools in Grade 12 NSC examinations have been high performing, as stipulated by the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) NSC school performance reports. However, among these schools, two began experiencing declines from 2022, while one started declining in 2020 and thereafter underperformed in the NSC results.

On that note, DBE (2024) maintains that SMTs in secondary schools should ensure that their schools do not experience consecutive underperformance in their NSC examinations. If they do, they should employ different instructional leadership strategies to improve students' achievements and sustain them (Dille, 2017). Therefore, this study, conducted across three selected secondary schools, explored SMTs' instructional leadership challenges and strategies for responding to declining student performance in NSC examinations. Pan, Nyeu, and Chen (2015) argue that, globally, instructional leadership in schools is one of the leadership types that significantly contributes to learners' educational outcomes. Hence, the lessons the researchers share from this inquiry not only contribute to South African but also to international discussions on how school management faces different factors that negatively influence students' academic performance and how it can respond to this. On that note, the research objectives that guided this study are:

1. To explore the instructional leadership challenges that SMTs are facing in declining students' performance in the NSC examinations.
2. To examine the instructional leadership strategies that SMTs are employing in responding to declining students' performance in the NSC examinations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Examining the dynamics that impact SMTs' instructional leadership on students' academic achievements

Instructional leadership exercised by SMTs is widely recognised as a critical determinant of learners' academic achievement. Its influence is multifaceted, shaped by organisational dynamics, school climate, and SMTs' ability to mobilise teachers and learners toward instructional goals. For

instance, SMTs instructional leadership may be impacted by staff motivation, as it directly affects engagement in teaching and learning (Heystek & Emekako, 2020). Don and Raman (2019) reveal that motivation among individuals working together is vital, as it enables them to perform their organisational tasks effectively. As Grenier, Gagne, and O'Neill (2023) posit, inspiration amongst organisational members is a collective energy source each member contributes, which drives the organisation's activities and direction. This suggests that low internal drive among school stakeholders in performing their duties can lead to school underperformance. For instance, Heystek and Emekako (2020) concluded in their empirical work that school stakeholders' reduced morale in the enactment of their pedagogical duties played a significant role in low learners' academic achievement. Schlebusch (2020) posited that when school stakeholders lack the internal drive towards their work, they develop negative attitudes toward it, negatively affecting how they perform their academic duties, leading to adverse school performance. Therefore, motivation to work for school academic performance is one factor that cannot be overlooked among school personnel. Motivation not only promotes collaboration among school stakeholders but also fosters a unified focus on teaching and learning.

Another dynamic that influences the SMTs' instructional leadership is staff cohesion. According to the Department of Education (DoE) (2008), effective schooling depends on unified, cooperative relationships among school stakeholders. Studies demonstrate that staff division, marked by conflict, mistrust, or poor communication, undermines instructional coherence and creates hostile school climates that impede learning (Ertürk, 2022; Sibuyi et al., 2024). Hence, first, this suggests that SMTs must be united to provide instructional leadership and direction. Two, when SMTs function in this manner, they also need to promote unity among teachers so that they can be motivated to work toward the school's overall objective: producing academically inclined students. Therefore, SMTs are to lead educators in ensuring that they are not divided in the school, as this has a detrimental effect on students' academic attainment (Gxhweni & Plaatjies, 2023).

Beyond staff unity, another factor that can enable SMTs to produce learners that are academically performing are strategic interventions designed to enhance students' academic engagement. One commonly used strategy is reward based motivation (Ali et al., 2025). Such evidence is provided by Shava and Heystek (2018), who concluded that empowering students through rewards enhances their academic achievement. Therefore, as motivation appears to play a critical role in students, it seems that SMTs must ensure that it is consistently awakened among learners. The reason is that when students are inspired, they work hard to achieve positive results in their studies. In this regard, rewards serve as a practical strategy that school leaders can employ to stimulate learner motivation, reinforce positive academic behaviours, and ultimately improve overall school performance (Mafora, 2013).

Apart from school leaders using rewards to ignite academic motivation in learners, school leaders can utilise motivational speakers, as recommended by Khan, Iftikhar, and Ali (2021). Motivation are words one receives that are directed at and intended to uplift a person's internal drive to excel in performing specific practices. When SMTs in their school utilise motivational talkers to inspire learners in their education, it elevates academic confidence, enhances academic performance, and further alleviates psychological problems that hinder learning (Jadhav, 2025). An inquiry by Nzimande (2019) is a testament to this, as this scholar conducted a study in schools that had improved academically from underperformance. This study shows that, for SMTs to achieve academically inclined learners, having motivators to change students' attitudes towards their studies was critical. This underscores the pivotal role of sustained motivational interventions by SMTs in cultivating resilient learners who are both academically driven and psychologically equipped to overcome barriers to success.

We conclude this section by noting that the dynamics that influence the SMTs' instructional leadership role in relation to students' academic performance and underperformance connect to all parts of the school, both academic and functional. SMTs' instructional leadership role in learners'

achievement is influenced by the school climate, organisational structures, and SMT members' capacities to engage educators and students in pursuit of instructional goals. On that note, while existing scholarly work focuses on consistently underperforming schools, little is known about high-performing schools that shift from inclined academic performance to underperformance. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by providing empirical and theoretical understandings of the driving factors behind declines in academic performance in high-performing secondary schools and the strategies SMTs can utilise to mitigate them.

Theoretical framework

This study adopted Hallinger's (2018) instructional leadership model and distributed leadership theory as a theoretical framework. Hallinger's (2018) model consists of three dimensions, of which principals must exercise instructional leadership in the school. These dimensions include defining the school's mission, managing the instructional programme, and creating a positive learning climate. Though this model consists of these dimensions, only the third was adapted. Though Hallinger's (2018) model focuses on principals' performance of instructional leadership in these dimensions, the adapted dimension in this study was considered to be carried out by all SMT members. This is based on a submission by Mosoge and Mataboge (2021) that principals cannot perform instructional leadership tasks alone; they must do so with SMT members. The dimension 'creating a positive learning climate' encompasses the SMTs' actions that influence students' learning attitudes (Salleh & Hatta, 2019). Therefore, using this dimension enabled the researchers in this study to explore the instructional leadership practices SMTs are implementing to positively influence their Grade 12 students' performance in the NSC examination in response to the decline.

Given that SMTs in schools not only work together to enable instructional leadership to function but also with others (Vogel, 2018), distributed leadership theory was also utilised in this study's theoretical framework. Even though many debates have contributed to the development of distributed leadership theory, the notable contributors to its construction are Harris (2008) and Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004). Distributed leadership focuses on teamwork, collective responsibility, joint, and collaborative performance of tasks to attain organisational goals (Harris, 2008; Spillane et al., 2004). This suggests that distributed leadership is not about the sole enactment and influence of leadership, but rather about group efforts directed toward attaining group objectives (Harris, 2008; Spillane et al. 2004). Therefore, distributed leadership serves as a strategic mechanism through which SMTs can foster collective agency, ensuring that leadership practices are embedded across the school community to drive sustainable academic improvement.

METHODOLOGY

This study was situated within the interpretive paradigm, which allows for the construction of the participants' realities through their perceptions (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). This paradigm provided a lens through which the qualitative perspectives and lived experiences of SMTs were explored regarding their instructional leadership challenges and strategies for addressing declining Grade 12 students' performance in the NSC examinations. Although this paradigm was utilised in this manner in this inquiry, we ensured that the perspectives of participants were truly provided without being presented with bias or dishonesty. Given that this study utilised a qualitative approach that focuses on social phenomenon (Lim, 2025), to ensure methodological alignment, a multiple-case study design was adopted to deepen understanding of the SMTs' qualitative realities. This design enables one to research people in a similar situation (Heale & Twycross, 2018). Thus, this design was chosen because the selected schools in this inquiry experienced declines in student performance on the NSC examinations.

Regarding sampling, purposive sampling was utilised, as it involves selecting participants based on the judgement that they have the required information to assist the study in answering its

research question(s) (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Therefore, the selected participants in this inquiry comprise three principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads. Principals were selected because they lead the SMTs in their teaching and learning actives. Given that each school has two deputy principals, we selected the one who lead the Grades 10-12, which is the Further and Education Training (FET) phase. Pertaining to departmental heads in each school, we chose the one with the most experience in the SMT. This made the total number of participants in this inquiry be nine. The table below shows the number of participants utilised in this study:

Table 1. Number of participants

SCHOOL	SMT MEMBERS		
	Principals	Deputy principals	Departmental heads
SCHOOL ONE	P1	DP1	DH1
SCHOOL TWO	P2	DP2	DH2
SCHOOL THREE	P3	DP3	DH3
TOTAL	3	3	3

Source: Own elaboration.

With the above individuals, semi-structured interviews were used, as they involve an interaction in which participants provide in-depth, subjective perspectives on their experiences (Rabionet, 2022). During these interviews, with the number of participants in this study, the researchers in this inquiry ensured they generated rich, thick data, which led them to reach data saturation, a point at which no new data emerged from the study (Mwita, 2022). Furthermore, during the interview process, each participant was informed by the researchers that they should not withhold any perceptions and could take a few minutes off during the interview, given the sensitivity of the study's topic (school performance decline). However, before the interviews commenced, participants' voluntary participation was obtained. Also, participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time, as Bassey and Owan (2019) advise. Each interview session with participants was more than an hour, as in-depth perspectives were required.

The participants' data were analysed using a deductive thematic analysis. This approach involves obtaining people's perceptions and experiences on the phenomenon the researchers are studying and framing those perspectives within a theoretical framework (Ayre & McCaffery, 2022). In conducting the analysis, ATLAS.ti 25 was used, and data were coded using code categories. After the codes in each code category were thoroughly checked, code categories were clustered to form themes. Regarding ethical considerations, before commencing this inquiry, the researchers obtained ethical clearance, dated May 2024, from the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg. Furthermore, written permission from GDE and principals was obtained to access the schools. All participants in this study, after receiving access to the schools, signed informed consent and were assured that their real names would not be disclosed in the study's data presentation.

FINDINGS

This section presents findings in response to the research objectives that guided this inquiry. The findings are presented under two headings: 'SMTs' instructional leadership challenges in declining students' performance in NSC examinations' and 'SMTs' instructional leadership strategies in responding to declining students' performance in NSC examinations. Before the findings are presented, we first present table two below, which shows the data obtained from ATLAS.ti and how the themes presented herein were generated. Also, before we present the findings, we acknowledge the constraints on participants' self-reporting in this study.

Table 2. Themes generation from ATLAS.ti

THEMES	CATEGORIES OF CODES	GROUNDING FREQUENCIES
PRINCIPALS' SEGREGATION AMONG SCHOOL STAKEHOLDERS	Principals favouring certain individuals over others - diminisher of corporation and morale in academic activities among stakeholders, not favoured	3
THE ABSENCE OF MOTIVATION IN SMT MEMBERS IN ENACTING ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES FOR SCHOOL PERFORMANCE	Lack of academic passion in SMT members for their school's academic performance	1
	The principal showing no interest in school change in the performance of their tasks	1
	SMT members are not putting effort into the enactment of their academic duties	2
	SMT members showing no interest in performing academic duties to better their school	2
UTILISING INSPIRATIONAL SPEAKERS	Collaborating with the GDE personnel to motivate learners	1
	Inviting ex-teachers to motivate learners	1
	Inviting professionals to motivate learners	6
MOTIVATING LEARNERS WITH REWARDS	Awarding learners with certificates to enhance their academic motivation	3
	Motivating learners with financial rewards for academic recognition, and fostering continuous effort	1

Source: Own elaboration.

SMTs instructional leadership challenges in declining students' performance in NSC examinations.

Principals' segregation among school stakeholders

Schools require each SMT member and teacher to perform their duties so that academic goals can be attained. These individuals must be united in the running and functioning of the school, and it is the principal's role to ensure this, given that they are leaders of their SMTs and their schools (South African Standard for Principalship (SASP), 2015). However, the findings in this study revealed that the way principals enact their instructional leadership within their SMTs and among teachers, cause division that prevents stakeholders from working together in teaching and learning activities, thereby affecting learners' academic performance. DP1, a deputy principal from school one, had the following perception to mention:

Basically, the staff in the school feel like the principal does not recognise them. They think she has her own people she prefers, and she sees good things from them and wrong things in others... and to those who know that they are not favoured, it is not sitting well, and they choose not to be part of anything now in the school, and it makes us not be one, and the school is divided.... There would also be instances where you feel that the principal herself would be choosy in the SMT. There are those whom she covers when they are wrong, or their weaknesses are acknowledged, and nothing harsh is said to them. So, what this does to the SMT is make it have no cooperation. Like, one SMT member would say, 'Let us do this,' and the others would say, 'No, we cannot, because we are busy.' You know, like, again, one SMT member would ask another SMT member

to say, 'Can you give me your class in the afternoon?' and they would say no and just refuse like that... So, there is no longer cooperation (DP1).

Similarly, a deputy principal at school two, DP2, shared the same perspective as DP1 above, highlighting the division caused by the principal. This deputy principal had the following to state:

You know, if I am to be realistic about what is happening in our school, our principal is dividing the school in such a way that within the SMT, he publicly identifies certain people and calls them managers, saying, 'Who am I going to leave the school with?' So and so, you will lead this meeting. In this meeting, we had to meet with the staff afterwards. Remember, in the SMT, we are all managers. He was like, 'Managers so and so will continue with the meeting.' That, in itself, implies that others are not managers. So, our principal is very divisive, and he only believes in certain people, thinking that they can do this, while others cannot. So, the ones he favours would be the ones he pushes forward... You see, the meetings that I would call, he would not attend, but when the other deputy principal calls them, he attends them all (DP2).

DH3, a departmental head at school three, also expressed a similar view to the above deputy principals; DH3 expressed herself as follows:

The principal has favourites; he is taking sides. If a person he favours has done something wrong, he is not going to hold them accountable and that is why me and him are always fighting because it makes the SMT to be divided; It is like the principal is an activist of divide and conquer; it is these people in his corner, and us on this side... he even does this on other teachers and demoralise them because they always feel they are not favoured; like, whatever they say, it is not taken into account. So, that is what is happening, and I do not want to lie (saying it in an angry and high-pitched voice) (DH3).

Principals in schools are senior school leaders (Blose & Mnikathi, 2025). Their role is dual: they are leaders of the SMTs and, at the same time, teachers. They must work with all these individuals to ensure their schools achieve their goals. However, in the selected schools in this inquiry, that is not the case. Principals, through their instructional leadership, are dividing their SMTs and teachers through practices such as favouring certain stakeholders over others and failing to foster collective interaction. These practices are preventing SMT members and teachers from cooperating on academic activities and goals. The findings reported herein concur with what Sibuyi et al. (2024) note: division among staff members is a challenge that prevents SMTs from providing learners with education that yields education outcomes. The findings that are presented in this section also show misalignment with distributed leadership. This approach requires collective interaction among organisational members to achieve goals (Spillane et al., 2004), and the principals in this study, through their actions, are breaking this collective interaction among SMT members and educators, thereby hindering their schools' attainment of academic objectives, particularly those related to Grade 12. The findings in this section demonstrate that it is vital that SMTs have principals who enact their instructional leadership in ways that motivate people to work together. The findings reported herein further reveal that actions by a principal that segregate staff have a strong detrimental effect on how staff perform their academic duties and on their dedication to these responsibilities, thereby hindering the achievement of academic goals. This suggests that effective instructional leadership is grounded in collective actions and inclusivity, as these are critical for maintaining staff dedication and collective progress. Without such leadership practices by principals, they risk undermining their school's capacity for SMTs and educators to obtain sustained academic outcomes, particularly in critical grades such as Grade 12, as this study shows.

The absence of motivation in SMT members in enacting academic activities for school performance

Motivation in anything one does plays a significant role, as it pushes them to remain consistent in their efforts to achieve their desired outcome (Ganta, 2014). The findings in the selected schools indicated that SMT members lack motivation to engage in academic activities for their schools' academic performance. For example, at school two, DP2, the deputy principal, viewed her principal as not motivated in the way he is doing his job, which affects other SMT members' motivation. DP2 stated the following:

I do not see him (Referring to the principal) being motivated; I do not see him doing his duties as he is expected to ensure that, you know, there is change. So, it kills the morale of the SMT (DP2).

Unlike DP2, DP3, the deputy principal at school three, viewed all SMT members at her school as lacking motivation in their academic duties related to school performance. Following is how she expressed herself:

We (Referring to the SMT as the whole) are tired, who would motivate whom? We are exhausted; I do not want to lie. If I had a business or some kind of income, I would have left this school a long time ago. So, ah (sighing), we are not motivated by anything, really. Our motivation to see this school doing better is decreasing every day... Do not get me wrong, we love kids, and we want to see them have a bright future by having their certificate (Referring to Grade 12 certificate), but the passion is fading, slowly, slowly, slowly; It is no longer there (DP3).

In school three, as DP3 stated, all SMT members lack motivation to perform their academic duties; P1, a principal at school one, view some of her SMT members as lacking motivation and uninterested in their school's academic activities. P1 shared the following perspective:

No, I am not (Referring to being happy with the motivational levels of SMT members in their work) because there are those among the SMT who are not pulling up their socks, and that gives me unnecessary work. Now, I end up charging people for not doing what they are supposed to do. It would be much nicer if we could all do our work, then I would focus more on monitoring teaching and learning, you know. However, now I find myself having to monitor a person who might not attend class, but they are part of an SMT. You see, if all of us (Referring to SMT members) can know why we are here, my life would be much easier, but there are those people who you can even say are just here to collect a cheque; they really do not want to be here (P1).

The above data excerpts show that the SMT members in the selected schools are challenged by a lack of motivation to fulfil their academic responsibilities for students' achievements. These findings indicate that a lack of motivation influences how school leaders enact their instructional leadership to improve academic performance in their schools. These findings concur with those of Heystek and Emekako (2020) and Schlebusch (2020), who reported that SMTs' lack of motivation to enhance learners' academic performance led to underperformance in their schools. Therefore, motivation among SMT members cannot be overlooked, as SMTs need to fulfil their duties with dedication. Motivation in SMTs is crucial because, if absent, it jeopardises the whole school, as these leaders set the direction of their schools and influence others to perform their duties optimally. Based on the findings reported in this study, the researchers assert that inspiration in SMTs must be consistently maintained to prevent losing academic vision and goals related to students' academic performance. Sustained motivation ensures that SMTs remain aligned with their strategic objectives by collectively working to improve learner outcomes. In this way, motivation serves as a cornerstone of effective instructional leadership, ensuring the school's long-term success and serving as the sole stakeholder internal morale driver for school performance.

SMTs instructional leadership strategies in responding to declining students' performance in NSC examinations.

Utilising inspirational speakers

SMTs' perceptions in this study revealed that the school leaders are utilising motivational speakers to enhance learners' academic performance. This instructional leadership practice aims to motivate learners to focus on their studies and take them seriously so that they can do well. P3, a principal at school three, mentioned the following; however, he saw this practice as insufficient to ignite learners' internal morale. P3 stated the following:

This year, I think we have had people from MTN to motivate the kids, and we have had people from Vodacom; we have also had the former teachers here. Oh, the department again has a unit; this ISS unit motivates the kids, and it has also come... but I do not think that is enough, looking at the conduct and the behaviour of these kids in the school, I think they need more than this to change (P3).

At school two, even though they use inspirational speakers, DH2, a departmental head, wishes these individuals would come more often. The following is what she stated:

The motivational speakers only come towards the trials, towards the exams in September, and they also come towards the final exams; but in Term One and Term Two, they do not come. In Term one and Term Two, motivational speakers only come for us as educators because we are also suffering with the kind of learners we have...I think this would be better if motivational speakers motivate learners at the beginning of Term One to give them direction. Then, in Term Two, tell them about progress and what must be done. Then, at the beginning of Term Three, provide them with praise if they have done right and correct their wrongs; they need motivation like that, which is required every term (DH2).

DH1, a departmental head at school one, also stated that the SMT at his school is using motivational speakers. However, he mentioned that the learners are lacking in implementing what the motivational speakers convey to them. Below is his perception:

Let me say that we get motivational speakers, but they mostly only motivate the Grade 12s; It is sometimes where they will be talking to all the Grades in the school... but the thing I think about our learners, they listen to the motivational speakers we bring, you will see that they are listening and feeling interested, but applying, that is where most of them are failing (DH1).

The data excerpts presented above demonstrate that SMTs are utilising inspirational speakers to motivate students academically, enabling them to take their studies seriously and focus on them so that their academic achievements can increase. Although the SMTs in this study aimed to achieve this through this instructional leadership practice, they did not achieve their intended outcome. Jadhav (2025) posits that SMTs' attempts in their schools to utilise motivational speakers aim to inspire learners, build academic confidence, and enhance their academic performance. However, what Jadhav (2025) posits is not occurring in the selected schools.

The findings of this inquiry, as presented in this section, do not further align with what Nzimande (2019) found in his study. That is, SMTs using inspirational speakers in their schools played a crucial role in changing their students' attitudes towards their studies. Although the SMTs' attempts in this study to use motivational speakers did not achieve their intended outcomes, they align with Hallinger's (2018) third dimension: creating a positive learning climate. This dimension encompasses the school leaders' actions to influence learners' learning attitudes (Salleh & Hatta, 2019). The researchers in this study note that, although school leaders can use motivational talkers, they should use different approaches to motivate learners with these individuals. The motivations do not need to be broad; they should focus on students' realities. The studies (i.e., Jadhav, 2025; Nzimande, 2019) above provide evidence that when inspirational speakers are used, students' attitudes toward their academics shift positively. Thus, this suggests that when using motivational speakers, SMTs must be strategic, as not every motivation learners receive ignites their academic

passion. By SMTs carefully shaping motivational interventions to students' particular needs and context, SMTs amongst learners could develop and foster deeper and genuine academic engagement. In doing so, SMTs can completely shift superficial motivational practices by inspirational speakers into powerful tools that cultivate sustained student dedication and enhanced academic outcomes

Motivating learners with rewards

Igniting learners' motivation to learn seems vital in the selected schools. The findings of this study showed that SMTs enhance learners' achievement by providing rewards for learning. This study showed that this occurs through academic certificates and financial rewards. The findings reported herein demonstrate that rewards given to learners also motivate other learners who are not the recipients. DH3, a departmental head from school three, mentioned the following:

Yes, we do give awards; we give them to learners who have performed well and achieved level 7 in their subjects. We give them the certificates of excellence so that they can frame them and encourage them not to drop. So, awards motivate them a lot because they (Referring to learners) even do some sort of competition, saying that this certain award next term is going to be mine. Also, such things motivate learners who are at risk (DH3).

At school one, DH1, who is a departmental head, expressed the same sentiment as DH3 above. DH1 stated the following:

Previously, we used to give them (Referring to award certificates) only to Grade 12 learners who performed well; we did that. However, from this year, we started giving them to learners in Grades 8 to 12. In Term One, across all grades, we had top 10s where we designed certificates and gave them to learners. This term, we are thinking of improving the certificates and adding something extra, like a gift... I think that when other learners see their peers receiving awards, they get a wake-up call and become motivated. So, I think if we keep giving awards the way we have done the previous term, time and again, we might reach a point where most of the learners would want to be part of them (DH1).

P2, a principal from school two, expressed a similar view to the above participants. However, he revealed that, as SMT, they sometimes do not award learners due to financial constraints. P2 expressed himself as follows:

Like, last year, at the end of Term Three, we did awards for Grades 8 to 12 learners because we had good marks, so we do them, but you know that awards go hand in hand with a financial muscle, and this school is a non-fee school, so sometimes we are struggling to organise such awards because they involve money. So, sometimes, if we have the money, we organise them like we did last year, where we held them at the community hall for Grades 8 to 12 (P2).

The findings of this study indicate that SMTs use rewards to motivate learners academically and improve their performance. The findings of this study show that the SMTs in the selected schools use academic certificates and financial rewards to achieve this. The findings of this study align with the work of Ali et al. (2025). This inquiry showed that rewards as a strategy enhance learners' motivation and willingness to partake in learning tasks. Similarly, this study's findings align with those of Shava and Heystek (2018), who reported that empowering students through rewards was among the functions SMTs performed to improve students' academic achievement in their schools. The findings of this inquiry further resonate with Hallinger's (2018) model's third dimension, creating a positive learning climate, which focuses on SMTs' actions to influence students' academic attitudes (Salleh & Hatta, 2019). When SMTs in this inquiry reward their students, they increase their morale, dedication, and focus on academic activities. In conclusion, rewards should be thoughtfully implemented not only to boost students' immediate academic morale but also to foster a sustained, long-term culture of responsibility and accountability for overall school success.

DISCUSSION

SMTs are central to effective school leadership and management (SASP, 2015). Among their responsibilities, instructional leadership is a key function (Mosoge & Mataboge, 2021), as it directly relates to ensuring students' academic success (Dille, 2017). This implies that when learners' academic performance declines, SMTs are expected to intensify their efforts to restore and improve students' achievements (Dille, 2017; Harris et al., 2017). Guided by this understanding, the present study purposively engaged three principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads from schools that are experiencing a decline in student performance in the NSC examinations. Within these schools, the study explored SMTs' instructional leadership challenges and strategies in responding to declining student performance in the NSC examinations.

The findings of this study revealed two challenges facing SMTs in the decline in Grade 12 students' academic performance. These include principals' segregation among school stakeholders and the absence of motivation in SMT members in enacting academic activities. The study found that principals' practices, such as favouring certain stakeholders over others and failing to foster collective interaction, are causing division that prevents stakeholders from working together in teaching and learning tasks, thereby affecting learners' academic performance. These findings show that principals with these practices lessen the effectiveness of distributed leadership among SMT members themselves and between SMT members and teachers, as working together on pedagogical activities for school performance requires collective interaction among organisational members to achieve goals (Spillane et al. 2004). Concerning the absence of motivation in SMT members in enacting academic activities for school performance, the findings showed that SMTs lack the internal drive to perform their duties to see their schools doing well, affirming the work of Heystek and Emekako (2020) and Schlebusch (2020) that SMTs' lack of motivation in the enactment of their instructional leadership duties has a detrimental effect on the school's academic performance.

Despite the challenges mentioned above, the findings showed that SMTs continue implementing certain instructional leadership strategies, including inviting motivational speakers and providing learner rewards. However, this study found that the usage of motivational speakers to inspire students academically was not as effective as the SMTs intended. These findings did not resonate with Jadhav (2025), who contends that the utilisation of motivational speakers inspires students, builds their academic confidence, and improves their academic achievements. Regarding the provision of rewards to learners, this study found that SMTs use this practice to motivate learners academically and enhance their performance. These findings resonated with the view of Ali et al. (2025), who noted that rewards are a strategy school leaders can utilise to enhance learners' motivation and willingness to engage in learning tasks. Furthermore, these findings aligned with Hallinger's (2018) model's third dimension, creating a positive learning climate, which focuses on school leaders' actions to influence students' academic attitudes (Salleh & Hatta, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the role of SMTs in sustaining Grade 12 students' performance in the NSC examinations requires greater effort, dedication, consistent improvement in classroom instruction, genuine collaboration with teachers, and the consistent cultivation of students' intrinsic academic motivation. However, for all of this to occur, principals are the focal point who should ensure, through their practices within the SMT and in the school as a whole, that they foster good synergy among stakeholders so that they can work together and with learners. When this occurs, all activities related to teaching and learning are carried out willingly by SMT members and teachers to ensure that students are learning.

We conclude that what is vital in the school is the working relationships that foster SMTs working together with their teachers; the principal's role in this cannot be underestimated. At the same time, school leaders should not wait for their schools to experience declines in students' academic performance in the NSC examinations before addressing the academic drive of their learners. We state that, whether the school is doing well or not, the SMTs should ensure that students are always committed to their studies and have the will to work hard.

We acknowledge that this inquiry is qualitative, thus constraining the type of data the study can generate. Furthermore, we acknowledge that this study is limited to the secondary schools that participated, as it was small-scale inquiry. Therefore, the participation of other schools could have resulted to different findings. In that regard, given that instructional leadership in the 21st century plays a critical role in student outcomes, the researchers note that large-scale studies are needed to understand better SMTs' instructional leadership challenges and strategies for responding to declining student performance, particularly in high-performing schools.

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