

The Roles of School Management Teams in Improving the Academic Performance of Grade 12 Learners

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Abstract. The lack of role implementation by members of School Management Teams (SMTs) creates uncertainty about whether or not they understand their roles. This is the premise still to be thoroughly explored. This lack of implementation is reflected by the poor academic performance of Grade 12 learners. This study was conducted to examine the roles of School Management Teams (SMTs) in improving the academic performance of Grade 12 learners, to eventually probe the solutions that may be used by SMTs in improving the academic performance of Grade 12 learners at Malamulele North-East Circuit, South Africa. The study employed the interpretive research paradigm, which also informed the use of the qualitative research methodology. An Exploratory research design was used as a blueprint for the study. The population of the study included principals, deputy principals, departmental heads (DHs) and educators. To achieve the objective, purposive sampling method, as a non-probability sampling, was used to choose ten (10) participants, four (04) principals, two (02) deputy principals, two (02) departmental heads and two (02) educators who were teaching Grade 12 learners. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews and thematically analysed. The findings revealed that SMTs must lead and manage teaching and learning by monitoring lessons, providing teaching and learning resources, and ensuring stakeholder collaboration. The findings would contribute to the body of knowledge on the roles of SMTs in improving learners' academic performance. Based on the findings, it is recommended that SMTs provide learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) and effective leadership and management in schools. It is further recommended that other studies may be conducted on the experiences of deputy principals as heads of curriculum and departmental heads as curriculum managers, to cab knowledge gaps and to come up with practical solutions around curriculum management implications.

Keywords. Academic performance; educator; management; principal; school management team

Introduction

This study begins from the premise that limited role implementation by SMTs in the Malamulele North-East Circuit, South Africa, may be associated with poor performance, an observation that has not been conclusively established. Thus, the study examines whether the limited implementation of roles aligns with observed shortcomings in learner performance. The study focuses on the roles of School Management Teams (SMTs) in improving the academic performance of Grade 12 learners. The Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture (2023) indicated that SMT is a school-based management structure, consisting of the school principal, deputy principal(s), heads of departments and senior educators.

The primary duty of the SMTs is to manage the curriculum and ensure that the process of preparing, coordinating, directing, and managing the work of educators is carried out using available resources to accomplish organisational objectives (Mbane & Machaba, 2021). Aiyar and Ebeke (2020) stated, "The days when the progress of the nations could be judged by their military powers, economic powers, or by the splendour of their capital cities and public buildings, are over". Currently, the progress of nations is weighed,

and based on the provision of opportunities for their vulnerable and disadvantaged children, as well as the exposure to equal quality of education.”

The roles of SMTs are an attempt by the Department of Education to ensure quality and equity in the standard of education in the country, and positive learner outcomes. SMTs that play their roles enhance learners’ discipline and motivation, which speaks to the fact that SMTs create a conducive learning environment through reducing disruptions within the learning time. Moreover, learner support increases when SMTs play their roles accordingly, which means that learners at risk may be easily identified and given necessary support in Saturday classes and also in camps. In addition, parental involvement becomes visible in a school where SMTs effectively play their roles, SMTs that diligently perform their roles build a strong relationship with community structures, leading to high parental support. The following section of the introduction addresses the relevant literature for this study: This study explored both theoretical and empirical literature on the roles, challenges, and strategies in implementing SMTs’ roles.

Instructional Leadership Theory

Kivunja (2018) defines a theory as a set of interrelated concepts and definitions that present a systematic view of a fact. Similarly, Abend (2008) states that a theory is a generalised statement of ideas that explain and predict connections among several facts. This study used the Instructional Leadership Theory, developed by Hallinger & Murphy, (1986). This theory emerged with a focus on the principal as head of the SMT in schools and aims to address leadership as a two-dimensional concept that deals with leadership function and leadership process. Ng (2019) supports instructional leadership by breaking it into two different concepts, which are narrow and broad. The narrow concept states that the theory deals directly with the process of teaching and learning in the classroom, while the broad concept deals indirectly with learning, such as the culture and discipline of schools. The two concepts enable SMTs to produce satisfactory results if thoroughly utilized.

Sanchez and Watson (2021) also support instructional leadership theory, by articulating that school principals should provide supervision and evaluation of SMTs, educators, and learners for better academic performance. The characteristics of instructional leadership theory are that an instructional leader focuses on developing curriculum and staff, monitoring and supporting the subordinates, and building teamwork for multifaceted activities that need the cooperation of subordinates (Hallinger et al., 2020). Shaked (2024) states that instructional leadership holds SMTs accountable for the academic performance of learners; hence, principals as instructional leaders of SMTs should equip and empower members of SMTs with leadership skills. Instructional leadership theory relates to this study in the sense that SMTs are instructional leaders in schools. The researchers chose this theory because it inspires SMTs to take ownership of the school’s vision, share common goals and objectives of the school. Distributed leadership is the collective practice of leadership in which principals, deputy principals and departmental heads, and sometimes co-opted senior educators, collaborate and share leadership roles, responsibilities and decision-making to improve teaching and learning for better academic performance of learners (Bufalino, 2025). It is thus, the collective efforts of SMTs and other stakeholders, employing their potential for the common goal of improving the performance of Grade 12 learners. The provision of LTSM and SMTs’ training by the Department of Basic Education alleviates SMTs’ challenges in performing their roles.

Methodology

As a research design, the researchers chose the interpretivist approach for the study because it assisted with gathering multiple realities on the role of SMTs in improving the academic performance of Grade 12 learners. The researchers used an exploratory design in this study. This design allows a researcher to collect attitudinal and behavioural data from participants.

Data Collection Method

The researchers used qualitative research because the information collected using qualitative research

instruments has been dependable and reliable, as it revealed the direct feelings and thoughts of participants, and qualitative research allows honest and unfiltered responses of participants.

Sample or Participants

The population of the study was all secondary school principals, deputy principals, departmental heads and secondary school educators in Malamulele North-East circuit, South Africa. The principals, deputy principals, departmental heads, and Grade 12 educators were purposively sampled because they are SMT members, directly responsible for managing the curriculum and accountable for learner performance. Each participant had more than five years of working experience in their position. Learners were excluded because they are not part of the SMT.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher approached 25 SMT members to participate in the study. However, the researchers finally interviewed and stopped at 10 participants because they were the only ones who volunteered to participate. The sample size of 10 also ensured that the volume of data obtained is manageable, allowing for an in-depth qualitative exploration (Etikan, 2020) of the role of SMT in improving the academic performance of grade 12 learners. Furthermore, relatively similar responses were obtained from these participants for the different questions posed, indicating that some level of data saturation was reached.

Research Instrument / Interview Or FGD Protocol

The study used interviews to collect data, specifically, face-to-face interviews as a way of obtaining detailed information from participants, characterised by open-ended questions in which the researchers are allowed to make follow-ups for clarity (Taherdoost, 2021). The instrument was initially piloted with two participants who were not part of the final sample. Three questions were rephrased to eliminate ambiguity. Although interviews were planned to last 45 or 60 minutes, interviews with some participants exceeded 60 minutes as participants were allowed to tell their stories. The interviews took place at the participants' schools, outside teaching and learning time. Each participant was interviewed once. The interviews were audio recorded and data were transcribed. The transcribed data were returned to participants; no changes were requested by any participant. All indicated that their transcript reflected what they said.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers upheld the trustworthiness of this study by ensuring the findings are credible, confirmable, transferable and dependable. Adler (2022) states that trustworthiness in a qualitative study is concerned with the quality of the data for the study. The researchers ensured that the study is credible by returning the transcribed data and results to the participants for verification and accurately reported the findings (Kyngas et al., 2020). Regarding confirmability in this study, the researchers based their findings on the perspectives of the participants as reflected in the data collected, thereby maintaining objectivity (Kyngas et al., 2020). Furthermore, by using the same interview guide instrument for all participants in a category and employing thick descriptions, the researchers ensured that the findings could be transferred to similar settings (Griffith, et al. 2020). In addition to the detailed descriptions, the thorough reporting of the data collection and analysis processes ensured that the findings are dependable.

Data Analysis Procedures

Inductive coding was employed as the codes and themes were developed from the data, which was thematically analysed using the steps of analysing qualitative data according to Creswell and Creswell (2017). The researchers applied Creswell's nine-step inductive approach to qualitative data analysis: (1) planning for data recording; (2) data collection and preliminary analysis; (3) data management and organisation; (4) recording and memo writing; (5) generating categories, themes, and patterns; (6) coding the data; (7) testing emerging interpretations; (8) exploring alternative explanations; and (9) writing the report. The findings were subsequently shared with the participants, all of whom agreed that they accurately reflected their views.

The Findings

This study sought to find out the roles of SMTs in improving the academic performance of Grade 12 learners. The following five themes emerged from the analysed data: the provision of resources, the provision of effective leadership, stakeholder involvement, the provision of support and motivation, and curriculum management.

Provision of Resources

The researcher found that it is the role of SMTs to provide resources to learners to improve the academic performance of grade 12 learners.

The first role is correct teachers' subject allocation, secondly, proper staff leadership, thirdly, parental involvement, fourthly, involvement of community stakeholders, and finally, learners' profiling. [PA]

Set up a team which is qualified to teach subjects in Grade 12, encourage both teachers and learners, initiate extra lessons with learners, and outsource for sections in which teachers are not familiar. [PC]

Encouraging learners and teachers by inviting motivational speakers, profiling of learners, promoting healthy competition among learners, parental involvement, choosing capable teachers to teach Grade 12 learners, and outsourcing more experienced teachers in the subjects. [PD]

Provision of resources to teachers, such as Annual Teaching Plan, annual assessment plan, subject policy, Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for monitoring purpose, monitoring plan, and monitor teachers lesson plans and learners' activities on weekly basis, and classroom lesson observation is conducted per plan. [DHB]

As a teacher, I teach learners according to school timetable and also sacrifice my time on weekends to teach learners, I also ask the departmental head to provide study guides and further support the SMT's strategies to improve academic performance of Grade 12 learners, such as, complying to teach during Saturdays and on recess. [TA]

Based on the above statements, PA, PC, PD, DHB and TA hold similar views when it comes to the provision of resources in the academic performance of Grade 12 learners. PA, PC and PD specifically base their role on human resources, such as educators. On the other hand, DHB and TA base their view on physical resources (teaching and learning materials), such as ATPs, CAPS documents and study guides.

Provision of Effective Leadership

The provision of effective leadership is another finding that emanated from the study as a role to improve the academic performance of Grade 12 learners. Some participants explained:

The first role is correct teacher subject allocation, secondly, proper staff leadership, thirdly, parental involvement, fourthly, involvement of community stakeholders, and finally, learners' profiling. [PA]

Setting a school performance target, profiling learners in all subjects for effective monitoring and intervention, supporting teachers and learners in areas of their concern, develop school action plan, regular communication with parents. [PB]

Set up a team which is qualified to teach subjects in Grade 12, encourage both teachers and learners, initiate extra lessons with learners, and outsource for sections in which teachers are not familiar. [PC]

We share responsibilities as, SMT members, Departmental Heads guide and motivate teachers in their departments and solving subjects' challenges of learners. [PD]

Assisting the principal in a day-to-day management of school, playing a leadership and motivational roles to departmental heads, providing guidance to departmental heads and learners for high performance standard, record keeping and managing learners conduct according to departmental policy. [DPB]

Through departmental meetings, setting clear expectation of subject performance with teachers under my supervision, monitoring teachers work, consolidation of teachers' reports (feedback), taking professional instructions from deputy principal and principal. [DHA]

I profile my learners in the subject that I teach thoroughly looking at their performance and also advise SMT to implement and manage extra-classes. [TB]

The interesting part from the above statements is that PA, PB, PC, PA, PB, DPB and DHA are of the view that provision of effective leadership is a role of SMTs in improving academic performance of learners. PA and PB are of one view on the provision of effective leadership through timetabling. On the other hand, PB and DHA are of the view of setting clear expectations of subject performance with educators as a provision of effective leadership. PA and TB concur on profiling of learners for their academic performance. PA alone also states that SMTs have Departmental Heads, and their role is to manage the curriculum while a deputy principal heads and leads the curriculum for effective leadership. PB is of the view that SMTs plan and develop School Improvement Plan (SIP) as a provision of effective leadership for learner academic performance to improve. Furthermore, PC is of the view of planning and initiating extra-lessons. PD is of the view that SMTs share responsibilities as SMT members for effective leadership.

Stakeholder Involvement

The involvement of stakeholders is one of the many SMTs roles that emerged from the study to improve the academic performance of Grade 12 learners as indicated by some participants.

The first role is correct teachers' subject allocation, secondly, proper staff leadership, thirdly, parental involvement, fourthly, involvement of community stakeholders, and finally, learners profiling. [PA]

Setting school performance target, profiling learners in all subjects for effective monitoring and intervention, supporting teachers and learners in areas of their concern, develop school action plan, regular communication with parents. [PB]

Encouraging learners and teachers by inviting motivational speakers, profiling of learners, promoting healthy competition among learners, parental involvement, choosing capable teachers to teach Grade 12 learners, outsourcing of more experienced teachers in the subjects. [PD]

Provision of Support and Motivation

The findings of the study also revealed that it is the SMTs' role to provide support, guidance and motivation to educators and learners to improve the academic performance of Grade 12 learners.

Setting a school performance target, profiling learners in all subjects for effective monitoring and intervention, supporting teachers and learners in areas of their concern, developing a school action plan, regular communication with parents. [PB]

Setting up a team which is qualified to teach subjects in Grade 12, encourage both teachers and learners, initiating extra lessons with learners, and outsourcing for sections in which the school's own teachers are ill-equipped. [PC]

Encouraging learners and teachers by inviting motivational speakers, profiling of learners, promoting healthy competition among learners, parental involvement, choosing capable teachers to teach Grade 12 learners, outsourcing of more experienced teachers in the subjects. [PD]

Departmental heads monitor the work done by teachers with learners, create conducive teaching and learning and support teachers and learners. [PC]

We share responsibilities as SMT members, Departmental Heads guide and motivate teachers in their departments and solving subjects' challenges of learners. [PD]

*Assisting the principal in a day-to-day management of school, playing a leadership and **motivational roles** to departmental heads, providing guidance to departmental heads and learners for high performance standard, record keeping and managing learners conduct according to departmental policy. [DPB]*

As a teacher I teach learners according to school timetable and also sacrifice my time on weekends to teach learners, I also ask the departmental head to provide study guides and further support the SMT's strategies to improve academic performance of Grade 12 learners, such as, complying to teach during Saturdays and on recess. [TA]

PB, PC, PD, PB, PC, PD, DPB and TA agree on the role of support and motivation of educators, learners and also SMTs themselves to improve the academic performance of learners.

Curriculum Management

The findings of the study revealed that SMTs do not thoroughly execute the role of managing curriculum and this is a constraint in improving the academic performance of Grade 12 learners, this finding is proven by end of year Grade 12 results.

The SMT has a Deputy Principal who is the curriculum head and deals with curriculum matters, e.g. timetabling; the SMT also has a Departmental Head who manages the curriculum of subject(s) under him/her, e.g. monitoring the work of teachers within the subject led and Annual teaching plan coverage. [PA]

The SMT plays a crucial role in improving academic performance, such as allocation of subjects to teachers, draws a timetable, provision of Annual Teaching Plans to teachers, monitoring of educators' work, formal and informal tasks of learners, and motivating learners to strive towards high performance. [PB]

Departmental heads monitor the work done by teachers with learners, create conducive teaching and learning and support teachers and learners. [PC]

By explaining the pass requirements to learners, tracking learners' school attendance throughout the year, awarding learners' high performance in prize giving ceremony, and monitoring departmental heads' work and also encourage them to monitor teachers' work. [DPA]

Through departmental meetings, setting clear expectation of subject performance with teachers under my supervision, monitoring teachers work, consolidation of teachers' reports (feedback), taking professional instructions from deputy principal and principal. [DHA]

Provision of resources to teachers, such as Annual Teaching Plan, annual assessment plan, subject policy, Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for monitoring purpose, monitoring plan, and monitor teachers lesson plans and learners' activities on weekly basis, and classroom lesson observation is conducted per plan. [DHB]

As a teacher I teach learners according to school timetable and also sacrifice my time on weekends to teach learners, I also ask the departmental head to provide study guides and further support the SMT's strategies to improve academic performance of Grade 12 learners, such as, complying to teach during Saturdays and on recess. [TA]

I profile my learners in the subject that I teach thoroughly, looking at their performance and advising the SMT on implementing and managing extra-classes. [TB]

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that it is the role of SMTs to provide resources to improve the academic performance of grade 12 learners. These echo the stipulations by the Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture, (2023) that the SMTs must promptly respond to the teaching and learning needs of a school. The findings also concur with those of Mkomi and Mzokwana (2024) on assigning resources and overseeing academic achievement programmes, Caldwell and Spinks' (2021) on infrastructure, curriculum, and personnel support. These SMTs' role reflects a characteristic of the instructional leadership theory, to ensure teaching and learning in the classroom, and this cannot be ensured in the absence of resources. This theme of provision of resources aligns with the aspect of broad instructional leadership concept because resources are provided to support teaching and learning.

The provision of effective leadership is another finding that emanated from the study as a role to improve the academic performance of Grade 12 learners. This supports Caldwell and Spinks (2021), who stated that the SMT's underlying basis is giving leadership guidance and direction about proper teaching and learning that finally yields good academic performance. The findings also concur with those of Mandasari and Aminatun (2020), who explained that SMTs ensure that decisions taken during school meetings are communicated to all stakeholders for transparency in implementing rules and regulations. Provision of effective leadership in schools is one of the instructional leadership traits and this cannot be visible in the absence of SMTs. The theme of provision of instructional leadership is a broad instructional leadership concept since SMTs exercise effective leadership to create and maintain school environment for teaching and learning to yield positive results.

The involvement of stakeholders is one of the many SMTs roles that emerged from the study to improve the academic performance of Grade 12 learners. This echoes the stipulations by the Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture (2023) that encouraging educator and parent participation in the performance of learners is a cornerstone of effective SMTs. This requires that necessary measures be taken for stakeholder participation in decision-making for effective teaching and learning. Stakeholder involvement is another key attribute of instructional leadership theory, and this can be effectively coordinated by the principal as a leader of SMT. This theme of stakeholder involvement is part of the broad instructional leadership concept because it focuses on support systems that enhance teaching and learning.

A characteristic of the instructional leadership theory is that leadership (SMTs) provides support, guidance, and motivation. This study's findings support earlier findings (Caldwell & Spinks, 2021) in that it is the SMTs' role to provide support, guidance, and motivation to educators and learners to improve the academic performance of Grade 12 learners. The theme of provision of support and motivation is part of the broad instructional leadership concept since it emphasises emotional and professional motivation of the staff and material support for effective teaching and learning indirectly.

Efficient curriculum management falls within Ng's (2019) broad concept of the instructional leadership theory. The findings of the study revealed that SMTs do not thoroughly execute the role of managing curriculum, and this is a constraint in improving the academic performance of Grade 12 learners. This finding is proven by end of year Grade 12 results. This finding echoes Hofer et al. (2021), who state that SMTs ensure educators understand the use of curriculum-related policy documents. Moreover, the findings correlate with those of Setlhodi (2020), who noted that SMTs develop tools to monitor the curriculum coverage. My opinion in this study is that school leadership and management embedded in the roles of SMTs are pivotal to school functionality, learner performance and quality education for economic development. This theme of curriculum management is part of the narrow instructional leadership concept because it focuses on the core activities of teaching and learning, which is what happens directly in the classroom.

The lack of sufficient resources, both physical and material, with very minimal circuit support still, constrains learner academic performance. The lack of LTSM is accompanied by insignificant and poor content in textbooks. The instructional leadership theory in line with distributed leadership, consents DHs to work together with educators in their departments to profile learners according to their performance and assist them

in line with SIP's curriculum delivery strategies for the DHs and DPs to monitor resources and performance of the profiled learners.

Conclusion

This study confirms existing literature and offers new evidence in relation to the role of SMTs in improving the academic performance of Grade 12 learners. As recommendations, in relation to practice, firstly, SMTs should without fail involve community stakeholders, such as parents in the education of their children to help motivate learners by conducting stakeholders' meetings – this recommendation is linked to the theme of stakeholder involvement and the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996.

Secondly, SMTs should involve the Department of Social Development in the academic performance of learners, to deal with learners' ill-discipline and issues of teenage pregnancy – this recommendation also links with the stakeholder involvement theme and the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996. Thirdly, SMTs should monitor educators' work and learners' written work according to CAPS documents, ATPs and examination guidelines – this recommendation is linked with the theme of curriculum management and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement.

Fourthly, SMTs should provide learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) from the Department of Education through the provincial education department – this recommendation is linked to the provision of resources theme and South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 and South African Schools Funding Norms and Standards (Issued under SASA). Fifth, SMTs should provide leadership and management in schools – this theme links with the theme of provision of effective leadership and Employment of Educators Act No. 76 of 1998.

Sixth, SMTs, together with teachers, should identify learners at risk and re-teach them separately and ensure that they are not left behind – this recommendation is linked with the themes of provision of support and motivation, and curriculum management and the National Education Policy Act No. 27 of 1996 and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. In relation to policy, the Department of Education should review the National Policy on Promotion and Progression and the National Policy on Rationalisation and Redeployment of Educators – these recommendations link with the policy of South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996, National Policy Act No. 27 of 1996 and Employment of Educators Act No. 76 of 1998 and Labour Relations Act No. 66 of 1995.

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