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Instructional leadership challenges and strategic responses to declining secondary school performance: Perspectives from school management teams

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Abstract

This study explored the instructional leadership challenges and strategic responses of School Management Teams (SMTs) in three South African secondary schools in response to the decline in their National Senior Certificate (NSC) results. To this end, an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative approach were adopted, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was utilised, involving principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads from the three selected schools. Thematic analysis revealed that poor working relationships among stakeholders and the presence of some educators who deliberately engaged in practices detrimental to teaching and learning contributed to the decline in NSC results. The findings further showed that SMTs responded to the decline in NSC performance by conducting additional classes and collaborating with district officials. This study concludes that sustainable improvement in learner performance requires not only strategic interventions but, more importantly, professional working relationships that strengthen collaborative instructional leadership practices and enhance teacher commitment and accountability. Although this study was grounded in the South African context, it contributes to global understandings of the instructional leadership challenges and strategic responses of SMTs to declining school academic performance.

Keywords: *academic performance, national senior certificate, school leadership, secondary schools*

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1. Introduction

Schools, as educational institutions, comprise various personnel who perform different duties to achieve academic goals. At the base of the school hierarchy are teachers, followed by departmental heads, deputy principals, and principals. Among these stakeholders, principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads play a particularly critical role in ensuring that schools function effectively and achieve their academic objectives; collectively, they constitute the School Management Team (SMT). Given their responsibility for school operations and the attainment of academic goals, SMTs perform a range of duties, including providing effective leadership in teaching and learning (Groenewald et al., 2025; Motlalepula et al., 2022; Schlebusch & Schlebusch, 2022), working collaboratively with educators by guiding and supporting academic activities within the school (Harris & Jones, 2022; Mbane & Machaba, 2021), and managing curriculum implementation while providing educational support and resources to enhance learner performance (Huaisheng et al., 2019; Mbane & Machaba, 2021).

The activities undertaken by SMTs to ensure the achievement of teaching and learning goals are collectively referred to as instructional leadership (Mosoge & Mataboge, 2021). Although instructional leadership encompasses various responsibilities, one of the most significant roles, particularly in secondary schools, is ensuring that learners consistently perform well academically (Nwosu et al., 2022). In South Africa, a secondary school is considered successful if its Grade 12 learners achieve the performance targets established by the relevant provincial education department. This performance is measured through the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations. For example, in KwaZulu-Natal, secondary schools are expected to achieve an NSC pass rate of at least 45% to be classified as performing schools (Mkhize, 2023), whereas in Gauteng Province, where the schools participating in this study are located, the benchmark is 65% (Gauteng Department of Education [GDE], 2025). Consequently, the GDE considers a secondary school to be underperforming if it achieves less than 65% in the NSC examinations.

Comparable to secondary school exit examinations in other countries, such as the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in the United Kingdom and high school diploma assessments in the United States of America (Denes, 2023; Dziak, 2025), South Africa's NSC examinations form part of a broader global discourse on educational performance and accountability. The schools examined in this study have historically been high-performing institutions, consistently achieving strong NSC results. However, they have

experienced successive declines in learner performance. According to the NSC school performance reports published by the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE), two of the participating schools began experiencing declines in NSC performance in 2022, while the third school's results started declining in 2020. Although schools may encounter a variety of challenges that affect learner achievement, school leaders and managers are still expected to implement strategies that sustain and improve academic performance (Bayat et al., 2015; Harris & Jones, 2022; Heystek & Emekako, 2020; Schlebusch, 2020).

Therefore, this South African multiple-case study contributes to understanding the instructional leadership challenges and strategic responses of SMTs in relation to declining school academic performance. Existing studies (Bayat et al., 2014; Harris & Jones, 2022; Nzimande, 2019; Ramalepe, 2023; Setlhodi & Lebeloane, 2014; Subramoney, 2022; van de Grift & Houtveen, 2007) have focused largely on chronically underperforming schools, leaving limited empirical and theoretical insights into instructional leadership challenges in schools experiencing performance decline despite a history of high achievement. Accordingly, this study aims to explore the instructional leadership challenges facing SMTs in relation to the decline in NSC results and to examine the strategies currently employed by SMTs to enhance learner performance in the NSC examinations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Dynamics Influencing SMTs' Instructional Leadership in Relation to Students' Academic Performance

Globally, in this 21st century, instructional leadership that consistently enhances students' academic performance has become vital (Chhourn, 2019; Pan, Nyeu, & Chen, 2015). School leaders have shifted from administrators to individuals responsible for ensuring that all school functions contribute to student attainment (Daing & Mustapha, 2023). However, various factors can hinder school leaders from enabling students to perform. Letsoalo (2018) notes that educators are often the most significant contributors to learner underperformance. When teachers fail to teach effectively in classrooms and provide academic training, students' educational outcomes are negatively affected (Nguyen et al., 2023; van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006). Therefore, in their daily work, school leaders should ensure that teachers fulfil their responsibilities to achieve academic goals. Although SMTs lead and manage instructional

leadership, its success largely depends on teachers, who implement academic goals related to student achievement.

Apart from teachers being individuals who can negatively affect students' attainment if they do not properly do their work, poor working relationships among school stakeholders can also have an impact. Bayat et al. (2014) emphasise that the standard of teaching and learning in schools relies heavily on the instructional leadership of SMTs and on the involvement of other stakeholders. Therefore, SMT members must collaborate effectively with one another and with other stakeholders to ensure that teaching and learning enhance learners' academic performance. When SMTs and the personnel they lead lack working together, academic goal attainment is negatively affected, resulting in poor school performance. For example, the works of Bayat et al. (2015), Schlebusch (2020), and Subramoney (2022) on South African schools found that SMT members often lacked strong interpersonal relationships. Although the DBE's Personal Administrative Measures (PAM) (2022) document outlines tasks to be performed by all SMT members for school functionality, it appears essential that SMT members cultivate working relationships beyond simply following task allocations. Such enable collaboration that strengthens school functioning and supports improved academic performance.

Although SMTs are viewed as senior school leaders, their role is primarily internal; schools in South Africa still have external leaders in the form of districts. Therefore, the role of these school leaders is to integrate external and internal instructional leadership so that the school can function effectively, serving as a collaborative platform that SMTs utilise to enhance students' academic achievement (Jane, 2015). According to the South African Department of Basic Education's National Policy Act No. 27 of 1996, the Policy on the Organisation, Role, and Responsibilities of Education Districts requires district personnel, including circuit managers and subject specialists, to collaborate with SMTs on academic enhancement and developmental strategies (DBE, 2013). In addition to working with district officials to improve student learning, school leaders can also employ extra classes. The academic performance of learners in schools plays a significant role in SMTs' instructional leadership, as their effectiveness is often measured by the extent to which learners achieve strong academic results. Hence, SMTs must be responsive when learners are not performing well (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Studies by Maluleke (2024) and Shava and Heystek (2018) indicate that SMTs can address declines in learners' academic performance by providing extra

classes. These lessons allow learners to revisit complex topics and develop a deeper understanding of curriculum content that is not possible during regular periods (Saraye, 2025). SMTs' instructional leadership is broad and requires diverse strategies to ensure learners' performance improves when it declines. If one strategy proves ineffective, SMTs should adopt alternative approaches that align with their students' learning needs and support the achievement of academic objectives.

While much of the existing literature (Nguyen et al., 2023; Subramoney, 2022; Letsoalo, 2018; Bayat et al., 2015; Bayat et al., 2014; van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006) focus on schools that are chronically underperforming, there remain studies with empirical and theoretical understandings of the instructional leadership challenges faced by schools that transition from high performing to experiencing a decline in academic performance. Therefore, this study aims to close this gap by providing insights into the factors driving declines in academic performance in high-performing secondary schools and the strategies SMTs can use to address them.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Hallinger's (2018) instructional leadership model and distributed leadership theory as a theoretical framework. This model consists of three domains, of which instructional leadership must be performed in the school. These dimensions include defining the school's mission, managing the instructional programme, and creating a positive learning climate. Though this model includes these domains and focuses on the principal solely performing them, in this study, only the second domain was adapted and viewed as enacted by the SMT as a whole. This was based on Mosoge and Mataboge (2021), who state that SMT members cannot achieve instructional leadership solely; rather, they do so collectively. Therefore, in this enquiry, managing instructional programme refers to the SMT collectively managing teaching and learning to enhance classroom instruction and achieve the school's academic objectives (Bada et al., 2020; Hallinger et al., 2014).

Although SMTs were created on the premise that its members must work together to realise school goals (Department of Education (DoE), 2008), they still need to work with other stakeholders, such as educators, School Governing Bodies (SGBs), among others, in all academic plans, decisions, and activities to achieve academic goals (Tenha & Makamure, 2024; Jambo & Hongde, 2020). For this reason, this enquiry was also framed within the

distributed leadership theory. This theory was pioneered by scholars such as Spillane et al. (2004) and Harris (2008). As a theory of leadership in practice, it focuses on collective interaction between organisation members in achieving tasks (Cao et al., 2025; Spillane, 2004) and promotes the organisation stakeholders' collective influence in attaining objectives (Harris, 2008). Furthermore, distributed leadership fosters mutual respect, trust, transparency, and strong working relationships among stakeholders when they work together (Yang & Chang, 2024; Harris, 2008). In task enactment, distributed leadership focuses on collective distribution, where people work individually but interdependently to achieve a shared goal (Spillane, 2004).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm to explore and understand SMTs' perceptions of the instructional leadership challenges they face and their strategic responses to declining NSC performance. As Omodan (2015) notes, the interpretivist paradigm enables researchers to understand participants' realities through their experiences and perspectives. While acknowledging that this paradigm facilitates the construction of participants' realities, the researchers analysed the data with integrity and objectivity to ensure that the findings were represented as accurately and truthfully as possible. To achieve this, the study employed a qualitative approach, which focuses on understanding social phenomena through individuals' experiences and perspectives (Bhangu et al., 2023). This approach informed the adoption of a multiple-case study design, which facilitates an in-depth understanding of cases by enabling researchers to examine similarities and differences across research sites within a common context (Heale & Twycross, 2018). In this study, the participating secondary schools were all historically high-performing institutions that had experienced declines in NSC performance. The use of a multiple-case study design therefore enabled the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the instructional leadership challenges faced by SMTs and the strategic responses they employed to address declining academic performance in their respective schools.

3.2. Participants of the Study

This enquiry adopted purposive sampling, a method that allows researchers to select participants who are most likely to provide information relevant to the achievement of the

research objectives (Etikan & Bala, 2017). To address the aims of the study, one principal, one deputy principal, and one departmental head were selected from each participating school.

Principals were selected because they lead the SMTs and are primarily responsible for providing instructional leadership to ensure the attainment of academic goals. As the selected schools each had two deputy principals, the deputy principal responsible for the Further Education and Training (FET) phase (Grades 10–12) was purposively chosen to participate in the study. In selecting departmental heads, those with the greatest teaching and management experience in each school were purposively selected. Based on these selection criteria, the nine participants were considered well positioned to provide rich and detailed data that would address the research objectives. The demographic details of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' demographics

Participant	Gender	Race	School	Experience in the SMT	Highest qualification	Age range	Code
Principal	Female	African	School One	10 years	Honours in Economics	50-60 years	P1
Deputy principal	Female	African	School One	26 years	MSC in Science Education	60-65 years	DP1
Departmental head	Male	African	School One	10 years	Higher Diploma in Education	50-60 years	DH1
Principal	Male	African	School Two	15 years	Bachelor of Education	50-60 years	P2
Deputy principal	Female	African	School Two	15 years	Bachelor of Education Honours	50-60 years	DP2
Departmental head	Female	African	School Two	11 years	Bachelor of Education	40-50 years	DH2
Principal	Male	African	School Three	15 years	Bachelor of Education Honours	40-50 years	P3
Deputy principal	Female	African	School Three	16 years	Bachelor of Education Honours	50-60 years	DP3
Departmental head	Female	African	School Three	14 years	Bachelor of Education	50-60 years	DH3

3.3. Data Gathering Process

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. This method enables researchers to engage in in-depth dialogue with participants and openly share their views while providing opportunities for probing and clarification in response to the researchers' enquiries (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). Through these in-depth interviews, the researchers sought to collect rich and detailed data, which provided confidence that data saturation had been achieved (Saunders et al., 2018). Furthermore, during data collection, participants were encouraged to share their perceptions freely without withholding information that could be relevant to the study. Given the sensitivity of the topic, participants were also informed that they could pause the interview or take a break at any time should they feel overwhelmed by the information they were sharing.

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, following a deductive approach in which the enquiry was guided by a particular theoretical framework to address the research objectives (Majumdar, 2019). Thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research to develop themes from participants' subjective perceptions while identifying patterns of similarity and difference across the data (Crowe et al., 2015). During the analysis, the researchers developed code categories to classify similar segments of text. These code categories were subsequently clustered, thoroughly reviewed, and verified before the final themes were generated, following the thematic analysis process proposed by Terry et al. (2017). Furthermore, ATLAS.ti version 25 was utilised to assist the researchers during the data analysis process.

3.5. Research Ethics

All data collected from the participants were securely stored in cloud storage by the first author, and only the second author had access to the data. Before engaging with the participants, ethical clearance (SEM 1-2024-078) was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg. Furthermore, permission to access the schools was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) and the respective school principals.

Prior to the commencement of data collection, all participants signed informed consent forms, which included a statement informing them of their right to withdraw from the study at

any time without penalty. In addition, the researchers assured participants that their identities and real names would remain confidential. To protect anonymity, codes were used when reporting and presenting the findings of the study.

3.6 Trustworthiness

Throughout the commencement, implementation, and completion of the study, the researchers ensured adherence to the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Guba (1981), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

First, credibility was enhanced through member checking, whereby participants were provided with the findings in PDF format and given the opportunity to verify their accuracy, confirm their agreement, or identify and correct any misinterpretations (Lim, 2024).

Second, to support transferability, detailed information about the participants and the research context was provided to determine the extent to which the findings may be applicable to other contexts (Stahl & King, 2020).

Third, dependability was ensured by sharing and reviewing all stages of the research process among the researchers. This process helped ensure that the study was conducted systematically and logically and that the data were analysed rigorously (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Finally, confirmability was achieved by presenting participants' views as accurately as possible and supporting the findings with direct participant accounts, thereby ensuring that the findings reflected the participants' perspectives rather than the researchers' biases or assumptions (Lim, 2024).

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings presented in this section are organised under two themes that correspond to the research objectives guiding this enquiry. Before presenting the findings, Table 2 illustrates how the themes emerged from the code categories, together with their grounded frequencies (i.e., the number of times each code category was identified in the data). It is important to acknowledge the potential limitations associated with self-reported data, including the possibility of response bias among SMT members.

Table 2

Themes generated from the study

Themes	Code categories	Grounded frequencies
Poor working relationships among stakeholders	Staff resistant to working together	1
	Staff not getting along	4
Having some educators with purposeful practices that are detrimental to teaching and learning	Teachers that are intentionally resistant on the school activities	5
	Teachers who are deliberately ineffective in pedagogy	3
Performing additional classes	Conducting extra afternoon classes	6
	Conducting extra morning classes	5
	Conducting extra weekend classes	7
	Using tutors for extra classes	1
Collaborating with district officials	Working with circuit managers on teaching and learning	1
	Working with facilitators on teaching and learning	5

4.1. Instructional Leadership Challenges Facing SMTs on the Decline of NSC Results

Poor working relationships among stakeholders. Relationships bind people together in pursuit of shared goals and objectives. The same principle applies within organisations, where staff members are expected to maintain positive working relationships that enable them to function collaboratively and achieve organisational goals (Abrahamsen, 2018). In the selected schools, poor working relationships among staff members emerged as a significant challenge to SMTs' instructional leadership and their efforts to achieve academic goals. DP1, a deputy principal from School One, explained:

> *… relationships, friction… we stopped getting along as staff a bit around 2022; then things became worse. There was even a huge, huge, huge strike, in which the learners were striking for chairs and desks, and in other years, we have been having such issues. However, you could see that learners were told by other staff members to strike, and that made the principal so sick and disturbed to a point that she had to be away from school for some time… So, that's the biggest thing that disturbed the school, the frictions in us as staff… This even affected the attendance of classes by some teachers; you would see a teacher who is normally in the 90s in terms of the passing percentage dropping to 50%.* **(DP1)**

P2, a principal at School Two, shared the same sentiments. However, his perception focuses on the SMT alone. P2 mentioned:

> *… like I am saying, we are disjointed, we strive for unity, and it will come a week or so. After that, it is no longer that unity to try and improve the condition*

> *(Referring to underperformance) of the school, and we are the SMT, we are supposed to be the key and fundamental anchor of school performance.* **(P2)**

P3's perception at School Three concurs with the other participants. P3 highlighted a poor working relationship among his SMT members at his school and indicated that they are not getting along, which is detrimental to the school. P3 mentioned:

> *... the issue is you find that the HoD has an issue with the deputy principal, the deputy has an issue with the principal; there are a lot of issues, and I am afraid that we are in that mode, and it is really affecting the school, and I can see it (P3).*

From the participants' accounts, it emerged that poor working relationships among SMT members and staff in the selected schools hinder the attainment of academic goals and negatively affect learner performance. Practices such as sabotage, conflict, and a lack of unity in academic activities challenge the effectiveness of SMTs' instructional leadership and their efforts to improve learner achievement. These findings are consistent with those of Schlebusch (2020), who found that weak interpersonal relationships among SMT members contributed to ineffective instructional leadership and lower academic attainment. Similarly, the findings align with those of Bayat et al. (2015), who reported that declines in learner achievement are often associated with poor, strained, and dysfunctional collaboration among school staff.

The findings do not reflect the principles of distributed leadership. Distributed leadership requires leaders and followers to work collaboratively towards shared goals, supported by mutual trust and positive working relationships (Harris, 2008). The presence of division and conflict among SMT members and educators in the participating schools suggests a misalignment with the principles of distributed leadership. Consequently, there is a need to strengthen teamwork and foster cohesive professional relationships between SMT members and teachers. Such collaboration can promote unity of purpose, shared commitment, and collective effort, which are essential for sustained improvements in learner academic performance.

Presence of educators whose practices are detrimental to teaching and learning. SMTs depend on both teachers and learners to achieve academic success. In South African secondary schools, Grade 12 teachers play a particularly critical role because they work directly with learners to prepare them for the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations. SMTs rely heavily on teachers' commitment and effectiveness to attain academic goals. The

findings presented in this section indicate that the decline in Grade 12 results in the selected schools is partly attributed to the practices of some teachers that are detrimental to teaching and learning. Specifically, participants reported that certain educators engaged in behaviours such as avoiding academic responsibilities and arriving late for classes, thereby negatively affecting learner performance. P1, a principal from School One, stated:

> *Now you see that (Referring to resistant teachers), it derails performance. I am finding myself dealing with teachers who do not want to be part of what we are trying, and now I must find out why they cannot stay in the afternoon for extra classes. I am finding myself asking people what we can do for them to be able to teach in the afternoon, like what can we do to have you? But I think not wanting to participate is wanting to see this school not progress.* **(P1)**

Departmental heads at Schools Two and Three shared similar perceptions. DH2 at School Two shared the following perspective:

> *Our problem, the main problem that we encounter, is that some educators do not go to class on time and stay in class for the duration of the whole period. They would go and greet learners during their periods, go out to make copies for them, and then return to leave the copies with the learners, after which the period is over. So, I think it is also some of our teachers who contribute to this dilemma (Referring to underperformance) in our school with their lack of commitment.* **(DH2)**

The departmental head, DH3, at School Three expressed:

> *Like now, we have learners who always complain and are very angry because their teacher does not come to the extra classes, I am talking about the history learners. As a result, at the end of the day, this has influenced the results. It has made last year's results go down.* **(DH3)**

The extracts reveal that teachers also contribute to the decline in academic performance in the selected schools. Participants indicated that some teachers engage in practices that are detrimental to teaching and learning, including avoiding academic responsibilities, failing to teach as required, and being absent from scheduled classes. These support the observations of Knight (2009) and Nguyen et al. (2023), who note that resistant educators are among the factors that create instructional leadership challenges for SMTs in their efforts to improve school performance.

The findings reported in this enquiry do not reflect the principle of collective distribution, whereby leaders and followers work individually yet interdependently towards the achievement of a common goal (Spillane, 2004). One of the primary goals of a school is to maximise learner academic performance (Makgato & Mudzanani, 2019). Achieving this objective requires all stakeholders to fulfil their respective roles and responsibilities. In the selected schools, some teachers, as classroom leaders, were not working collaboratively with SMTs to support learner achievement. Their practices appeared misaligned with the instructional leadership efforts of SMTs and the shared goal of improving Grade 12 learner performance.

Teacher support is important in enabling SMTs to achieve desired academic outcomes. They further demonstrate that although SMT members occupy formal leadership positions within schools, the success of their instructional leadership depends significantly on the commitment and cooperation of teachers. In this regard, effective instructional leadership is not solely the responsibility of SMTs but requires the collective effort of all stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning process.

4.2. Strategic Responses Employed by School Management Teams to Enhance Learner Performance in the National Senior Certificate Examinations

Additional classes. Schools operate according to scheduled subject periods that run from morning until afternoon. However, SMTs in the selected secondary schools implement additional classes beyond the regular school timetable. Participants indicated that these extra classes are conducted before normal school hours in the morning, after regular classes in the afternoon, and during weekends. The findings further showed that SMTs encourage teachers to use these additional classes to provide support in subjects where learners experience difficulties and to strengthen their understanding of curriculum content.

DP3, a deputy principal from School Three, explained that Saturdays are utilised for extra classes at her school. She further indicated that the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) head office provides support for this initiative. DP3 stated:

> *We are getting tutors from one of the head office units, developing teachers who are assisting in the education system, curriculum-wise, managerial-wise, and many other things. So, these tutors come to school on Saturdays because they are good teachers employed by this unit… So, this unit functions like saying go and help this school; it seems there is a problem in Mathematics.* **(DP3)**

Similarly, DP2, a deputy principal from School Two, indicated that the school regularly conducts extra lessons to support learners and improve their academic performance. The following excerpt reflects DP2's perspective:

> *... we decided that there must be always extra classes so that teachers can have more time in subjects in making sure that learners understand what they are being taught rather using the 7 days we have in the week ... So, we have morning classes, there are afternoon classes, and there are Saturday classes. Some teachers even come on Sundays.* **(DP2)**

DH1, a departmental head from School One, indicated that the school also implements additional classes as a strategy to improve learner performance. However, unlike the other schools, DH1 expressed concern that the learners who attend these extra lessons are often those who are already performing well academically while the learners who would benefit most from additional support, particularly those experiencing academic difficulties, are less likely to attend these sessions. DH1 stated:

> *... there is a timetable for morning classes; also, we have a timetable for afternoon classes and our weekend classes, which are on Saturday and Sunday… The biggest problem is that if you call them (Referring to learners) to come, maybe in the morning, afternoon or Saturday, the ones coming are those you do not need that much. The ones that you need to empower them to teach to move from level 1 to level 4 (Referring to achievement levels) do not come. Those who are coming are the ones that, even if they do not come, you know they are going to pass, so that is the problem.* **(DH1)**

The data extracts indicate that SMTs utilise additional classes as a strategy to improve learners' Grade 12 examination performance. These classes are conducted before regular school hours, after the normal school day, and during weekends. SMTs support teachers and learners in participating in these supplementary lessons to strengthen learners' understanding of curriculum content and improve academic achievement. These findings are consistent with those of Maluleke (2024) and Shava and Heystek (2018), who found that schools often respond to declining learner performance through the implementation of extra classes. Similarly, the findings align with Saraye (2025) that additional instructional time can enhance learners' understanding of curriculum content beyond what is achievable during regular classroom periods.

Furthermore, these findings are consistent with the second dimension of Hallinger's (2018) instructional leadership model, which emphasises the role of school leaders in managing teaching and learning processes to improve classroom instruction and achieve academic goals (Bada et al., 2020; Hallinger et al., 2014). The instructional leadership practices of SMTs in the selected schools extend beyond administrative responsibilities to include deliberate actions aimed at maximising instructional time and supporting learner achievement. While the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) (2022) require SMTs to ensure that teaching and learning occur during regular school hours, effective instructional leadership may require the implementation of supplementary interventions to address learners' academic needs. In responding to declining academic performance, SMTs recognised the importance of providing learners with additional learning opportunities to strengthen curriculum understanding and support the achievement of the schools' academic goals.

Collaboration with district officials. The findings revealed that both internal and external collaboration are taking place within the selected secondary schools. As internal school leaders, SMTs collaborate with district officials, who serve as external stakeholders in supporting teaching and learning. Through this collaborative engagement, departmental heads receive assistance with curriculum-related matters, SMTs gain access to academic strategies aimed at improving learner performance, and teachers benefit from professional development opportunities designed to enhance their instructional practices. P2, a principal from School Two, explained:

> *They (Referring to district officials) are helping us with how to tackle some of the duties, especially curriculum-related issues. Facilitators always come here to assist our teachers, like on how to prepare the learners, how to phrase the assessments, and other stuff that is related to school academics… also, time and again, they would come to school to check curriculum coverage and check which topics are problematic and organise teacher development activities that will assist teachers on certain topics.* **(P2)**

On the same vein, DP1, a deputy principal from School One, expressed consistent views. However, this participant's account focused specifically on the support provided to departmental heads through collaboration with district officials. DP1 stated:

> *The facilitator will come and maybe check performance in the department he is visiting. If there are certain things, maybe there are gaps somewhere, the*

> *facilitator will show them how they can close those gaps, you know. So, if that department encounters any problems related to a subject a facilitator is a specialist in, they are there to assist. For example, if the departmental head tries to help a teacher teach a particular aspect but still cannot grasp it, she will ask for help from the facilitator to come and assist.* **(DP1)**

DH3, a departmental head from School Three, indicated that the SMT at her school receives support from district officials to enhance learner academic performance. The participant highlighted the importance of this collaboration in assisting the school to address academic challenges and improve learner outcomes. DH3 stated:

> *They support us enough (Referring to district officials)… they come and motivate us and then help us to create the strategies of how to come out of the situation (Referring to underperformance) we are now in, hey… sometimes we do a strategic planning together with them; they give us support… even the circuit manager comes to our school and we have talked to him about the situation (Referring to underperformance) and he promised that he will work with us and do something.* **(DH3)**

The findings of this study indicate that SMTs collaborate with district officials to improve learners' NSC performance. This collaboration enables departmental heads to receive support on curriculum-related matters, provides SMTs with academic strategies to enhance learner achievement, and offers teachers professional development opportunities aimed at improving instructional practices. These findings are consistent with the National Education Policy Act No. 27 of 1996, which requires SMTs and district officials, including circuit managers and subject specialists, to work collaboratively in implementing school improvement and academic development strategies. However, the findings differ from those reported by Schlebusch (2020), who found that district officials were not actively involved in supporting the academic programmes of the schools under their supervision, thereby contributing to poor learner performance. In contrast, the findings of this study suggest that district officials play an active and supportive role in promoting academic improvement within schools.

The findings also reflect the principles of distributed leadership. Distributed leadership emphasises teamwork, shared responsibility, and the collaborative execution of tasks to achieve organisational goals (Harris, 2008). The collaboration between SMTs and district officials observed in this enquiry demonstrates these principles in practice, as both groups work

collectively to improve learner academic achievement. SMTs cannot effectively manage teaching and learning in isolation; rather, the involvement of external stakeholders and the sharing of expertise are essential in addressing declining academic performance. Leadership practices that promote collaboration and capacity building are important to strengthen collective instructional leadership between internal and external stakeholders and enhancing learner achievement.

5. Conclusion

This study suggests that the decline in NSC performance is largely associated with internal school challenges that undermine the effectiveness of instructional leadership. Poor working relationships among SMT members and staff, together with the presence of educators who disengage from their instructional responsibilities by resisting participation in academic activities, neglecting classroom duties, and failing to support additional teaching initiatives, negatively affect the collaborative efforts required to promote effective teaching and learning. Although SMTs employ strategies such as conducting additional classes beyond regular teaching hours and collaborating with district officials to address declining NSC performance, the persistent internal school dysfunction and inconsistent teacher commitment remain significant contributors to learner underperformance. Sustainable improvements in learner achievement require not only strategic interventions but also strong professional working relationships that foster collaborative instructional leadership, teacher commitment, and accountability.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature by providing empirical and theoretical insights into instructional leadership challenges in schools experiencing declining academic performance despite a history of high achievement. Based on the findings, the study recommends the establishment of structured platforms and regular engagement sessions involving SMTs and teachers, with a particular focus on strengthening professional relationships and promoting collaborative instructional leadership. Such initiatives should be aligned with individual stakeholder commitment and performance accountability to support measurable and sustained improvements in learner achievement.

As a small-scale qualitative study, the findings are limited to the perspectives of the participating SMT members and cannot be generalised to all secondary schools. Consequently,

further research involving a larger sample of schools is recommended to deepen understanding of instructional leadership challenges and strategic responses in schools experiencing a transition from high academic performance to declining learner outcomes.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the University of Johannesburg. As part of a doctoral thesis, the conduct of this study was approved by the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Education ethics committee with an ethical clearance number SEM 1-2024-078, dated May 2024.

AI Declaration

The authors declare the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the authors used Grammarly to eliminate grammatical and punctuation errors. Furthermore, the authors used Copilot in searching for literature. The authors take full responsibility in ensuring proper review and editing of contents generated using AI.

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