

Influence Of Principals' Instructional Leadership Roles On Learners' Academic Performance at Selected Public Secondary Schools in the Khomas Region, Namibia

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The Khomas Region continues to face challenges in learners' academic progression, with 75%, 67.6% and 71% of Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary (NSSCO) candidates failing to qualify for Grade 12 in 2022, 2023 and 2024, respectively (MoEAC, 2025). Against this background, the study examined the influence of principals' instructional leadership roles on learners' academic performance in public secondary schools.

Objectives: It focused on principals' strategies and implementation of the five components of instructional leadership, stakeholders' perceptions of their influence on academic performance, and the contextual constraints affecting their implementation. The study also identified feasible context-specific strategies for strengthening principals' instructional leadership and improving learners' academic outcomes.

Methods: The study employed a qualitative case study design to develop an in-depth understanding of principals' instructional leadership roles and their influence on learners' academic performance in selected public secondary schools in the Khomas Region. Four schools, comprising two high-performing and two low-performing schools, were purposively selected from the 29 public secondary schools, with participants comprising three principals, eight HODs and eleven teachers. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis, enabling methodological triangulation and comparison of reported practices with observed and documentary evidence. A pilot study was conducted to refine the research instruments and procedures. The data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework, with coding and theme development focusing on the five components of instructional leadership, their relationship with learner performance, and the contextual challenges affecting principals' leadership practices.

Results: The findings indicate that effective instructional leadership is strongly associated with improved learner performance and is shaped by both leadership practices and school context. High-performing schools demonstrated clearer shared goals, evidence-based decision-making, positive learning climates, high academic expectations, consistent instructional supervision, constructive feedback, teacher collaboration, parental engagement and effective resource mobilisation. In contrast, low-performing schools experienced weaker goal ownership, irregular supervision, disciplinary and absenteeism challenges, limited parental participation, inadequate resources, overcrowding and lower staff morale. Overall, the findings show that instructional leadership extends beyond managing teaching and learning to include teacher and learner motivation, discipline, professional development, inclusion, technology and resource management, highlighting the need for collaborative, evidence-informed and context-responsive leadership to improve educational outcomes in the Khomas Region.

Conclusions: The study concludes that principals' instructional leadership significantly contributes to creating conditions that support improved learner academic performance. Effective leadership requires the integration of clear goals, a positive school climate, developmental instructional supervision, strategic resource management and continuous professional development. Sustainable improvement

further depends on participatory decision-making, teacher empowerment, distributed leadership, stakeholder engagement and evidence-informed practices. The study therefore recommends strengthening principals' and HODs' leadership capacity, promoting collaborative instructional improvement, ensuring equitable resource utilisation and fostering stronger school–community partnerships to support sustained and context-responsive improvements in learner performance in the Khomas Region.

Keywords: Differential learning needs, influence, instructional leadership, learners' performance, school leadership, school performance

1. INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

Since gaining independence in 1990, Namibia has undertaken substantial educational reforms aimed at expanding access, promoting equity and improving the quality of education (World Bank, 2021). The country's comparatively high investment in basic education further demonstrates its commitment to educational development (UNICEF, 2023). Despite these efforts, however, learner academic performance remains uneven across schools, with disparities associated with differences in resource availability, socio-economic conditions and school-level practices (Chaka, 2018). Within this context, school leadership is particularly important because principals influence the organisational conditions under which teaching and learning occur.

Of the various approaches to school leadership, instructional leadership is especially significant because it places teaching, learning and learner achievement at the centre of principals' responsibilities (Hallinger & Murphy, 2024). Hallinger and Murphy (2024) conceptualise instructional leadership as encompassing goal setting, management of the instructional programme and promotion of a positive learning climate. This conceptualisation remains influential because it places teaching and learning, rather than administrative compliance alone, at the centre of school leadership. Furthermore, Robinson et al. (2020) identify goal setting, management of the instructional programme, promotion of a positive learning climate, strategic resourcing and teacher professional development, as critical leadership practices. Their meta-analysis found that instructional leadership had a substantially stronger relationship with learner performance than transformational leadership, reinforcing the importance of leaders maintaining a sustained focus on the quality of teaching and learning.

Instructional leadership encompasses principals' efforts to establish clear instructional goals, supervise and evaluate teaching, support teachers' professional development, monitor learner progress and create conditions that promote effective teaching and learning. Research indicates that when these practices are implemented effectively, they can contribute to school improvement and enhanced learner performance, while potentially reducing performance disparities between schools (Hallinger & Murphy, 2024; Hou et al., 2019; Mestry, 2018; Shava et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the influence of instructional leadership cannot be considered independently of the contexts in which principals work. Its effectiveness may be shaped by the availability of educational resources, teachers' capacities, school culture, parental involvement and broader socio-economic and institutional conditions.

The Namibian schooling context presents several challenges that may constrain principals' capacity to exercise effective instructional leadership. UNESCO (2021) identifies inadequate funding and educational resources as continuing barriers to effective teaching and learning, particularly in poorly resourced schools. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC, 2021) reports persistent challenges relating to resource shortages, overcrowded classrooms and teachers' difficulties in responding to diverse learning needs. School-level concerns such as limited parental involvement, teacher and learner misconduct, failure to meet performance targets and learner late-coming may further complicate principals' instructional responsibilities (Kaukewahulo, 2022; Shapaka, 2024). In addition, cultural norms and perceptions of educational change may influence the acceptance and implementation of instructional leadership practices (Josua et al., 2022). These conditions suggest that the relationship between principals' instructional leadership and learner academic performance needs to be examined within its specific educational context rather than assumed to operate uniformly across schools.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the recognised contribution of instructional leadership to school improvement, learner academic performance remains a persistent concern in Namibia (Chaka, 2018; Iileka, 2017). A key concern is that principals may become heavily occupied with administrative and managerial responsibilities, thereby limiting the time and attention devoted to their core instructional functions of promoting effective teaching and learning (Maponya, 2020; MoE, 2005). This challenge may be compounded by the traditional emphasis on teaching experience and knowledge of educational policies and procedures in the appointment of school principals, with comparatively limited preparation and formal certification specifically focused on school leadership (Naidoo & Mestry, 2019; So-Oabeb & Du Plessis, 2023). Consequently, some principals may have insufficient opportunities to develop the leadership competencies required to effectively guide instruction, support teachers and monitor learner achievement (Mbangula, 2021).

The problem is particularly pronounced in the Khomas Region, where secondary school examination outcomes indicate persistent challenges in learner progression. Available statistics show that 75%, 67.6% and 71% of Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary Level (NSSCO) candidates in the region failed to qualify for Grade 12 in 2022, 2023 and 2024, respectively (MoEAC, 2025). These outcomes remained substantially below the desired regional progression target of 50% (MoEAC, 2023). Given that school leadership is recognised as an important school-based influence on learner performance (Bush et al., 2018; MoE, 2005), the persistence of poor academic outcomes raises an important question concerning the extent to which principals are effectively performing their instructional leadership roles and whether these roles are translating into improved learner performance.

Although previous studies have examined the relationship between instructional leadership and learner academic performance in various educational settings, limited empirical evidence specifically addresses how principals' instructional leadership roles influence learner academic performance in public secondary schools in the Khomas Region. This geographical and contextual gap limits understanding of how instructional leadership operates within the particular institutional, socio-economic and educational conditions of the region. The present study therefore seeks to examine the influence of principals' instructional leadership roles on learner academic performance in selected public secondary schools in the Khomas Region, while also identifying the challenges that may constrain the effective implementation of these roles.

OBJECTIVES

The study sought to examine the influence of principals' instructional leadership roles on learners' academic performance in selected public secondary schools in the Khomas Region. Specifically, it identified the strategies principals use to address the five components of the instructional leadership model; examined how these strategies are implemented; explored the perceptions of principals, HODs and teachers concerning their influence on learner performance; and investigated the constraints principals experience in performing their instructional leadership roles, together with context-specific strategies for addressing these challenges.

METHODS

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research approach using a case study design to develop an in-depth understanding of principals' instructional leadership roles and their influence on learners' academic performance in selected public secondary schools in the Khomas Region. Qualitative inquiry was considered appropriate because the study sought to explore participants' experiences, perceptions and practices within their natural school contexts. It enabled the researcher to obtain detailed accounts from principals, HoDs and teachers regarding how instructional leadership was implemented and how it related to academic outcomes. As Creswell and Creswell (2023) observe, qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring complex phenomena that require an understanding of participants' perspectives and contextual experiences. The case study design further allowed the researcher to examine instructional leadership holistically within real-life school settings, while identifying contextual patterns and practices that may not have been adequately captured through quantitative approaches.

Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprised 29 principals, 58 HoDs and 116 NSSCO level subject teachers in the Khomas Region. These participants were considered appropriate because of their professional experience and direct knowledge of instructional leadership and learner performance in secondary schools. Four public secondary schools were purposively selected, comprising two high-performing and two low-performing schools, based on the 2023 Grade 11 NSSCO national examination results. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to select information-rich cases that could provide contrasting perspectives on instructional leadership and academic performance.

The intended sample comprised principals, HoDs and NSSCO subject teachers across the four schools. However, one principal from School D withdrew from the study and did not provide access to the school's meeting minutes. In addition, one teacher from School A transferred to another school before data collection was completed. The final participant group consisted of 22 participants, including three principals, eight HoDs and eleven teachers. Most participants were female, while professional experience in secondary education ranged from two to 26 years. Six participants (27%) held master's degrees, ten (46%) held honours degrees and six (27%) possessed diplomas. The combination of extensive professional experience and varied academic qualifications provided participants with substantial practical and professional knowledge relevant to the research questions.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were generated through three complementary methods: semi-structured individual interviews, observations and document analysis. The use of multiple sources enabled methodological triangulation and provided a more comprehensive understanding of instructional leadership practices and their relationship with learner performance. Individual interviews were conducted with three principals, eight HoDs and the participating teachers. Interviews were held privately at the participants' schools and lasted approximately 40 minutes each. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to use predetermined questions while also asking probing and follow-up questions to clarify responses and explore emerging issues in greater depth. This approach encouraged open communication and enabled participants to describe their experiences in their own words. Rubin and Rubin (2020) emphasise the importance of rapport and trust in qualitative interviewing, particularly where participants are required to discuss professional experiences and practices. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed to preserve the accuracy of the accounts and facilitate systematic analysis.

Observation was used to obtain first-hand information about leadership and instructional practices in their natural settings. The researcher observed principals during morning briefings, interactions with staff, classroom-related activities and their routine activities around the school premises. Teachers and learners were also observed in classrooms, during break periods and on school grounds. Observation enabled the researcher to compare reported practices with actual behaviour and to identify practices that participants might not have articulated during interviews. Although researcher presence can introduce observer bias, this limitation was addressed through systematic observation and triangulation with interview and documentary evidence.

Document analysis provided an additional source of evidence. Relevant and current school documents were examined using a document analysis guide. These included school vision and mission statements, meeting minutes, timetables, lesson observation records, staff development registers, resource and financial records, learner support documents, discipline records and extracurricular schedules. Documents were examined for evidence of instructional supervision, curriculum monitoring, resource provision, teacher professional development, learner support and the creation of a positive learning environment. Information from documents was compared with interview and observation findings to identify consistencies, differences and recurring patterns.

Data Collection Procedure

Before the main study, a pilot study was conducted approximately two months in advance to assess the clarity, relevance and appropriateness of the research instruments. The pilot involved two secondary schools in the Khomas Region that were not included in the main study: one high-performing and one low-performing school. Participants included a principal and HoD from the low-performing school and an HoD and teacher from the high-performing

school. Feedback from the pilot was used to refine the interview questions and procedures, thereby improving the credibility and dependability of the instruments.

Following the pilot study, appointments were arranged with prospective participants. The researcher explained the purpose and procedures of the study and conducted interviews during participants' free periods in private rooms at their respective schools. Observations were undertaken using an observation template, with detailed field notes recorded while minimising unnecessary researcher interference. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, transcribed and systematically coded. Relevant school documents were collected and reviewed according to the document analysis guide. The use of interviews, observations and documents enabled the researcher to compare different forms of evidence and develop a contextualised interpretation of instructional leadership practices.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data were analysed thematically following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019). First, the researcher familiarised himself with the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts, observation notes and documentary information. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying significant words, phrases, statements and patterns relevant to the research questions. Third, related codes were grouped into potential themes. Fourth, the emerging themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the data. Fifth, the themes were clearly defined and named. Finally, the findings were organised into a coherent report and supported by appropriate participant quotations and evidence from observations and documents.

Colour coding was used to facilitate systematic organisation of the qualitative data. For example, evidence relating to defining school goals was assigned one colour, while evidence concerning resource provision was assigned another. Data from interviews, observations and documents were subsequently integrated under relevant themes. Thematic analysis focused particularly on the mechanisms through which instructional leadership influenced academic performance, including defining the school mission, managing instructional programmes, supervising teaching and learning, providing instructional resources, developing teachers' professional capacity and creating supportive learning environments. Attention was also given to principals' responses to contextual challenges and systemic disruptions, including COVID-19, and their implications for learner performance.

Trustworthiness

The credibility and dependability of the study were strengthened through methodological triangulation. Findings obtained from interviews were compared with observations and documentary evidence to determine areas of convergence and divergence. The use of contrasting high-performing and low-performing schools also provided contextual variation and strengthened the analytical depth of the study. Probing questions during interviews enabled the researcher to clarify participants' responses and reduce ambiguity. Peer or expert review of the methodology, findings and conclusions was also used to identify potential biases, inconsistencies or omissions. These measures enhanced the credibility of the interpretations while supporting the transferability of the findings to comparable educational contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and institutional permission were obtained before data collection. The researcher received ethical clearance and research permission from the University of Namibia (UNAM), followed by permission from the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC) and the Khomas Regional Directorate of Education. Participants were informed about the purpose, procedures and significance of the study and were assured that participation was voluntary. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Permission was obtained before interviews were audio-recorded.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using participant codes rather than real names and by ensuring that information was not disclosed to unauthorised persons. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned coded identifiers. Principals were designated PA–PD, HODs as HODA1–HODD2, and teachers as TA1–TD3, with the letters indicating the respective school and numbers distinguishing participants within each category. The withdrawal of the School D principal was respected in accordance with the principle of voluntary participation. Research data were stored in a password-protected folder on the researcher's computer and were to be securely deleted after five years.

or upon completion and graduation from the thesis. These procedures were intended to protect participants' privacy, autonomy and professional interests throughout the study.

RESULTS

Defining Shared School Goals

The findings indicate that effective instructional leadership begins with the clear definition of shared school goals grounded in the school's vision, mission and values. Across the four schools, participants recognised these statements as providing direction, legitimacy and a common purpose for learners, teachers, parents and School Board members. The findings further indicate that goals should not remain static but require regular review to respond to changing community needs and emerging educational priorities.

A clear distinction emerged between the high-performing and low-performing schools. The high-performing schools used examination and internal performance data more systematically to identify needs, establish priorities and target interventions. Management meetings and annual reports were used to identify areas of strength and subjects requiring improvement. In contrast, decision-making in the low-performing schools was more centralised, and teachers reported limited influence over important decisions. As one participant stated, "there is no shared ownership of these decisions" (TD2, 30 January 2025). Thus, the findings suggest that effective goal setting is associated with clarity, evidence-based decision-making, participation and collective ownership.

Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate

A positive learning climate emerged as an important condition for improved learner performance. Participants consistently associated effective learning with safety, order, punctuality, teacher commitment, high expectations, parental involvement, motivation and appropriate learner support. The findings indicate that school climate is multidimensional, incorporating instructional time, professional development, discipline, leadership visibility, academic standards, parental engagement and incentives.

Protection of instructional time was particularly prominent. The high-performing schools demonstrated greater attention to punctuality, efficient meetings, lesson preparation and time on task. Teachers recognised that careful planning facilitated effective transitions and maximised classroom learning. By contrast, low-performing schools experienced greater disruption arising from lengthy administrative meetings, although teachers demonstrated resilience by using available classroom time productively.

Continuous professional development was also regarded as essential for strengthening teacher efficacy. Workshops, mentoring, peer teaching, co-teaching and professional collaboration provided opportunities for teachers to strengthen subject knowledge and instructional practices. However, participants emphasised the need for context-specific professional development rather than generic training. As one participant observed, "We really don't need one-size-fit-all training activities" (TD3, 30 January 2025). Digital literacy was another concern, particularly in poorly resourced schools, where inadequate devices, infrastructure and training constrained meaningful ICT integration.

Discipline, Leadership Visibility and Academic Expectations

Discipline emerged as an important dimension of instructional leadership. Although it is not explicitly identified as a separate component in the instructional leadership models underpinning the study, participants regarded order and responsible behaviour as prerequisites for effective teaching and learning.

Substantial differences existed between the schools. High-performing schools recorded lower levels of disciplinary cases and absenteeism, whereas low-performing schools experienced higher learner and teacher absenteeism, classroom disruption, drug use and vaping, as well as learner pregnancy. The quantitative records supported this qualitative evidence, with learner disciplinary cases ranging from 1% at SA to 6% at SD, while weekly learner absenteeism ranged from 2% to 6%.

Parental involvement, staff cohesion and leadership consistency were identified as important influences on discipline. High-performing schools involved parents, community leaders and, where necessary, the police in

addressing serious disciplinary problems. Extracurricular activities, learner leadership structures and clear behavioural expectations were also used to promote responsible behaviour. Conversely, staff disunity in low-performing schools weakened collective responsibility. One participant observed that “the majority of teachers chose to be spectators while learners are misbehaving” (TD3, 30 January 2025).

Leadership visibility was another prominent finding. Participants associated principals’ presence on school grounds with accountability, professional modelling and improved discipline. Nevertheless, visibility needed to be balanced with administrative responsibilities, as direct managerial intervention in classroom discipline could sometimes be perceived as undermining teacher authority.

Maintaining high academic expectations was also characteristic of the stronger-performing schools. These schools demonstrated a more visible culture of academic excellence through target setting, role modelling and continuous monitoring. Participants emphasised that expectations needed to be regularly revisited rather than established once and subsequently neglected. As one participant stated, “High expectations lead to high achievements. Believe in our learners” (NBB12).

Parental and Teacher Motivation

Parental involvement was strongly associated with learner discipline and academic achievement. High-performing schools maintained regular communication with parents through meetings, newsletters, consultations and fundraising activities. Parents contributed to monitoring learner progress as well as mobilising resources. In contrast, parental participation was considerably weaker in low-performing schools, with one participant reporting that only approximately 5% of parents attended school meetings. Importantly, parents whose children required greater academic and behavioural support were often the least likely to participate.

Teacher motivation was influenced by recognition, fairness, trust, autonomy and supportive leadership. High-performing schools used awards, praise, delegation and open-door policies to acknowledge teachers’ contributions. Participants also emphasised that leaders should “lead by example” (PB, 17 January 2025) by modelling punctuality, professionalism and commitment.

Conversely, low-performing schools reported teacher demotivation associated with overcrowding, inadequate resources, limited recognition, perceived unfairness and strained management–teacher relationships. Although extrinsic incentives were valued, participants also emphasised intrinsic motivation, suggesting that sustainable teacher commitment cannot depend solely on monetary rewards.

Learner motivation was promoted through awards, certificates, encouragement, motivational speakers and extracurricular activities. Schools also demonstrated inclusive and socially responsive practices by supporting disadvantaged learners with uniforms, stationery and sanitary products and accommodating pregnant learners and learner-mothers.

Managing the Instructional Programme

Management of the instructional programme involved supervision, monitoring, feedback, assessment and teacher development. Although all schools recognised the importance of instructional monitoring, substantial differences were evident in implementation.

The high-performing schools demonstrated more systematic supervision through classroom visits, file inspections, lesson-plan monitoring and academic reviews. Novice teachers generally received more frequent observations than experienced teachers. Informal walkthroughs were considered particularly useful because they provided a more authentic representation of classroom practice than scheduled observations.

Participants indicated that supervision served both accountability and developmental purposes. As one participant explained, “Monitoring and feedback assist instructional practices by tracking the quality coverage of the syllabus” (HODD2, 29 January 2025). Regular supervision encouraged teachers to plan effectively, maintain appropriate records, monitor assessment and ensure syllabus coverage. In low-performing schools, less frequent supervision was associated with opportunities for complacency, weak planning and delayed assessment.

The quality of feedback was equally important. Participants emphasised that feedback should be timely, honest, empathetic and solution-oriented, with attention directed towards professional gaps rather than personal shortcomings. As one participant stated, “I’m attacking the gap in knowledge so that I can assist the teacher” (HODC2, 23 January 2025).

Assessment was regarded as a mechanism for improvement rather than merely measurement. Continuous tests, written work, examinations and examiner reports enabled schools to identify learning gaps and introduce interventions such as remedial and after-school lessons. However, overcrowding constrained teachers’ capacity to mark work and provide individualised feedback.

Teacher Development and Collaboration

Teacher development was most effective where supervision was combined with mentoring, peer learning and collaborative practice. High-performing schools used experienced teachers and Heads of Department (HoDs) to support novice teachers through formal and informal classroom visits, co-planning and professional discussions.

Participants valued opportunities to learn from colleagues because different perspectives helped teachers refine their instructional methodologies. As one teacher explained, “You want feedback because we have different perspectives” (TA1, 15 January 2025).

However, collaborative practices were less consistently embedded in low-performing schools. Although co-teaching, co-planning and peer teaching were recognised as beneficial, they remained underutilised. The findings therefore indicate that professional collaboration requires deliberate leadership structures, trust and shared responsibility.

Providing Resources and Addressing Structural Inequalities

Resource provision emerged as a major differentiating factor between the schools. High-performing schools benefited from laboratories, ICT infrastructure, projectors, interactive boards, internet access, learning materials and learner-support systems. These resources facilitated practical learning, multimedia instruction and differentiated support.

By contrast, low-performing schools experienced shortages of textbooks, computers, laboratory facilities and basic infrastructure, together with overcrowded classrooms. Participants stressed that “if there are no resources, you are not going to deliver what is required” (TB2, 20 January 2025).

Resource scarcity was compounded by weak parental contributions and difficulties with fundraising. Concerns about delayed financial accountability reduced staff trust and weakened participation. Nevertheless, some schools demonstrated innovative approaches, including Google Classroom, Wi-Fi access, open educational resources and targeted fundraising. These findings suggest that both resource availability and leadership capacity to mobilise, allocate and account for resources are important.

Technology further illustrated the resource divide. While some schools integrated projectors, smart televisions, internet resources and Google Classroom into teaching, others lacked basic computers and printers. Digital inequality therefore reinforced existing educational inequalities.

Developing Leadership Capacity

The development of leadership skills and knowledge emerged as a further theme. Principals and HoDs identified managerial competence, digital literacy, social intelligence and ethical leadership as important areas for professional development.

High-performing schools demonstrated evidence of management members attending leadership and digital-literacy training. However, participants from low-performing schools raised concerns that leadership workshops often prioritised principals while excluding HoDs, despite their substantial managerial and instructional responsibilities.

Overall, the results demonstrate substantial differences between the schools. SA and SB showed more systematic and collaborative practices, while SC and SD experienced weaker goal ownership, irregular supervision, greater disciplinary and absenteeism challenges, weaker parental participation, resource shortages and lower staff morale.

DISCUSSION

Shared Goals, Participation and Evidence-Based Leadership

The findings support Hallinger and Murphy (2024), who argue that school goals gain relevance and legitimacy when derived from high-level institutional statements. The vision, mission and values of the schools provided an important foundation for establishing common direction and purpose. However, the findings extend this perspective by demonstrating that clearly formulated goals alone are insufficient. Goals require regular review, evidence-based adjustment and stakeholder participation to remain meaningful in changing educational contexts, consistent with Harris and Jones (2022).

The stronger performance of SA and SB suggests that goal setting is most effective when examination and internal performance data are systematically incorporated into decision-making. This accords with Dekker et al. (2024), who emphasise evidence-based goal setting. Conversely, the centralised decision-making evident in SC and SD weakened teachers' sense of ownership. The finding that "there is no shared ownership of these decisions" (TD2, 30 January 2025) illustrates that instructional leadership is strengthened when teachers are treated as active contributors rather than passive recipients of decisions.

Positive School Climate, Instructional Time and Professional Learning

The findings confirm the importance of school climate for learning and academic achievement, supporting Maxwell et al. (2017). However, the study demonstrates that a positive climate encompasses more than safety and discipline. It includes protection of instructional time, professional development, leadership visibility, high academic expectations, parental engagement and learner support.

The stronger attention to punctuality, efficient meetings, preparation and time on task in SA and SB indicates that instructional time is both an organisational and professional resource. Conversely, lengthy administrative meetings in low-performing schools potentially reduced opportunities for classroom learning. Nevertheless, teachers' ability to use available time productively suggests that leadership responsibility for protecting instructional time must be complemented by teacher professionalism.

The findings concerning professional development support Raman et al. (2022), while also highlighting the importance of contextual relevance. Generic professional development may have limited impact when it does not address teachers' actual instructional needs. The observation that "We really don't need one-size-fit-all training activities" (TD3, 30 January 2025) therefore reinforces the need for differentiated and needs-based professional learning. Digital literacy should similarly be treated as an integral component of contemporary teacher development, particularly in schools experiencing technological disadvantage.

Discipline, Leadership Visibility and Academic Expectations

Although discipline is not explicitly represented as a separate component in the instructional leadership models underpinning this study, the findings demonstrate its close relationship with teaching and learning. Higher disciplinary problems, absenteeism, substance use and learner pregnancy in the lower-performing schools created conditions that could undermine instructional effectiveness.

The findings further suggest that sustainable discipline depends on collective institutional responsibility. Parental engagement, staff cohesion, learner leadership and community involvement strengthened disciplinary processes in the stronger-performing schools. In contrast, staff disunity weakened collective responsibility in the lower-performing schools. Discipline should therefore not be regarded solely as an administrative responsibility of principals but as a shared component of school leadership and professional practice.

The importance of leadership visibility is consistent with Leithwood et al. (2020) and Cabaron and Oco (2023). Visible principals can model professional conduct, reinforce accountability and respond to emerging problems. However, the findings also demonstrate the need to balance visibility with respect for teacher autonomy. Effective visibility should therefore be understood as supportive supervision rather than intrusive managerial control. The stronger academic cultures observed in SA and SB also support Marzano (2017) and Robinson et al. (2021), who emphasise high expectations as a feature of effective instructional leadership. Importantly, the findings indicate that

high expectations must be continuously reinforced through target setting, monitoring, encouragement and role modelling.

Parental Engagement, Teacher Motivation and Inclusive Leadership

The strong relationship between parental involvement, learner discipline and achievement suggests that schools cannot improve learner outcomes independently of families and communities. The markedly low participation of parents in some low-performing schools is particularly concerning because families of learners requiring the greatest support may be the least engaged. School leadership should therefore move beyond relying on voluntary participation and develop deliberate strategies for reaching hard-to-engage families.

Teacher motivation was similarly influenced by organisational conditions. Recognition, fairness, trust, autonomy and supportive leadership strengthened motivation, whereas overcrowding, inadequate resources, perceived unfairness and strained management–teacher relationships contributed to demotivation. These findings complement Ryan and Deci (2020) and Deci et al. (2020) by demonstrating that intrinsic motivation operates within organisational conditions that can either support or undermine teachers' professional commitment.

The provision of material support to disadvantaged learners, including uniforms, stationery and sanitary products, and the accommodation of pregnant learners and learner-mothers, extends the interpretation of instructional leadership beyond conventional managerial concerns. Such practices indicate an emerging social-justice dimension in which equity involves responding to differentiated needs rather than treating all learners identically.

Instructional Supervision, Feedback and Assessment

The findings strongly support Hallinger and Murphy (2024) and Shaked (2023b) in emphasising the active involvement of instructional leaders in teaching and learning. The systematic classroom visits, file inspections, lesson-plan monitoring and academic reviews evident in the stronger-performing schools indicate that supervision can strengthen instructional accountability and professional practice.

The findings further demonstrate that supervision is most effective when it combines accountability with professional development. Timely, empathetic and solution-oriented feedback encourages teachers to address instructional gaps without experiencing supervision as personal criticism. The statement, "I'm attacking the gap in knowledge so that I can assist the teacher" (HODC2, 23 January 2025), illustrates this developmental orientation.

This finding is also consistent with Robinson et al. (2021), particularly their emphasis on collaborative examination of evidence and joint problem-solving. Informal walkthroughs were particularly valuable because they provided leaders with a more authentic understanding of classroom practice.

Assessment similarly functioned as an improvement mechanism rather than merely a measurement tool. Continuous assessment, examination results and examiner reports provided evidence for identifying learning gaps and designing interventions. However, overcrowding limited teachers' ability to mark work and provide individualised feedback. This demonstrates that instructional improvement depends not only on teacher competence but also on favourable structural conditions.

Teacher Development, Collaboration and Distributed Leadership

The findings demonstrate that teacher development is strongest when classroom supervision is integrated with mentoring, peer learning, co-planning and collaborative practice. Experienced teachers and HoDs played an important role in supporting novice teachers, suggesting that schools possess internal professional expertise that can be mobilised through deliberate leadership.

The statement, "You want feedback because we have different perspectives" (TA1, 15 January 2025), highlights the value of professional dialogue and collegial learning. However, the weaker use of co-teaching, co-planning and peer teaching in low-performing schools indicates that collaboration cannot be achieved simply by encouraging teachers to work together. It requires structures, trust, time and leadership support. This finding reinforces the broader argument for distributed and shared instructional leadership, whereby responsibility for improving teaching and learning is extended beyond principals to HoDs and teachers.

Resources, Technology and Structural Inequalities

The substantial differences in resource availability between the schools demonstrate that instructional leadership operates within broader structural conditions. Laboratories, textbooks, ICT infrastructure, internet connectivity and learning materials enabled the stronger-performing schools to provide richer instructional experiences, whereas shortages in low-performing schools constrained teachers' capacity to implement desired practices.

The statement that "if there are no resources, you are not going to deliver what is required" (TB2, 20 January 2025) captures the relationship between leadership and material conditions. However, the findings also demonstrate that resources alone are insufficient. Leadership capacity to mobilise, allocate, utilise and account for resources determines how effectively available resources contribute to teaching and learning.

The digital divide is particularly significant. Differences in access to computers, projectors, smart televisions, internet connectivity and Google Classroom demonstrate how technological inequality can reproduce wider educational inequalities. Consequently, improving instructional leadership requires attention not only to leadership practices but also to equitable infrastructure and digital capacity.

Leadership Capacity and an Integrated Interpretation

The findings concerning leadership development support Hopp and Pruschak (2023) and Robinson et al. (2020), who emphasise continuous professional learning among educational leaders. Principals and HoDs require competence in instructional supervision, strategic management, digital literacy, data use, social intelligence and ethical leadership to respond effectively to contemporary educational demands.

The exclusion of HoDs from some leadership development opportunities is particularly important because HoDs occupy a critical position between strategic school leadership and classroom practice. Leadership development should therefore extend beyond principals and encompass the wider management team.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that effective instructional leadership is not confined to formal practices such as defining goals, managing instruction and monitoring teaching. Rather, it operates as an interconnected system involving shared goal setting, positive school climate, professional learning, discipline, parental engagement, motivation, resource provision, collaboration and leadership development.

The stronger practices observed in SA and SB suggest that learner performance is influenced by the interaction between leadership practices and organisational conditions. Strong instructional leadership can mobilise resources, establish high expectations, protect instructional time, support teachers and engage families. However, leadership effectiveness is constrained when overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, weak parental participation and insufficient professional development persist. Instructional leadership should therefore be understood as context-responsive, requiring both leadership agency and attention to structural realities.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that principals' instructional leadership plays an important role in creating the conditions necessary for improved learner academic performance. The five broad dimensions examined—goal setting, promoting a conducive school climate, managing instructional programmes, managing resources, and developing leadership knowledge and skills are interconnected rather than isolated practices. Effective principals integrate these dimensions to create coherent systems in which teachers are supported, learners are motivated and instructional improvement becomes a shared responsibility.

The findings demonstrate that clear and measurable goals provide direction, but their effectiveness depends on stakeholder ownership, regular monitoring and evidence-based adjustment. Similarly, a positive school climate requires more than disciplinary rules; it depends on respectful relationships, consistent expectations, parental engagement, learner support and visible leadership. Instructional monitoring is most productive when classroom observations, feedback and teacher development are developmental and collaborative.

The study further concludes that teacher professional development is central to sustainable instructional improvement. Principals who facilitate mentoring, peer collaboration, coaching and relevant training are more likely

to strengthen classroom practice. However, professional development should be differentiated according to identified teacher needs and school priorities. Participatory leadership is equally important for securing teacher commitment and reducing resistance to instructional initiatives.

Adequate and equitably distributed resources also contribute to effective instructional leadership, although resource availability alone does not guarantee improved achievement. Principals must ensure that resources are strategically allocated, effectively utilised and aligned with instructional priorities. Resource management, stakeholder participation and instructional leadership should therefore be understood as mutually reinforcing processes.

Finally, principals and HoDs require continuous professional learning. Development in digital literacy, instructional supervision, data use, conflict management, emotional intelligence and strategic management is increasingly necessary in a complex educational environment. The participation of school management members in managerial and digital-literacy workshops supports the principle that leadership development should be continuous rather than a once-off activity. As one Management Continuous Professional Development Plan for SD stated, “The members of the school management are encouraged to attend workshops to reskill and upskill their leadership knowledge and skills” (MCPDA).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen participatory goal setting. Principals should involve teachers, learners, parents, HoDs and School Boards in developing measurable school-improvement objectives. Learner performance data should be systematically used to identify priorities, monitor progress and adjust interventions. School goals should be communicated regularly so that stakeholders understand their responsibilities and contributions.
2. Strengthen safe, disciplined and inclusive learning environments. Schools should address absenteeism, substance abuse, learner pregnancy and behavioural challenges through coordinated interventions involving teachers, parents, learners and relevant community structures. Positive discipline, restorative approaches and learner-support programmes should complement formal disciplinary measures.
3. Institutionalise developmental instructional supervision. Principals should conduct regular classroom visits and provide constructive feedback, mentoring and peer coaching. Professional development should be based on identified teacher needs and should prioritise digital literacy, differentiated instruction, assessment, classroom management and innovative teaching approaches. Training should avoid generic, one-size-fits-all approaches and provide opportunities for teachers to apply and reflect on newly acquired competencies.
4. Promote teacher collaboration and distributed leadership. Schools should establish structures for co-teaching, co-planning, peer teaching, mentoring and professional dialogue. HoDs and experienced teachers should be deliberately engaged in instructional leadership and teacher development to strengthen collective accountability and professional learning.
5. Improve equitable resource allocation and accountability. Resource allocation should be transparent, equitable and explicitly linked to instructional priorities. Schools should strengthen partnerships with parents, communities and other stakeholders to supplement government resources while maintaining financial accountability. Particular attention should be given to disadvantaged schools to reduce resource-related inequalities.
6. Address digital inequality. The Ministry and schools should prioritise ICT infrastructure, internet connectivity, appropriate digital devices and teacher training, particularly in poorly resourced schools. Digital technologies should be integrated according to instructional needs rather than introduced merely as technological innovations.
7. Strengthen parental engagement. Schools should develop targeted strategies for engaging parents who are less likely to participate in conventional meetings, particularly families of learners experiencing academic, behavioural or attendance difficulties. Communication should be regular, accessible and focused on shared responsibility for learner success.
8. Invest in continuous leadership development. Principals and HoDs should receive sustained professional development in instructional supervision, strategic planning, data-informed decision-making, digital competence,

emotional intelligence, conflict management and collaborative leadership. Leadership development should include HoDs rather than focusing exclusively on principals.

9. Strengthen system-level support. The Ministry should support schools through targeted professional development, equitable resource allocation and appropriate mechanisms for monitoring instructional leadership practices. Such support should recognise differences in school contexts rather than applying uniform interventions across schools.

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