

Instructional Leadership in Underperforming Schools: Evaluating the Intervention Strategies of School Management Teams and Subject Advisors

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Abstract

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) results serve as a primary benchmark for school functionality in South Africa. Despite existing accountability frameworks, persistent underperformance remains a challenge. This qualitative study investigated intervention strategies employed by School Management Teams (SMTs) and subject advisors to enhance Grade 12 performance. Set in the Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati District Municipality and grounded in instructional leadership theory, the research utilized purposive sampling to select three high schools that have underperformed in Grade 12 for over fifteen years. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with three teachers, three principals, and two district officials, then analysed via inductive thematic analysis. The findings revealed a multi-pronged intervention approach categorised into three core themes: (1) Psychosocial Support, through motivational programme aimed at learner resilience; (2) Intensive Pedagogical Support, via academic camps to address curriculum gaps; and (3) Institutional Oversight, through human resource capacitation and subject advisor support. While these strategies are central to district recovery plans, their efficacy is hampered by geographic disparities and resource constraints. The study recommends that the Department of Education decentralise resource allocation to support remote schools and transition subject advisors from compliance monitoring to active instructional coaching. Further research is required to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of these specific interventions in sustainable academic recovery.

Keywords: academic underperformance, instructional leadership, school management teams, school leadership, subject advisor

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Introduction

The South African National Curriculum Statements (NCS) Grade 12 results serve as a benchmark for evaluating system standards and assessing functionality (Potterton, 2015). Even though Taylor (2021) warns these metrics do not necessarily indicate deep conceptual understanding, results continue as the basis for comparative assessments (Allais, 2014). Accountability is a focal point within the DBE, where stakeholders are held accountable for performance (Klinck et al., 2023). This is manifested through intervention strategies, including funded programmes like winter schools, spring classes, incubation camps, and Saturday classes (Mkhize & Otu, 2018; Mpiti & Wambu, 2023) designed to insulate learners against systemic shortcomings (West & Meier, 2020).

When schools underperform, subject advisors, teachers, and principals are called into account. Under Personnel Administration Measures (PAM), SMTs and district offices are entrusted with executing curriculum and designing programmes to enhance academic performance (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2016; Ehren et al., 2020; Mthembu, 2025). Tabe (2023) argues factors such as teacher quality affect performance, meaning teachers are at the centre of academic success. According to the DBE (2020), subject advisors' responsibilities include monitoring and supporting teachers in classrooms and implementing curriculum changes (Department of Basic Education, 2023; Mthembu, 2025). Mouton and Malumbete (2023) agree with DBE (2013) that chief responsibilities are oversight and assistance with curriculum implementation.

When performance-based accountability models fail, SMTs and advisors find themselves holding accountability for results complicated by deficiencies outside their control (Heystek, 2015). Some districts face underperforming schools where performance has been below 35% or under 50% for consecutive years. The Dr RSM district was at the bottom of Grade 12 rankings in North-West province for over fifteen years (DBE, 2022a). This prolonged underperformance suggests a disjuncture between intervention and classroom reality. There is a lack of qualitative understanding regarding how leadership roles manifest in specific strategies targeting recovery in Dr RSM district. This study asks: What are the types of intervention strategies the SMTs, and subject advisors employ to enhance the matric academic performance in Dr. RSM education district?

Literature Review

School Management Teams

The SMT comprises the principal, deputy principal, and Heads of Department, and may co-opt senior teachers and heads of support departments (Klinck et al., 2023). Under principal leadership, it plays a role in ensuring success. Planning and execution through teachers is central to SMT responsibilities. Teachers carry out tasks involving content delivery to support learners and enhance performance (Klinck et al., 2023; Maja, 2016; Mthiyane, 2019; Subramoney, 2016).

SMTs shape academic performance. Proactive efforts in strategic planning tailored to foster quality have a positive impact on learner performance (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021; Maifala, 2024; Ndimande, 2005; Yingwane, 2025). Schools lacking strategic planning mechanisms experience underachievement. Research highlights shortcomings like failure of SMTs to

execute enhancement programmes, inadequate involvement of parents, insufficient teacher motivation, and ineffective communication (Munsamy, 2023; Netshisumbewa, 2024).

Teachers' dedication is influenced by motivation, support, and resource provisioning from SMTs (Hompashe, 2024; Munsamy, 2023), impacting performance (Manyaka, 2025; Mosibudi, 2012; Ntseto, 2015). Additionally, SMTs encourage parents to participate in school affairs and keep them informed (DBE, 2016, 2022b).

Subject Advisors

Subject advisors, also referred to as superintendents, inspectors, field or subject specialists (Mbande-Kwayini et al., 2024), are

specialist office-based educators in a district office or circuit office whose function is to facilitate curriculum implementation and improve the environment and process of learning and teaching by visiting schools, consulting with and advising school principals and teachers on curriculum matters. (DBE, 2013, p. 11)

District offices serve as the link between Provincial Education Departments (PEDs), educational institutions, and the public (DBE, 2013, 2022b, 2023).

According to the Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts (DBE, 2013), the first role of a Subject Advisor is to monitor the curriculum and support implementation. When monitoring, they observe practices, check progress, and provide remedies (Mouton & Malumbete, 2023; Munyai, 2024). Their chief roles are monitoring and supporting curriculum delivery to ensure quality teaching (DBE, 2022b). They oversee curriculum, ensure teachers are developed, evaluate learner performance, monitor HoDs, ensure availability of materials, and conduct class visits with feedback (DBE, 2016; Govindasamy & Mestry, 2022). Subject advisors play an instructional role, conduct workshops, facilitate clusters, and visit schools (Bantwini & Diko, 2011; Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Shushu, 2023). District offices and subject advisors work closely with teachers (Mbande-Kwayini et al., 2024; Mthethwa, 2022).

Interrelationship Between Subject Advisors and Schools

The relationship between schools and districts is pivotal. Continuous communication and collaboration are imperative. DBE (2013) underscores district officials collaborating with principals, providing guidance and support. Disharmony or misalignment due to insufficient resources, lack of consultation, limited visibility, and responsiveness to change impacts learner achievement (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Mouton & Malumbete, 2023; Munyai, 2024; Netshisumbewa, 2024).

Educational researchers emphasize that success is contingent on support received from districts (Hompashe, 2024; Yingwane, 2025). Fostering mutual respect is essential. Clear role definition and professional independence are fundamental; when district officials intrude into daily operations, hierarchical tension undermines progress (V. M. Ndlovu, 2025). Principals possess understanding of what works best for their institutions (Kgwete, 2024; Shula et al., 2022). Acknowledging their leadership enhances collaboration and improves support (Kgwete, 2024; Maifala, 2024; Shula et al., 2022).

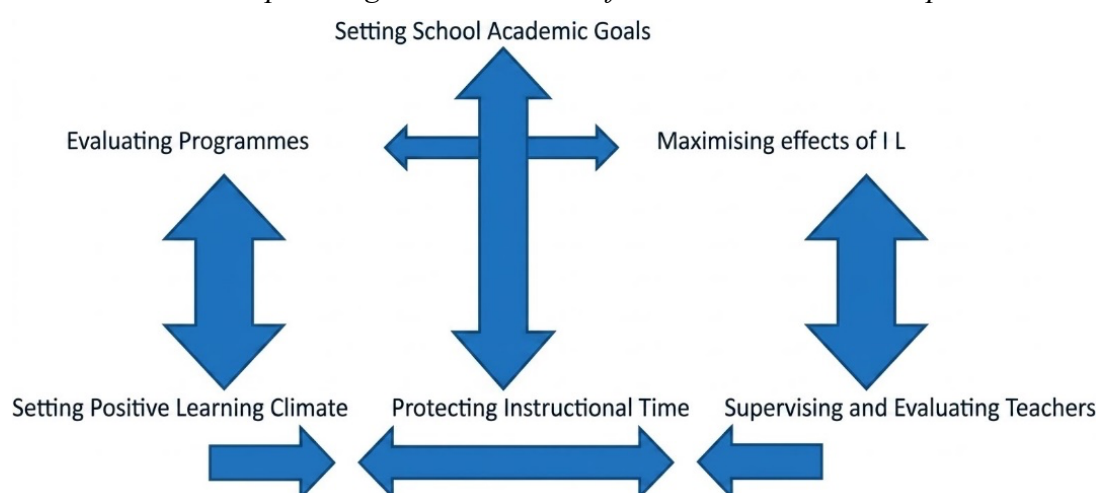
Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded in instructional leadership, “a model of school leadership in which a principal works alongside teachers to provide support and guidance in establishing best practices in teaching.” (Brolund, 2016, p. 42). Principals communicate with staff and set clear goals (Brolund, 2016). SMTs and Subject Advisors provide instructional leadership within their mandates (Bush & Glover, 2009; Grant & Osanloo, 2014). SMTs create conducive environments, set priorities, and ensure delivery (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021; Klinck et al., 2023; Maifala, 2024; Maja, 2016; Mthiyane, 2019; Ndimande, 2005; Subramoney, 2016; Yingwane, 2025). Subject Advisors focus on supporting teachers through professional development, guidance, and monitoring (DBE, 2013, 2016, 2022b, 2023; Govindasamy & Mestry, 2022).

Instructional leadership is executed through six functions: setting goals, evaluating programmes, maximising effects of instructional leadership, establishing a learning climate, protecting instructional time, and supervising teachers (Hallinger, 2005). Principals and SMTs initiate oversight through coaching, mentoring, and professional development (Mestry, 2017). This study investigated the collective experiences of key stakeholders. Figure 1 illustrates six interconnected functions.

Figure 1

The Interrelationship Amongst Six Functions of Instructional Leadership



Source: Weber's (1996) Model of Instructional Leadership

Setting School Goals

This function focuses on setting goals. SMTs, led by the principal, provide guidance to shape goals aligning with school philosophy. Subject Advisors collaborate with schools (DBE, 2013). The primary responsibility is to facilitate teaching and learning to improve performance (Krey & Burke, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008).

Evaluating and Monitoring Programmes

Evaluation and monitoring of programmes is essential for executing the vision. Institutions depend on staff to carry out tasks and implement programmes (He et al., 2024; Krey & Burke, 2005; Weber, 1996).

Instructional leadership includes promotion of learning based on professional inquiry and relationships (Timperley, 2011). Leaders must use data on learner performance to evaluate effectiveness (Hallinger & Murphy, 1992). They manage and evaluate by critically assessing and revising programmes (Chitamba & Jita, 2023). Data analysis enables leaders to set goals, timelines, and strategies (Chitamba & Jita, 2023; Lee et al., 2024).

Setting Standards for Achievement and Setting Tone and Learning Climate

Educational leaders create a climate for learning where learners set high standards (Weber, 1996). School visits by subject advisors serve as opportunities to inspire teachers (Chitamba & Jita, 2023; Mthembu, 2025; Shushu, 2023). Plans should be underpinned by a clear vision, ensuring alignment with goals (Mbande-Kwayini et al., 2024; Mthembu, 2025).

Protecting Instructional Time and Programme

Instructional leaders safeguard teaching time and prioritize curriculum delivery (Maponya, 2015). Transformational leadership involves inspiring teachers and learners to achieve goals (Metaferia et al., 2023). Regular communication and visits from district officials enhance self-efficacy (Mbande-Kwayini et al., 2024; Mthembu, 2025). Leadership must promote environments that foster a positive academic climate (Sariakin et al., 2025; Shaked, 2024), cultivating a supportive climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1992).

Supervising and Evaluating Teachers

Principals and SMT members supervise and evaluate teachers to maintain order and execution of duties. Personnel selection is important in sustaining instructional programmes, and strategic staffing decisions mitigate challenges (Mestry et al., 2013). SMTs and subject advisors provide staff with opportunities for professional development (Chabalala & Maphalala, 2024; Mestry et al., 2013). District officials provide support whenever principals seek assistance (Mbande-Kwayini et al., 2024; Mthembu, 2025).

Maximising Effects of Instructional Leadership (IL)

This function underscores the role of instructional leadership programmes and their alignment with goals (Akomodi, 2025; He et al., 2024). Successful implementation depends on effective allocation of human resources and organizational support (Shava & Heystek, 2021). Instructional leaders must possess knowledge of the six core functions: setting goals, evaluating programmes, maximising effects of instructional leadership, establishing a positive learning climate, protecting instructional time, and supervising teachers. This requires leveraging unique strengths of teaching staff to achieve objectives.

Research Methodology

Research Paradigm, Approach and Design

The interpretivism paradigm was employed as it seeks to capture participants' first-hand experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Interpretivism is guided by beliefs about the world and how it should be studied (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

A qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate to engage with SMTs and Subject Advisors. Qualitative research is characterized by interviews, fieldwork, and interaction analysis (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). A case study design was adopted to facilitate data collection (Baškarada, 2014). This approach gains understanding of a phenomenon through multiple collection methods (Coombs, 2022).

Population and Sampling

Purposive sampling sampled three secondary schools in Dr RSM district. School A is a quintile 3 school from Naledi circuit, School B is a quintile 3 school from Greater Taung Rural circuit, and School C is a quintile 1 school from Molopo Circuit. They were classified as underperforming in Grade 12 for three consecutive years.

Sampling criteria required schools to be operational for fifteen consecutive years with matric results below 65% in two out of three consecutive years. Underperformance was defined as a pass rate of 65% or lower, justified by the Equal Education Law Centre [EELC] (2022). This threshold was confirmed by Bayat et al. (2014), Heystek (2015), Mokoena and Govender (2024), and T. Ndlovu (2025).

In each school, a teacher teaching a matric class and the principal were sampled. Two district officials (Senior Education Specialists) were sampled based on criteria by DBE (2022b, p. 10) regarding monitoring and supporting curriculum implementation.

Data Collection and Quality Assurance

In-depth interviews were used, and data underwent inductive thematic analysis. Quality assurance criteria of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability were used (Birt et al., 2016). Credibility was confirmed through pre-interviews and prolonged engagements (Elo et al., 2014).

Transferability refers to the extent findings transfer to other settings (Polit & Hungler, 1999). Findings may apply to other districts facing underperformance (Department of Basic Education, 2023). Dependability refers to stability of findings over time, ensured by documenting procedures (Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability allows reliability of results to be scrutinized, minimizing researcher biases (Connelly, 2016). Process transparency improves confirmability (Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023). Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and raw voices presented verbatim.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical considerations to safeguard rights and validity (Gajjar, 2013). Ethical clearance was obtained from Sol Plaatje University ethics committee alongside permission from the North-West Department of Education. Briefing sessions invited voluntary participation (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). Informed consent was provided via signed documentation. Pseudonyms safeguarded confidentiality, and data was securely stored.

Results and Discussion

The research question was: What are the intervention strategies SMTs, and Subject Advisors employ to enhance matric academic performance? The objective was to investigate strategies utilized in Dr. RSM District. Themes emerging from inductive thematic analysis include:

Psychosocial Support: Motivational Programmes and Initiatives Aimed at Learner Resilience

Most responses identified demotivation as a key factor in underperformance. Participant B from School A stated: “Lack of motivation and frame of reference to want to succeed, so former matriculants who are successful are called to address learners alongside other motivational speakers just to boost them.” Participant A from School C shared:

The learners have lost hope. So, what I'm trying is to bring different faces monthly to come and share a few words with them. I have friends in various professional sectors; I call them to come and motivate my learners.

At School B, a letter invited a university admissions officer to speak to learners.

District SES Participant B highlighted demotivation due to socio-economic challenges. The district collaborates with a local TVET college to invite motivational speakers and states: “Even ourselves as district officials, we visit schools just to encourage learners to focus on their studies.” The district leverages school feeding schemes and subsidizes incubation camps with food and transport. District SES Participant A explained:

We provide socio-psychological assistance to learners to motivate them and show that, even if they lack the means to address their challenges, they can always rely on us as the government for support. Yes, our services are not always available when needed, but we are trying.

Intensive Pedagogical Support: Academic Camps to Address Content Gaps

Intervention strategies involve winter, autumn, spring, and incubation camps (“academic camps”). District SES Participant A explained that the district organizes autumn, winter, and spring camps and subsidizes year-end incubation camps: “We subsidize the camps and make sure that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds have food to eat when they are there.”

Participants highlighted the significance of incubation camps. Participant A from School B described them: “Learners come to school and sleep here. We appoint teachers to supervise and take turns. During this time, a timetable is developed, and learners are drilled in content to prepare them for exams.” Schools collaborate to share content. Participant B from School C shared: “We conduct Sunday school alongside weekday extra classes for drilling purposes.”

Institutional Oversight: Human Resources Capacitation and Subject Advisor Support

The district plays an oversight role in managing human resources. District SES Participants A and B highlighted accountability meetings with principals of underperforming schools and ICT integration training for teachers. Strategies ensure necessary materials and resources are available and utilized.

Subject Advisors conduct school visits to monitor teaching and provide support. Participant A from School C explained: “Because of struggles to visit schools, there is one common place where meetings are conducted for principals to share with their teachers.” These initiatives equip teachers and principals with developments to remain aligned with directives from the Department of Basic Education (DBE).

Conclusion

The research question was: What are the intervention strategies SMTs and Subject Advisors employ to enhance matric academic performance in the Dr. RSM education district? Findings revealed three strategies: motivational programmes and initiatives, academic camps, and human resource capacitation and oversight support.

It is recommended that motivational programmes be extended to remote schools. Subsidies for virtual platforms could address physical access challenges. Inviting district alumni to share experiences may inspire learners. Workshops could empower parents in providing motivational support. Local businesses could contribute through corporate social investment programmes to resource academic camps. Regular training should be offered to teachers and SMTs. Equipping subject advisors with tools such as transportation and technology will enable them to perform roles effectively.

A final recommendation is to encourage research evaluating the effectiveness of these intervention strategies in promoting matric academic performance in Dr RSM education district.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that Grammarly and OpenAI ChatGPT were used solely to assist with background literature exploration, proofreading, and language editing during manuscript preparation. The technology was not used to generate research findings or write core analyses, and the manuscript remains the original work of the authors.

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