



Managing teaching and learning in South African schools

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Leadership
English
Mathematics
Classrooms
Learners

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the significance of leadership and management in enhancing classroom practice and improving learner outcomes in two provinces of South Africa. It is increasingly recognised, internationally and in South Africa, that managing teaching and learning is one of the most important activities for principals and other school leaders. Managing teaching and learning is one of the core modules in South Africa's new national qualification for school principals. Drawing on case studies of eight schools, mostly in disadvantaged contexts, the paper shows that managing teaching and learning are often inadequate, and largely fails to compensate for the social and educational problems facing learners and their communities.

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1. Introduction

There are three fundamental requirements for developing effective teaching and learning in schools:

1. Sound classroom practice from specialist educators.
2. Sufficient and suitable learning materials.
3. Sound and proactive leadership and management of learning (Bush and Glover, 2009; Spillane, 2004; Taylor, 2007).

This paper examines the significance of leadership and management in enhancing classroom practice and improving learner outcomes in two provinces of South Africa. There is very limited research and literature on managing and leading teaching and learning in South Africa. A systematic review of the literature on school management in South Africa (Bush et al., 2005) found very few sources on this topic and none that offered a comprehensive view based on empirical work. The limited literature base was further stressed by Hoadley (2007). Molo (2007) also notes this problem but adds that there is developing awareness of its significance for South African schools. This paper aims to make an important contribution to addressing this limitation.

It is increasingly recognised that managing teaching and learning (MTL) is one of the most important (if not the most important) activities for principals and other school leaders. The South African Standard for School Leadership, for example, in setting out the core purpose of principalship, focuses strongly on the need to manage teaching and learning effectively:

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The core purpose of principalship is to provide leadership and management in all areas of the school to enable the creation and support of conditions under which high quality teaching and learning take place and which promote the highest possible standards of learner achievement.

The international literature mainly refers to 'leadership' of teaching and learning, or 'instructional leadership' (e.g. Leithwood et al., 1999) but 'management' is widely used in South Africa (Bush and Glover, 2009; Bush et al., 2008). While we acknowledge differences between these concepts (see Bush, 2003), a discussion of these terms is beyond the scope of this paper and we use both terms, as appropriate, in our discussion and analysis.

Leithwood et al. (2006) claim that leadership explains about 5–7% of the difference in learner achievement across schools. Principals can also impact on classroom teaching by adopting a proactive approach and becoming 'instructional' leaders.

There is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 5).

Robinson (2007, p. 21) stresses that the impact on student outcomes is likely to be greater where there is direct leader involvement in the oversight of, and participation in, curriculum planning and co-ordination and teacher learning and professional development. 'The closer leaders are to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to make a difference to students' (Robinson (2007, p. 21)). As Hoadley (2007, p. 1) states, in the South African context, 'there is a consensus around the importance of leadership to improved student outcomes'.

Bush and Heystek (2006) show that South African principals are mainly concerned with financial management, human resource management, and policy issues. The 'management of teaching and

learning' was ranked only seventh of 10 leadership activities in a survey of more than 500 Gauteng principals (p. 68). Chisholm et al. (2005) add that principals' time is largely consumed by administrative activities.

Hoadley (2007, p. 3) notes that South African principals have little experience of instructional leadership but managing teaching and learning is one of the core modules in South Africa's national ACE: School Leadership programme, recognising that this is perceived as a crucial role for school principals, deputy principals and heads of department (HoDs). This paper draws on research undertaken in eight schools, all of which have one or more leaders taking the ACE programme (Bush et al., 2008). The research was funded by the Zenex Foundation.

The international literature on the role of principals (e.g. National Assembly for Wales, 2005, p. 3) stresses that one of their major functions is 'leading learning and teaching'. The head-teacher, working with the staff and governors, creates the conditions and structures to support effective learning and teaching for all. Heads have a direct responsibility for the quality of learning and teaching and for pupils' achievement. This implies setting high expectations and monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of learning outcomes.

Bush and Glover (2009), referring to the South African context, claim that a principal focused strongly on MTL would undertake the following activities:

- Oversee the curriculum across the school.
- Ensure that lessons take place.
- Evaluate learner performance through scrutiny of examination results and internal assessments.
- Monitor the work of HoDs, through scrutiny of their work plans and portfolios.
- Ensure that HoDs monitor the work of educators within their learning areas.
- Arrange a programme of class visits followed up by feedback to educators.
- Ensure the availability of appropriate learning and teaching support materials (LTSM).

The research underpinning this paper sought to establish whether, and to what extent, these features were present in the case study schools.

2. Methodology

The broad aim of the research was to assess the management of teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy through case studies of classroom practice, and leadership and management practice, in selected schools. We chose to focus on these learning areas because they provide the foundations for all other subjects. The research adopted a 'snapshot' approach, establishing the nature of leadership and management at the time of data collection in these schools. Five specific methods were used:

1. Documentary analysis of the school's performance in language and mathematics, for example through scrutiny of matric results in secondary schools and test scores in primary schools. The authors recognise the limitations of relying on published test scores but they are widely used by international researchers (e.g. Leithwood et al., 2006), and by the national and provincial governments in South Africa, as a proxy for learner achievement.
2. An interview with the principal, to provide an overview of leadership and management of teaching and learning, and to establish whether and how s/he takes direct responsibility for MTL.
3. Interviews with the HoDs for languages and mathematics, to establish their perspectives on learner outcomes in their

learning areas, and to assess their leadership and management perspectives and practice. These middle managers have explicit responsibility for leading their learning areas or phases and the interviews were intended to establish whether and how they did so.

4. Non-participant observation of the classroom practice of one English educator and one mathematics educator, to provide 'snapshot' evidence on how literacy and numeracy are being taught.
5. Interviews with all the observed educators to establish their views about the leadership and management of their learning areas, and to discuss the observation of their practice.

All the interviews were semi-structured to provide a basis for comparison across research sites while also allowing sufficient flexibility for context-based variables. Sampling of schools and participants was linked to the aims of the project. The researchers worked in two provinces: Limpopo and Mpumalanga. Four schools were sampled purposively in each province. The criterion for inclusion was that the principal and/or other school leaders were taking part in the pilot phase of the new national principals' qualification, the Advanced Certificate in Education: School Leadership (ACE). This helped to provide access to the schools and also means that the participants were familiar with certain concepts related to the management of teaching and learning.

The interview schedules were structured to elicit responses to the five research questions:

- What are the school's current achievement levels in literacy and numeracy?
- What classroom practices can be observed in the school and how can they be improved?
- In what ways, if at all, does the principal lead and manage teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy?
- In what ways, if at all, does the SMT lead and manage teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy?
- How does the relevant HoD lead and manage teaching and learning of literacy or numeracy?

Classroom observations were undertaken to provide evidence relating to the second question above.

3. Findings

The four Mpumalanga schools are all located in the same disadvantaged township on the outskirts of a small town:

- School A: A combined school, with 800 learners.
- School B: A secondary school, with 900 learners.
- School C: A secondary school, with 1100 learners.
- School D: A primary school, with 700 learners.

The community served by the schools exhibits a range of social and economic problems, including poverty, unemployment, premature death and illness due to HIV/AIDS, and extensive teenage pregnancy. The international (e.g. Hallinger, 1992) and South African (e.g. Fleisch, 2008), evidence suggests that such factors strongly influence learner outcomes.

The four Limpopo schools are located in different parts of the province:

- School E: A primary school with 465 learners. This school has no electricity and experiences problems in obtaining sufficient water for the toilets.
- School F: A secondary school in the suburbs of a small town, with 1038 learners.

- School G: A secondary school in a remote rural setting, with 638 learners.
- School H: A primary school in a poor community, with 1745 learners.

Three of these schools serve poor communities and exhibit a range of problems, including inaccessibility, inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding, unfilled educator posts, and acute social and economic problems in the local communities. These problems have a significant impact on learner achievement. The fourth school is located in a suburb and serves both black and white learners.

3.1. Learner achievement

Standards, as measured by matric results and other school-level data, are low or moderate at seven of the eight schools but one achieves good results. All learners study in their mother tongue (isiZulu and Xitsonga) in grades 1–3 but code switching continues in all grades. Learners have very little opportunity to speak English outside the classroom or at home, because many parents do not speak or understand English. Learning is also inhibited by a serious shortage of learning and teaching support materials in many schools, while the impact of socio-economic factors should not be under-estimated.

English standards are high in schools B and F, but low at all the other schools. This is often attributed to the fact that it is a second language for all learners and that there is no reinforcement from parents or learners' peer groups. Concern was also expressed about educators not having mastered South Africa's National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and requiring further training to become more knowledgeable. Many also lack confidence and capability in English. Lessons observed by researchers, all of whom are experienced teachers and teacher educators, were judged to be variable in quality but generally competent if uninspiring.

Case study B was an exception to the rule, in that matric pass rates were high. This is evidently due to the strong leadership of the HoD, who stresses language drills and claims to have a 'firm grip' on the educators to keep them focused on learning. Standards were also high in school F, although educators expressed concern that some learners do not practise their language skills outside the classroom.

There were contrasting findings about maths standards in the two provinces. At most Mpumalanga schools, maths standards are even lower than those in English, notably at case study B, where poor maths matric results are in sharp contrast to the good performance in languages. However, maths standards in the two Limpopo primary schools were higher than those in English, according to the participants. Factors underpinning low standards in both provinces include a shortage of qualified maths educators, a weak foundation in earlier grades, the progression criteria through the grades, the alleged poor learner attitudes to the subject, and lack of parental involvement in learning. However, it was also evident to the researchers that classroom practice was variable or poor in quality, and some educators claimed that they lack appropriate support and leadership from their HoDs.

3.2. The management of teaching and learning

The responsibility for managing teaching and learning is shared amongst principals, school management teams (SMTs), heads of departments, and classroom educators. Educators manage curriculum implementation in their classrooms, HoDs have responsibility for ensuring effective teaching and learning across their learning areas or phases, while principals and school management teams have a whole-school role.

3.2.1. Principals

As noted above, overall management of teaching and learning is regarded as a key role for South African principals reflected, for example, in the South African Standard for Principalship. Their responsibilities should include setting the framework for effective teaching and learning, developing policies to address this issue, and ensuring that curriculum delivery is being implemented successfully. Their role is to take a school-wide view. Principals have a direct responsibility for the quality of learning and teaching and for pupils' achievement. This implies setting high expectations and monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of learning outcomes (Bush and Glover, 2009). Stein and Nelson (2003, p. 424) argue that it is necessary for the principal to know good instruction when they see it, to encourage it when they do not and to facilitate on-going learning for staff.

Hoadley (2007) reports that four management factors have been shown to be significant in improving student outcomes:

- The regulation of time.
- Monitoring curriculum planning and delivery.
- The procurement and management of books and stationery.
- Quality assurance of tests and the monitoring of results.

The research findings show that many principals have only a limited role in MTL. Two of the four Mpumalanga principals do not adopt a proactive management role in this area and could be regarded as 'laissez faire' leaders. The principal of primary school A, for example, restricts his instructional leadership to making sure 'that teachers and learners are in their classrooms' (Bush et al., 2008, p. 8). This links to Hoadley's (2007) point about regulating time but her other points are not addressed by this principal.

Two principals are more active, reviewing the work of educators and HoDs, as well as ensuring that classes take place. The principal of primary school D, for example, visits classrooms as well as ensuring that children attend class promptly and checking learners' workbooks.

All four Limpopo principals are involved in the management of teaching and learning but only three check the work of educators and HoDs. Two (cases E and F) conduct classroom visits or arrange for others to do so. Principal F adopts a wider role, including familiarity with the curriculum, communication with internal and external stakeholders, and the appointment of capable and committed staff. In general, however, MTL does not appear to be a central role for most of the eight principals. This finding echoes that of Henefeld (2007), whose study of Tanzania, Uganda and Madagascar shows that head teacher's oversight of teachers was generally perfunctory, with little observation of teaching taking place.

The management of teaching and learning in South African schools is adversely affected by a weak grasp of the curriculum, and particularly of the new National Curriculum Statement, in several of the case study schools. The principal of secondary school B, for example, comments that 'The new curriculum presents serious problems. It is demanding and some of us do not understand it'. Similarly, the principal of primary school E says that educators find the new curriculum 'very difficult to understand', while primary school H has not introduced the new curriculum yet.

3.2.2. School management teams

SMTs should share the overall responsibility for MTL with the principals. Where SMTs operate successfully, they have great potential to improve classroom practice through HoDs sharing their ideas, developing school-wide policies and enacting consistent practice throughout the school (Bush and Glover, 2009). However, the research participants were often unable to make a clear distinction between the work of individual HoDs and the collective work of the SMT in curriculum leadership. In six of the eight schools,

the SMT appears to have little impact on teaching and learning, either because it rarely meets, or because their meetings do not address teaching and learning issues. Case study B is one exception in that the SMT does discuss teaching and learning and, for example, introduced a classroom observation programme in response to disappointing 2007 matric results. The SMT in school F also provides the main forum for discussing teaching and learning issues.

3.2.3. Heads of department

Heads of department have an important part to play in MTL, within the school-wide strategy established by the principal and the SMT. The middle manager's role is focused on sub-units, based on learning areas or school phases, while the principal and the SMT should take a school-wide view (Bush and Glover, 2009). Rhodes and Brundrett (in press) stress that 'middle leaders are important in any strategy to develop learning-centred leadership in schools'.

The English National College for School Leadership (NCSL (2007) argues that middle leaders should lead teaching and learning through:

- modelling—leading by example
- monitoring—knowing what is going on in the classroom
- dialogue—by talking and listening to colleagues
- setting up structures and systems (p. 14).

Ali and Botha (2006), in the first major study of middle managers in South Africa, focused on 100 secondary school HoDs in the Gauteng province. They argue that, with the introduction of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), 'the responsibility of school managers has shifted towards instructional activities and the accomplishment of high quality outcomes' (p. 12). They also note that, if teaching and learning are to improve significantly, 'HoDs will have to spend much more time in supervising the teaching and learning activities that occur daily in their subject or learning area' (p. 17). They conclude that HoDs should:

- Spend more time analysing learners' results.
- Jointly develop departmental improvement plans with their educators.
- Monitor educator classroom records on a regular basis.
- Establish direct observation of educator teaching.
- Set improvement targets with educators.

Most Mpumalanga and Limpopo HoDs fail to match this ideal model. They all monitor the work of educators, notably through checking their lesson plans and learner assessments, while some also conduct classroom visits. The main emphasis is on checking the educators' work, rather than assessing learner achievement. What seems to be missing at several schools is any collective responsibility for teaching and learning. In several cases, educators contradicted HoDs' claims in terms of the frequency and quality of HoD observation, scrutiny and support. In four of the eight schools, educators appear to work on an individual basis, with little evidence of effective team-work within departments.

3.3. Evaluating learner achievement

Evaluation means assessing teaching and learning at a strategic level, for example through analysing examination and test scores, and devising strategies for improvement. This should be addressed on a whole-school basis and at the level of individual learning areas. An effective evaluation programme would:

- Provide a systematic review of performance across learning areas, with an honest appraisal of the reasons for perceived under-performance. These reasons should go beyond 'blame the

learner' responses to a careful assessment of how educators and school managers can work towards improved outcomes.

- Devise context-based strategies to enhance learner outcomes. These might include professional development for educators, modelling of good practice by effective teachers, and monitoring the performance of less effective educators.
- Address 'within-school variation' by asking more successful educators and managers to mentor those who are less successful (Bush and Glover, 2009).

Ali and Botha (2006), drawing on their research in Gauteng secondary schools, stress the need to develop a departmental school improvement plan to address problems identified from the in-school evaluation of performance. They add that this is much more likely to be effective if the plan involves the participation of educators.

Three of the four Mpumalanga schools conduct in-school assessments and use them as a basis for discussion with educators. Case study B was required by the provincial department to develop a school improvement plan following its disappointing 2007 matric results. Influenced by the provincial Department of Education's requirements, these schools submit quarterly reports on performance as well as discussing the outcomes with educators.

All four Limpopo schools conduct tests but only one carries out an analysis of the findings and follow-up action appears to be limited at most schools. Case F is an exception, where results are discussed at SMT meetings. The principal at school H examines a sample of learners' work, although this is done primarily to see that work has been completed rather than to assess learner outcomes.

3.4. Monitoring learner achievement

Southworth (2004) says that monitoring involves visiting classrooms, observing teachers at work and providing them with feedback. The English Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2003) found that there was a strong link between very good monitoring and good teaching. Southworth (2004, p. 80) adds that 'monitoring classrooms is now an accepted part of leadership'. He concludes that monitoring is a widely distributed role, including head teachers, deputies and heads of department.

All eight case study schools include scrutiny of documents as a monitoring device. In general, HoDs examine educators' portfolios and workbooks and also check learners' work to see if educators' claims are matched by learner outcomes. Where there are discrepancies, HoDs provide feedback to educators and seek improvement. It is not clear what sanctions are available if educators fail to comply with these requirements. Principals, in turn, review HoDs' work and may also check learners' work directly, as in school E. In case study B, poor performance resulted in disciplinary action being taken against one HoD.

Classroom observation is mandated for South Africa's Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) but also occurs in some schools as a monitoring device. In schools B and F, this is a systematic process but it is too early to assess whether it is achieving its purpose of improving learner outcomes. Elsewhere, observation appears to be a sporadic and unsystematic activity, restricted by the lack of time available to HoDs and the lingering belief that it is discouraged by the educator unions. In case studies G and H, templates for classroom visits have been developed but, as yet, there is no systematic programme of visits.

3.5. Factors supporting learner achievement

The participants identified four main factors seen to underpin learner achievement in their schools.

3.5.1. Committed and experienced educators

Respondents at most schools refer to dedicated or experienced educators as factors underpinning learner achievement despite the fact that outcomes are mostly poor. However, experience alone is inadequate if not matched by commitment and a willingness to innovate and these seem to be missing in many cases. The situation appears more positive at school F, because educators are committed as well as experienced.

3.5.2. Extra lessons

Participants at the three secondary schools refer to the benefits of additional lessons in helping learners to progress and/or to 'catch up' with their peers. Given the alleged poor preparation in previous grades or schools, and the problems arising from learners being moved through grades before they are ready, extra lessons provide the potential to compensate for such problems. However, it is not clear how effective this has been in raising learner achievement.

3.5.3. Good learning and teaching support materials

Respondents at school F point to the benefits of good learning and teaching support materials, including a computer centre and other equipment. Most of the other schools had limited LTSM, which contributed to under-achievement.

3.5.4. External interventions

At case study E, two external interventions, from local subject advisers and a national READ programme, were identified as valuable for learner achievement.

3.6. Factors inhibiting learner achievement

The participants were also asked to identify the factors inhibiting learner achievement in their schools and they mentioned four such issues.

3.6.1. Contextual factors

International (e.g. Hallinger, 2003) and South African (e.g. Fleisch, 2008) research shows that the main predictor of learning outcomes is the socio-economic context faced by the school and its learners. Seven of the eight case study schools face daunting challenges in trying to compensate for the many disadvantages facing their learners and the local community. Many parents are illiterate in their own language and have little command of English. This makes it difficult for them to reinforce learning at home. Even worse is the situation facing those many learners who have no parents and whose families are headed by grandparents or older siblings. There are also few, if any, books at home to help learners to master the basics of literacy and numeracy. Teenage pregnancy damages the learning of secondary school girls while hunger, which is widespread despite the well-functioning feeding schemes in the primary schools, is known to have a serious impact on learners' ability to concentrate (Fleisch, 2008). There is also a shortage of classrooms in schools E and H, leading to serious overcrowding. Some respondents also lament a lack of LTSM.

3.6.2. Learner-related factors

The social problems discussed above impact on learners' motivation and learning, for example in respect of uncompleted homework, learner absences and a perceived lack of commitment, particularly amongst older learners. There is also a concern that class sizes are too big, making it difficult to address learners' individual needs. Some respondents complain about learners being lazy and ill-disciplined, although the classroom observations do not support this argument. However, educators are too ready to

'blame the learners' rather than considering what strategies they should adopt to address these problems.

3.6.3. Educator-related factors

The respondents in most schools say that educators are demotivated, by their perceived heavy workload and by the demands of the revised National Curriculum Statement. Some also say that they need additional training, particularly where they are teaching subjects that were not part of their initial training. Principals and other managers say that some educators lack commitment, evidenced by absenteeism, late arrival to classes, and unwillingness to provide extra classes to help learners to 'catch up'. Some also criticise educators' reluctance to work collaboratively. School G is also short of staff. According to the participants, this is because educators do not wish to work at the school and, when vacancies are advertised, no applications are received.

3.6.4. Management issues

Educators in Mpumalanga often blame school managers for a lack of support. This may be due to the limited time available to HoDs for management, because of their own teaching commitments, or because HoDs have weak leadership skills and/or lack motivation. There are also fractured relationships within SMTs, making it difficult to develop, and implement an agreed strategy to improve teaching and learning. Fewer management issues were identified at the Limpopo schools, although the principal of school E is critical of one HoD. However, managers at most of these schools have been unable or unwilling to promote team-work within their learning areas.

3.7. Overview of case studies

Seven of the eight schools serve poor communities, with a range of social and economic problems. Most have stable staffing, which provides for continuity but does not encourage innovation. School G has five temporary educators and receives few applications. Learner outcomes range from good to below average or poor and this is partly due to a mix of contextual, learner-related and educator-related factors. However, weak or indifferent management is also an issue in most schools. Blaming the learners, the parents, or learners' previous educational experience appears to be an alternative to providing well thought out strategies for motivating educators and raising learner achievement.

4. Discussion

Fleisch's (2008) book, sub-titled 'Why South African children under-achieve in reading and mathematics', provides a detailed assessment of under-performance in these learning areas, based on a meta-analysis of a substantial body of research. He notes that the majority (70–80%) of primary school children, overwhelmingly from disadvantaged schools, 'are completing their primary education without being able to read fluently in their school's instructional language' (p.v.). These children are also acquiring only 'a very rudimentary knowledge and understanding of mathematics' (Fleisch, 2008). The findings from the Limpopo and Mpumalanga research generally support these conclusions.

Fleisch (2008) attributes under-achievement to five main factors:

- Ill-health
- Poverty
- Resources
- Language
- Teaching

Our findings provide evidence to support this analysis. The communities served by seven of the eight case study schools experience a range of health problems, and there is widespread hunger, poverty and unemployment. Learners at these schools are often listless, despondent and demotivated, which inevitably leads to under-performance.

The case study schools are also disadvantaged in terms of resources, with the Limpopo schools having classes as large as 100, making it much more difficult for learners to receive individual attention. Classes are often large because of the limited numbers of classrooms, not because there are insufficient educators. Most schools do not have enough learning materials, suggesting weak internal management of the acquisition and deployment of resources.

The great majority of learners in the case study schools do not use the language of instruction (usually English) outside the classroom. This means that there is no effective reinforcement of learning beyond the school. As Fleisch (2008, p. 119) states, 'English is more often like a foreign language'. In all eight Limpopo and Mpumalanga schools, weak mastery of English was cited as a major contributory factor for low standards of literacy. A further problem is that many educators also have only limited English language skills and also do not use the language in their personal lives.

Fleisch (2008, p. 121) says that the classroom 'is the major source of the crisis in primary education', with educator absence, ineffective teaching methods and weak subject knowledge all contributing to poor quality teaching. All these factors were present in the case study schools. Researchers found several classes unattended, while educators were in school staff rooms. Teaching was at best competent and uninspiring and, at worst, feeble with weak subject knowledge, especially in mathematics, and a consistent didactic pedagogy.

4.1. Leadership and management

Fleisch's (2008) analysis exemplifies most of the reasons for poor educational achievement in literacy and numeracy in South African's primary schools. However, it gives little attention to one major factor, School Leadership and Management. The eight case studies provide significant new evidence about the ways in which principals, SMTs and HoDs manage teaching and learning, and about their development needs if this is to become more effective.

The research shows that most principals have a weak grasp of teaching and learning. They often lack awareness of the requirements of the new National Curriculum Statement, and do not have a clear system for evaluating and monitoring teaching and learning. Their instructional leadership is often confined to checking that work has been completed rather than making informed judgements about the quality of teaching and learning. Managers at all levels blame the other factors identified by Fleisch (2008), notably poverty, parental illiteracy, language competence, and educator capability and motivation, rather than taking initiatives to address those factors that are within their control, such as securing and maintaining adequate LTSMs, and monitoring classroom practice. They are also weak at generalising 'best practice' in some classrooms to the rest of the school.

Managers have to grapple with difficult issues arising from unpromising school contexts, weak inherited infrastructure and under-qualified educators, but they often fail to use the scope they do have to improve learner achievement. Recent research (Leithwood et al., 2006; Robinson, 2007) shows that successful leaders are able to raise standards by motivating and inspiring educators to higher standards of performance, by developing and implementing effective evaluation and monitoring of classroom practice,

including observation, and through direct engagement with parents and the local community to limit the impact of unpromising contexts on learner achievement.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of schooling is to promote learning and teaching. The use of the term 'learner' in South Africa, instead of pupil or student, is a striking illustration of what schools are supposed to achieve. While many South Africans live in challenging circumstances, schools provide one of the few levers for improving the life chances of deprived children and young people. Enabling learners to gain qualifications offers the opportunity of a better life, for them and their families, as well as contributing to South Africa's economic development.

Given the centrality of learning, principals, deputies and HoDs need to give a high priority to the management of teaching and learning and not 'retreat' into their offices, to carry out routine administrative activities. Principals need to focus more strongly on teaching and learning if schools, and learner achievement, are to improve.

The starting point is to develop a vision for the school that places learning and teaching at the centre. Secondly, principals and their SMTs need to set out clear expectations of their learners and educators, and demonstrate good practice in their own teaching and leadership activities. The essential tools for managing teaching and learning are modelling, monitoring and evaluation. Leaders should provide good models in terms of lesson preparation, subject knowledge, pedagogic approaches, assessment, and learner welfare. They should monitor educators' practice in a systematic way and provide constructive feedback. They should also evaluate school outcomes and 'benchmark' them against schools in similar circumstances. Above all, school climate has to promote a positive approach to learning among all stakeholders, learners, educators, parents and the local community. This provides the best prospect of sustainable school improvement.

This paper is based on the findings from a small-scale 'snapshot' study of the management of teaching and learning in eight schools in two provinces. While there are pockets of good practice, the overall impression is that most school managers lack the capability, or the motivation, to develop, sustain and monitor teaching and learning effectively. While poor learner achievement is often recognised, principals, HoDs and educators are prone to blame the learners, their parents or lack of progress in previous schools or grades, rather than accepting personal and collective responsibility for weak learner outcomes. The majority of learners at most of the case study schools suffer a range of socio-economic problems, including poverty, illness, poor housing and an inadequate diet. However, the educators and managers at these schools are fatalistic in assuming that these problems are bound to lead to poor academic achievement, rather than committing themselves to raising standards despite these difficulties. Ultimately, however, much higher standards can be achieved only by developing the capability of leaders and educators and, in the long term, through addressing the social problems facing many townships and rural areas throughout South Africa.

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