




Investigation into the Challenges Experienced by School Management Teams (SMTs) Post-Pandemic in Rural High Schools in the Mopani-West Education District

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges faced by SMTs in dealing with poor academic performance in the Mopani-West District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Studies have indicated that schools in rural areas fail to meet their full potential due to a combination of factors including insufficient instructional resources, shortage of qualified educators, insufficient infrastructure, and poverty and inequality. The study adopted a qualitative approach following an interpretative case study design. Using purposive sampling a total of 18 participants, comprising six principals, six departmental heads, and six learners who met the research criteria were selected. The study sample included one principal, one departmental head, and one learner from each of these six schools in the Mopani-West District. Three schools from the sample were identified as high-performing, while the other three were identified as underperforming. Data were elicited using semi-structured interviews, followed by thematic data analysis to unveil rich narratives and patterns within the research inquiries. The findings of the study revealed that resource scarcity in schools significantly hampered the quality of education. Issues such as insufficient teaching materials, a shortage of teachers, and the absence of technology create stark disparities between less and more privileged schools. The study also highlighted the impact of inadequate infrastructure on learning as one of the pressing concerns that compromise quality teaching and learning. Recommendations were made accordingly.

KEYWORDS

Pandemic; COVID-19; school management team; academic performance; teaching and learning.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The South African education system has encountered various challenges, notably the persistent problem of inadequate academic performance among learners in rural high schools (Sekgota, 2020). The issue of poor academic performance significantly affects rural high schools within the Mopani-West education district. Challenges such as poverty, resource constraints, and inadequate infrastructure, hinder learners from reaching their full potential (Chikoko & Mthembu, 2021). The role of school management teams (SMTs) has been underscored as a potentially crucial factor contributing to the academic underperformance of learners in rural high schools (Ramango, 2021). According to Garan (2022), the challenges encountered by the SMTs in South Africa encompass limited budgetary resources for schools, a dearth of qualified teachers, inadequate infrastructure, rising learner enrolments, and language barriers between learners and teachers. The challenges outlined can detrimentally impact the quality of education and the overall effectiveness of SMTs (Chauke & Goosen, 2020). In terms of budget constraints, schools are often underfunded and struggle to meet the needs of their learners (Chikoko & Mthembu, 2021). Consequently, there is a scarcity of resources, including textbooks, laboratory equipment, and technology, which impedes learners' educational experiences (Garan, 2022). It is further compounded by an escalating challenge in sourcing qualified teachers, especially in rural areas, resulting in understaffed schools and overcrowded classrooms (Buthelezi & Ajali, 2022). Chauke (2020) argued that the shortage of teachers in schools places added pressure on SMTs, requiring them to effectively manage and support their teaching staff to ensure the delivery of quality education.

According to Ntuli et al. (2023), the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by SMTs in rural high schools in the Mopani District of South Africa, particularly amplifying the pre-existing issue of poor academic performance. The pandemic disrupted the education system globally, and South Africa was no exception (Soudien et al., 2022). Shava (2022) stated that with the closure of schools and the shift to remote learning, SMTs faced the daunting task of adapting to new modes of education delivery, particularly in rural areas where access to technology and internet connectivity is limited. One of the foremost challenges SMTs encountered was the digital divide. Many learners in the rural Mopani-West District lacked access to computers, tablets, or even a stable internet connection, making it difficult for them to engage in online learning (Tarka, 2020). Schleicher (2020) found that SMTs had to seek innovative methods to deliver educational resources to learners lacking digital access, utilising printed materials and radio broadcasts. This digital divide further widened the disparities in academic performance, as learners from more privileged backgrounds had better access to online resources (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020). Additionally, the pandemic disrupted normal school routines, leading to emotional and psychological stress among learners (Soudien et al., 2022). Many learners in rural areas faced increased anxiety and uncertainty, which impacted their ability to concentrate on their studies (Ntuli et al., 2023).

The investigation into the challenges of SMTs in addressing poor academic performance in rural high schools within the Mopani-West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa, holds importance for several reasons (Dlomo et al., 2022). In a study conducted by Ngobeni et al. (2023), it was discovered that socio-economic factors significantly impact academic performance, especially in rural areas. Limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of community support were identified as critical factors that can greatly influence the SMT's ability to promote academic success (Sibanda & Majola, 2023). These challenges greatly impact the academic achievement of learners in these regions (Chikoko & Mthembu, 2021). As a result, Venter (2020) maintains that recognising how SMTs navigate and address these challenges is crucial for devising specific interventions. The importance of effective SMTs in enhancing educational outcomes has been extensively studied (Mosoge, 2021). SMTs, comprising principals, deputy principals, heads of departments, and other administrative staff, are responsible for creating and implementing strategies that impact the learning environment, resource allocation, teacher support, and learner motivation (Fernández et al., 2023).

In the context of rural high schools in the Mopani-West District, the study aimed to explore the challenges experienced by SMTs. By examining SMT's challenges, decision-making processes, and resource management approaches, the study intended to uncover the factors that hinder effective management practices in these schools (Motlalepula et al., 2022). Results by Makoelle et al. (2022) confirmed that understanding these dynamics is critical to developing targeted interventions and policy suggestions that improve academic performance in marginalised education. According to Gwala's (2021) findings, effective leadership and management within educational institutions play a crucial role in enhancing academic performance. Therefore, the significance of SMTs in cultivating an environment conducive to academic success cannot be underestimated (Mkhabele, 2022). Buthelezi and Ajani (2022) contended that SMTs' decisions and strategies significantly impact school policies, resource allocation, teacher development, and learner support mechanisms. Studying the actions, approaches, and leadership styles of these teams offers valuable insights into tailored effective practices for rural settings, significant research focusses due to ongoing educational disparities between rural and urban areas (Al-Kubaisi et al., 2022). By exploring the challenges experienced by SMTs, policymakers and educators thereby gaining valuable insights into improving educational outcomes in rural high schools (Buthelezi & Ajani, 2022).

Initiatives were introduced by the Department of Education to enhance the professional development of SMT members, recognising their critical role in shaping the quality of education delivery (Makoelle et al., 2023). However, Sibanda and Majola (2023) discovered that despite these advancements, persistent challenges such as resource constraints, inequalities in educational provision, and varying levels of expertise among SMT members continue to impact the effectiveness of these teams. Current endeavours are dedicated to tackling these challenges and empowering SMTs to continue their pivotal role in advancing both educational equity and quality throughout South Africa (Gwala, 2021). In response to this persistent issue, this study

aimed to investigate the challenges experienced by SMTs in addressing poor academic performance in rural high schools within the Mopani-West District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Derived from the purpose of the study, the following research question was posed:

- What are the challenges faced by the School Management Teams (SMTs) in addressing poor academic performance in rural high schools in Mopani-West Districts?

The paper commences with the rationale for behind investigating the challenges experienced by SMTs post-pandemic in rural high schools in the Mopani-West District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Next, the researchers review the related literature on the challenges experienced by SMTs post-pandemic. Lastly, the methodological procedures followed in collecting data and analysing it in order to arrive at meaningful conclusions are presented. This study contributed empirical evidence to the existing corpus of literature and provided practical recommendations for enhancing the performance of rural schools within the Mopani-West District and similar settings globally.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Human Relations Theory (HRT), a key framework in organisational behaviour, emerged in response to the limitations of classical management theories that overlooked the human element in workplaces (Ojo, 2023). Originating from the Hawthorne studies conducted between 1924 and 1932 at the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne Works in Chicago, this theory revealed that social factors significantly influence workers' productivity and behaviour, challenging the traditional emphasis on task efficiency (Omolawal, 2023). For Wright and Ritter (2023), these findings highlighted the importance of considering human needs, emotions, and social dynamics within organisations. Elton Mayo, an Australian psychologist, was a prominent proponent of HRT (Cooley, 2023). Takahashi (2023) maintained that Mayo's work at Hawthorne played a pivotal role in shaping this theory, as he emphasised the significance of social interactions, informal groups, and the psychological aspects of work environments. Mayo's studies illustrated that factors such as recognition, attention, and a sense of belonging greatly impact individuals' attitudes and performance at work (Ojo, 2023). The tenets of HRT focus on understanding human behaviour within organisations. Central concepts include the importance of communication, leadership styles, group dynamics, motivation, and the psychological needs of individuals in workplace settings (Odoman et al., 2020).

HRT tenets were pertinent in examining the role of SMTs in addressing poor academic performance in rural high schools. The rationale for drawing on HRT for this study is that this theory focuses on how people interact in organisations (Cooley, 2023). In rural high schools in the Mopani District, Limpopo Province, South Africa, where social and cultural contexts are complex, this theory aided the researchers in assessing how school leaders affect learners' grades. It facilitated the exploration of the relationships between staff, how they talk to each other and what motivates them to impact learners' academic performance (Odoman et al., 2020). By adopting HRT, the study sought to demonstrate how SMTs influence learners' grades

by investigating how they interact, communicate, and motivate people in these particular schools. In this context, HRT provided a framework to analyse how leadership styles, communication strategies, and team dynamics among SMTs impact the school environment and subsequently influence learner performance (Takahashi, 2022). Moreover, the study aimed to uncover actionable insights to improve academic outcomes in these specific educational contexts by considering the psychological and social aspects inherent in this theory (Wright & Ritter, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lack of instructional resources

A lack of resources in rural areas is a significant factor contributing to poor academic performance in rural high schools in the Mopani-West District. As highlighted by Chauke and Goosen (2020), constrained access to resources such as textbooks, library facilities, and modern educational technology impedes learners' learning experiences and their capacity to acquire knowledge. Sibanda and Majola (2023) observed that the scarcity of textbooks in rural schools directly affects learners' access to essential reading materials, which are crucial for studying and understanding the curriculum. Chikoko and Mthembu (2021) highlighted the lack of library facilities in rural schools, which deprives learners of opportunities for independent learning, research, and exploration beyond the classroom. Furthermore, the lack of access to computers, internet connectivity, and other technological tools restricts learners' exposure to digital resources, hindering the development of critical digital literacy skills (Shava, 2022). This discrepancy in technological access significantly disadvantages rural learners compared to their urban counterparts, who typically have greater familiarity with and utilisation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Granić, 2023).

Teacher shortages

As reported by Wills (2023), the persistent shortage of qualified and experienced teachers in South African rural areas continues to significantly impact the education system. Arinaitwe and Corbett (2022) ascertained that the scarcity of resources is notably pronounced in remote and economically disadvantaged regions such as the Mopani-West District. The inadequacy of teachers is directly associated with compromised education quality and hindered academic progress among learners (Wills, 2023). As observed by Arinaitwe and Corbett (2022), overcrowded classrooms stemming from teacher shortages impede effective teaching and learning processes. The challenge of providing individual attention and support to learners considerably restricts engagement and comprehension, creating difficulties for teachers (Craig et al., 2023). According to Mohammed et al. (2023), the appointment of underqualified teachers compromises the quality of education. These teachers may lack subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, and classroom management abilities, further exacerbating the academic challenges faced by learners in rural areas. Research by Sibanda and Majola (2023) suggested that the lack of qualified teachers in rural high schools can lead to learner disillusionment and a decrease in

their aspirations. Learners might perceive the scarcity of quality education as a barrier to their prospects, leading to decreased motivation to excel academically (Arinaitwe & Corbett, 2022).

Inadequate school infrastructure

Poor school infrastructure is a significant factor contributing to the poor academic performance observed in rural high schools in the Mopani-West District. According to Nasuna et al. (2021), inadequate infrastructure negatively affects learners' learning experiences and outcomes. Wills (2023) stressed that a considerable number of rural schools face a dearth of crucial amenities like classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and adequate sanitation systems. As highlighted by Meier and West (2020), deteriorating structures and overcrowded classrooms foster an environment unsuitable for effective teaching and learning. Mufalo et al (2021) noted that the scarcity of resources such as textbooks, teaching materials, and technological equipment significantly restricts learners' access to current and pertinent educational content. As per Garan (2022), the lack of resources increases teacher frustration and demotivation, impeding their ability to provide quality education due to inadequate tools and materials. Nasuna et al. (2021) also argued that the lack of basic amenities such as clean water and functional toilets not only impacts the physical health of learners but also detrimentally affects their psychological well-being.

Poverty and social inequality

Poverty significantly impacts learners' academic success by restricting their access to crucial educational resources and opportunities (Ngobeni et al., 2023). Sibanda and Majola (2023) reported that in rural settings, where poverty rates surpass those in urban areas, learners frequently encounter inadequate school infrastructure and limited access to textbooks and technology. Chauke and Goosen (2020) highlighted that social inequality significantly contributes to discrepancies in accessing quality education. According to Folarin (2021), learners from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately enrolled in under-resourced schools characterised by a lack of qualified educators, limited extracurricular offerings, and insufficient support systems. Research by Chikoko and Mthembu (2021) indicated that poverty-related stressors, such as financial instability, inadequate housing, and food insecurity, can significantly impact learners' cognitive abilities and academic performance. They found that the persistent concern over meeting basic needs hampered learners' concentration on studying, resulting in decreased motivation and diminished engagement in the learning process.

METHODOLOGY

An interpretive case study research design was adopted for the research. Interpretive case study research stands as a valuable methodological approach, offering a comprehensive exploration of complex phenomena within their authentic, real-life contexts (Muzari et al., 2022). This type of research concentrates on delving into meanings, interpretations, and subjective experiences within a specific context (Leavy, 2022). Researchers utilising this design frequently leverage multiple sources of evidence, including interviews, observations, and

documents, to gather diverse and rich data, aiming for a holistic understanding of the case (Schoch, 2020). In education, SMTs play a crucial role in shaping strategies, policies, and methods for implementation within schools (Salter, 2023). Jonas and Mkulu (2022) opined that understanding and potentially addressing the factors contributing to poor academic outcomes can be significantly influenced by the role of SMTs. Moreover, in the South African educational landscape, Motlalepula et al. (2022) highlighted the significance of contextualised research methodologies, emphasising the relevance of interpretative case studies in capturing the nuances of educational challenges in rural areas. Therefore, in the realm of addressing poor academic performance within rural high schools in the Mopani-West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa, the proposed research design involved an extensive exploration of SMTs in their real-life contexts (Motlalepula et al., 2022).

The use of an interpretative case study allowed the researchers to deeply explore the multifaceted challenges of SMTs in addressing learner academic performance (Schoch, 2020). A rich exploration of various dynamics, such as administrative decisions, leadership styles, resource allocation, community engagement, and pedagogical initiatives, is facilitated by this approach (McQuaid et al., 2023). As advocated by Mkhabele (2022), within the specific socio-economic, cultural, and educational context of rural schools in the Mopani-West District, employing this method enabled a nuanced understanding of how SMTs function. Through diverse techniques such as interviews, observations, and document analysis, this qualitative method empowered the researchers to gather data, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities present within these schools (Robinson, 2023). According to Daud (2023), interpretative case study research provides a robust framework for exploring the intricate interplay of factors within a specific context. Similarly, Leavy (2022) emphasised the depth of insights gained from interpretative case studies, particularly in understanding the complexities of educational settings and the role of stakeholders like SMTs.

The pivotal role of the interpretative case study research design was evident in comprehensively examining the involvement of SMTs in addressing poor academic performance in rural high schools within the Mopani-West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa (Mkhabele, 2022). By offering a robust framework, the interpretative case study research method facilitated the exploration of multifaceted dynamics and contextual nuances influencing educational outcomes. The resulting insights proved valuable for suggesting targeted interventions and informing policy recommendations (Schoch, 2020).

Research locale

The study was conducted in the N'wanedzi Circuit, Mopani-West District, situated within the province of Limpopo in South Africa. Due to its unique geographical and socio-economic characteristics, the Mopani-West District faces specific challenges that impact the academic achievements of learners. These challenges are magnified in rural high schools, making it essential to assess the effectiveness of SMTs in mitigating these issues. The overarching objective of this study was to shed light on the strategies and practices employed by SMTs to

enhance academic performance in rural high schools. By examining their decision-making processes, resource allocation, and educational policies, the aim is to provide insights into how SMTs contribute to improving the educational outcomes of learners in the region. The research involved a comprehensive analysis of SMTs' functions, communication strategies, collaboration with teachers, and engagement with the community. By delving into these aspects, the researchers gained a deeper understanding of the multi-faceted role SMTs play in addressing the challenges faced by rural high schools in the Mopani-West District.

Selection of the participants

A non-probability sampling method was adopted for participant selection (Pace, 2021; Gill, 2020; Lohr, 2021). Non-probability sampling is defined by Vitale (2023) as a research method characterised by the intentional selection of participants based on predetermined criteria, excluding randomisation. This approach allows researchers to target specific demographics or groups of interest, enhancing the study's focus (Jalali, 2020). This approach is particularly useful in exploratory or qualitative studies where the goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon rather than make statistical inferences about a population (Vitale, 2023). Purposive sampling is crucial in qualitative research as it allows researchers to select informants, cases, or events that offer unique and insightful perspectives on the research topic (Obilor, 2023). Tutz (2023) maintained that purposefully selecting participants with specific attributes enables the acquisition of comprehensive data, facilitating a thorough exploration of the phenomenon under investigation. In addition, this targeted sampling approach enhances the quality of the data gathered, facilitating a nuanced analysis and interpretation of the research question (Kumar et al., 2023).

Purposive sampling in this research, involved selecting specific individuals or elements from a population based on particular characteristics relevant to the research objective (Obilor, 2023). The researchers intentionally targeted participants possessing desired qualities, aiming to gather in-depth and contextually rich data, unlike probabilistic sampling methods that rely on random selection (Sarker & Al-Muaalemi, 2022). In the context of the role of SMTs in enhancing learner academic performance, six schools from Mopani-West District, N'wanedzi Circuit, were purposefully sampled to participate in this research project. The sample included school principals, their heads of departments, as well as learners. In total, 18 participants actively took part in this study. They were profiled as follows:

Table 1.

Profile of the participants

Participants	Profile and Experience
Principals from the sampled school	Six (6) principals participated in this study. Their experience ranged from 2 to 10 years as principals. Their ages ranged from 50 to 56 years of age and included 2 female and 4 male educators. The principals aimed to identify

	the challenges comprehensively and develop targeted interventions to support SMTs, ultimately enhancing the educational experience for learners and educators.
Heads of departments from the sampled schools.	Six (6) heads of departments participated in this study. Their experience ranged from 3 to 10 years as departmental heads. Their ages were between 50 and 56 years of age and included 2 female and 4 male educators. They aimed to improve team development, nurture a culture of continuous learning and growth among their staff members, collaborate with stakeholders to address stakeholders' needs effectively and improve communication. Encouraging innovation and creativity as well as fostering adaptive problem-solving approaches were included in their agenda.
Learners from the sampled schools	Six (6) learners (3 boys and 3 girls) from the six sampled schools in grades 11 and 12 participated in this study. Aged from 16-18, the learners highlighted the challenges (as quoted in the findings) they are facing in their day-to-day learning experiences.

Data were presented using codes to ensure the respondents' confidentiality. The codes P1 to P6 were used to denote the utterances made by principals. Departmental heads were denoted from DH1 to DH6 while learners were denoted with L1 to L6. This was done in accordance with their schools represented as S1 to S6 respectively.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the preferred data collection instrument to provide a flexible and nuanced approach to investigating intricate educational phenomena (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenit, 2021). Husband (2020) proposed semi-structured interviews as they strike a balance between structured and unstructured formats, offering a framework of predetermined questions while allowing for open-ended discussions and exploration of participants' perspectives. Khoa et al. (2023) underscored the substantial advantage of utilising semi-structured interviews in educational research due to their capability to capture rich qualitative data, allowing researchers to deeply explore the intricacies of educational processes and gain profound insights into participants' beliefs, motivations, and experiences. Likewise, Ruslin et al. (2022) emphasised that these interviews enable the exploration of intricate educational subjects, such as learner engagement, classroom dynamics, and policy implementation, providing flexibility to delve deeper into specific areas of interest and uncover latent patterns, challenges, and opportunities within the educational landscape.

Importantly, the use of semi-structured interviews facilitates participant collaboration and fosters a sense of ownership of the research process (Kakooza, 2023). Through the involvement of educators, learners, and various stakeholders in co-constructing knowledge, the use of these interviews fostered a profound sense of agency and empowerment among

participants (Whitehead & Whitehead, 2020). To ensure data quality, triangulation was applied by integrating multiple data sources including the principals, departmental heads, and learners. After data were elicited using semi-structured interviews, the interviews were transcribed and circulated among the participants to confirm the correctness of the data to mitigate potential bias or misrepresentation (Kyngäs et al., 2020). This approach enabled the researchers to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings by verifying (Lemon & Hayes, 2020) that the utterances made by the participants during semi-structured interviews were correctly represented.

Data analysis

Thematic data analysis, a robust qualitative methodology, was used in this study due to its capacity to unveil rich narratives and patterns within research inquiries (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Jnanathapaswi, 2021). This method enabled the identification of overarching themes emerging from participants' perspectives and experiences, enabling researchers to delve deeply into the intricate complexities of the research topic (Lochmiller, 2021). Through the utilisation of thematic data analysis, the researchers could navigate the intricate layers of data, unveiling meaningful insights and generating comprehensive conclusions (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). In examining the impact of SMTs on mitigating poor academic performance in rural high schools, thematic data analysis was deemed indispensable (Forbes, 2022). This methodology allowed the researchers to comprehensively explore the intricate dynamics of SMT interventions within the specific context of the Mopani District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Through the systematic application of thematic analysis, the researchers were able to discern recurring themes, including the hurdles educators encounter in implementing SMT strategies, community collaborative efforts, resource allocation, and learner perspectives. The identified themes offered a comprehensive understanding of the impact of SMTs on academic outcomes in rural schools (Vitale, 2023). Thematic data analysis held significant importance in this research due to its ability to reveal contextual intricacies related to SMTs and academic performance that quantitative methods might overlook (Lester et al., 2020). As a result, thematic analysis was pivotal for exploring diverse dimensions within the qualitative data, thereby fostering an in-depth comprehension of intricate and multifaceted phenomena (Saldana, 2020). In the context of this investigation, thus, thematic data analysis facilitated a profound investigation into the socio-cultural, economic, and educational elements influencing the effectiveness of SMT interventions within rural high schools (Squires, 2023).

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to ethical research procedures. Before commencing this study, the researchers applied for ethical clearance to conduct research from the University of Limpopo's TREK (Ethics Committee). The ethics committee approved the application, and the research project was numbered "TREC/244/2023: PG". The researchers further requested permission to conduct research from the Department of Education (Mopani-West District, N'wanedzi Circuit). Hasan et al. (2021) cautioned that ensuring that individuals involved in research comprehend

its purpose, procedures, and potential risks is crucial for researchers. In support, Broesch et al. (2020) stated that respecting participants' autonomy and their right to make informed decisions about research involvement is a crucial aspect of safeguarding their well-being. As a result, after receiving approval, informed consent was obtained from all the participants, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the study, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time. Assent forms for teachers and consent forms for learners' participation in this study were also provided. Furthermore, during the data collection process, the researchers ensured that the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were maintained, as a crucial element of ethical considerations. To safeguard participants' privacy, the researchers prioritised the use of pseudonyms and implemented stringent data security measures to prevent unauthorised access (Brittain et al., 2020).

FINDINGS

In response to the research question "What are the challenges faced by the SMTs in addressing poor academic performance in rural high schools in Mopani-West Districts?" the following data emerged. The codes P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6 were used to denote the utterances made by principals from respective schools. Departmental heads were denoted by DH1, DH2, DH3, DH4, DH5 and DH6 while learners were denoted as L1, L2, L3, L4, L5 and L6. The schools were represented as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6 respectively.

Lack of instructional resources

Resource scarcity encompasses various challenges, spanning from a lack of teaching materials to restricted technology access. These limitations weigh heavily on rural high schools, impeding the provision of quality education. In the Mopani-West District, inadequate infrastructure, including crowded classrooms, subpar sanitation facilities, and a shortage of clean water, makes it hard for learners to concentrate on their studies. P2 from S2 in the district highlighted this aspect, mentioning how overcrowded spaces negatively affect learners' focus and academic performance:

"Our school lacks proper instructional resources. Most of the learners share textbooks, which negatively impacts their academic activities because they are unable to complete tasks given to them by their teachers in the form of homework."

Additionally, rural high schools frequently grapple with shortages of crucial teaching resources like textbooks, lab equipment, and stationery. This scarcity not only impedes the teaching process but also hinders learners' ability to effectively engage with the curriculum. DH2 from S2 affirmed this sentiment by stating:

"We struggle with a lack of textbooks and teaching materials. It's challenging to provide quality education when learners don't have access to the necessary resources."

DH1, in support of the view of DH2, responded:

"In our rural high schools, we suffer a great scarcity of resources. Such resources are fundamental to teaching and learning. Such resources include textbooks, chats, smart boards, projectors, and laptops. As compared to urban high schools, we are way behind."

DH5 also indicated that:

"We are not in the 21st century and technology is advancing at a quick pace. Technology has become the most effective way of teaching and learning. Such resources are needed in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Our schools need these resources so we may be able to keep up with schools in the urban areas."

DH5 echoed DH5's sentiments and iterated:

"In terms of technological advancement, we educators lack training. Most of us are not familiar with these things and if it might happen that we receive them in the near future, we need to be prepared for their utilisation."

Moreover, the absence of technology and internet access in many rural high schools limits learners' exposure to digital learning and research opportunities. This lack of access puts these learners at a disadvantage compared to their peers in more privileged areas, impacting their academic performance. L2 from S2 and L4 from S4 highlighted this disparity, emphasising how it affects their ability to compete on an equal footing. L2 expressed:

"We're at a disadvantage when it comes to technology. Many of our assignments require internet research, but we can't access it easily, which affects our academic performance."

L4 supported L2's statement by stating,

"It is very frustrating when we don't have access to necessary learning materials. We can't compete on a level playing field with learners from more privileged areas."

P2 emphasised that resource inadequacy remains a significant hurdle in rural schools. P2 principal declared,

"A lack of resources is a major challenge in rural schools. For instance, subjects like life sciences and geography need to be taught using overhead projectors, but most schools in rural areas do not have the means to buy these resources. Most schools in rural areas do not have laboratories, and this negatively impacts learners who are doing physical sciences, which forces them to learn it theoretically."

Teacher availability

The scarcity of teachers in rural high schools within the Mopani-West District stands as a pervasive and significant challenge. This shortage directly affects learners' academic performance by restricting both the quality and quantity of education they receive. P1 from S1 underscored this concern, noting the severe shortage of teachers specialising in specific subjects by saying:

"We have a severe shortage of subject-specific teachers. Some teachers have to cover multiple subjects, making it impossible to provide quality instruction."

DH1 held similar views as P1:

"We also have a lot of workload due to the lack of qualified teachers in our schools. It can be one of the factors hindering better results from being produced in many of our schools. Teachers are unable to cater for the needs of all learners since they are less."

DH3 corroborated P1's perspective:

"We are unable to arrange and organise our learners well due to larger numbers of learners in classrooms."

This shortage forces some teachers to cover multiple subjects, making it nearly impossible to deliver high-quality instruction across the board. Consequently, this scarcity means that educators may lack the expertise necessary to effectively teach certain subjects. As a result, learners could receive inadequate education in these areas. Compounding this issue is the lack of access to specialised subjects due to the shortage of teachers. The DH1 from S1, highlighted this struggle, explaining how the shortage hampers their ability to offer a variety of subjects by saying:

"We struggle to offer a variety of subjects due to the shortage of teachers, which limits the career choices for our learners."

This limitation significantly narrows the career choices available to learners, potentially curtailing their prospects and educational opportunities. The shortage of qualified and motivated teachers in the district poses a substantial barrier to the quality of education and the academic performance of learners.

Improving school infrastructure

Rural schools in the Mopani-West District often grapple with infrastructure limitations such as insufficient classrooms, libraries, and technology resources, which directly impact the quality of education for learners. L1 from S1 lamented the absence of a proper library and the lack of computer access. L1 stated:

"Our school lacks a proper library, and we don't have access to computers. This makes research and studying for exams much harder. We're at a disadvantage compared to learners in urban areas."

This absence significantly hampers learners' ability to conduct research and study effectively for exams, placing them at a disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts, who have better resources available. The inadequate infrastructure, coupled with overcrowded classrooms and subpar facilities, creates an environment that is far from conducive to optimal learning. DH4 corroborated this sentiment by emphasising the dire need for repairs in school buildings. DH1, DH4 and DH3 mentioned respectively:

"The substandard infrastructure, including cramped classrooms and inadequate sanitation facilities, creates an environment that's far from ideal for effective teaching and learning."

"Our school buildings are in dire need of repairs. Leaky roofs and crumbling walls make teaching and learning difficult, especially during adverse weather conditions."

“Our classes lack lighting. During over-caste days, classrooms tend to be a bit dark and learners are unable to fully concentrate on what is in discussion.”

Issues like leaky roofs and crumbling walls not only make teaching and learning challenging on a day-to-day basis but also pose significant difficulties during adverse weather conditions, further impacting the educational experience for both teachers and learners.

Equal access for all despite poverty and inequality

The study identified socioeconomic factors as pivotal in shaping the academic performance of learners in rural high schools within the Mopani-West District. Among these factors, poverty emerges as a significant challenge, imposing additional hurdles that hinder learners' ability to concentrate and excel academically. Economic constraints associated with poverty create impediments that affect learners' focus and their capacity to thrive academically. Issues related to poverty and the subsequent lack of access to essential resources significantly impact learners in rural areas, amplifying economic hardships that adversely influence their academic performance. The study highlighted the stark reality of limited access to fundamental necessities such as nutritious food, adequate housing, and proper healthcare, factors that directly contribute to hindered cognitive development and overall health among these learners. DH2, who worked in S2, echoed these concerns, shedding light on the profound impact of poverty on academic performance. DH2 confirmed:

“Many of our learners come from impoverished backgrounds. They often come to school hungry and lacking basic school supplies. These factors can make it extremely challenging for them to focus on their studies.”

Similarly, P2 stated:

“Many learners in rural areas come from disadvantaged backgrounds, facing poverty, inadequate nutrition, and limited access to educational support from parents, family members or their peers. These factors can negatively impact their academic performance.”

DH6 extended on the above views:

“The SGB is also facing challenges due to finances as they are able to help us when we are in need of educators to help ease the workload and help learners progress.”

Many learners come from financially strained backgrounds, often arriving at school hungry and lacking basic school supplies. These circumstances create formidable challenges, making it exceedingly difficult for these learners to concentrate on their studies and engage effectively in the learning process.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The research findings shed light on the myriad obstacles faced by SMTs as they endeavour to improve academic performance in rural high schools within the Mopani-West District. The study revealed a complex web of challenges affecting learners' academic performance. It is evident that resource scarcity in these schools significantly hampers the quality of education. Issues such

as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, and the absence of technology and internet access create stark disparities between these schools and more privileged ones. One of the most pressing concerns highlighted by principals, teachers, and learners is the impact of inadequate infrastructure on learning. The lack of proper facilities, including overcrowded classrooms and dilapidated buildings, poses a substantial obstacle to effective teaching and learning. This issue extends beyond the physical space; the absence of essential resources such as textbooks and technology further impede learners' engagement with the curriculum. The shortage of qualified teachers specialising in specific subjects amplifies these challenges. Not only does it limit the quality of education provided, but it also restricts the variety of subjects offered, thereby limiting learners' career choices. Lastly, socio-economic factors, particularly poverty, play a profound role in shaping learners' academic experiences. Financial constraints lead to hunger, a lack of necessary school supplies, and limited access to fundamental necessities, creating significant barriers to concentration and effective learning. In essence, the findings underscore a network of inter-connected challenges faced by rural high schools in the Mopani-West District. These challenges collectively contribute to hindering learners' academic performance and present significant obstacles to their educational advancement. Addressing these issues will require a multifaceted approach that tackles resource scarcity, infrastructure deficiencies, teacher shortages, and socio-economic disparities.

When comparing the above findings of the study with previous studies, both differences and similarities emerged. Guran's (2022) research based on the study "The difficulties faced by school administrators working in disadvantaged schools and the effects of the administrator role they exhibit on the success of teachers and learners" highlighted the formidable challenges confronting school administrators in disadvantaged schools and their profound influence on teacher and student success. The study revealed that lack of teacher commitment exacerbates the situation, attributed to the arduous conditions within disadvantaged schools, leading to high turnover rates among inexperienced educators grappling with learners and parental challenges. This has a detrimental effect on educational advancement and stability. Additionally, the socio-economic and socio-cultural setting of disadvantaged schools significantly shapes the learning environment, with poverty, unemployment, and familial dynamics fuelling absenteeism, behavioural disruptions, and parental disengagement. Societal issues such as domestic violence and substance abuse further complicate learner behaviour and attitudes toward education, compounding the hurdles for teachers and administrators alike. Another study by Mufalo et al (2021) titled "Challenges faced by combined schools in Masaiti District which hinders the provision of quality education" uncovered the multitude of challenges confronting combined schools in Masaiti district, hindering the provision of quality education. A glaring issue was the shortage of teaching and learning materials, including textbooks, undermining both teachers' instructional effectiveness and learners' learning experiences. The study showed that shortages of teaching materials and infrastructure, lead to overcrowded classrooms and limited access to resources, exacerbating educational disparities.

Both studies recognised societal factors such as poverty, unemployment, and familial issues impacting education, with Guran (2022) emphasising absenteeism and behavioural problems stemming from broader societal issues like domestic violence and substance abuse. Mufalo et al (2021) noted negative parental attitudes toward education and the lack of boarding facilities affecting learners' safety and academic performance. Despite the findings of the study being similar to those of the two previous studies with respect to socio-economic issues such as poverty and unemployment, those studies indicated that poverty and unemployment were the major causes of the poor academic performance of the learners (Guran, 2022; Mufalo et al, 2021). On the contrary, the current study revealed teacher shortage as a challenge while Guran (2022) and Mufalo et al (2021) found teachers' lack of commitment as a factor that compromises good academic performance.

The scarcity of instructional resources and infrastructure in rural areas not only affects the quality of education provided but also restricts the range of subjects offered, limiting learners' academic opportunities and prospects. The imbalance in teacher-to-learner ratios further strains the educational system, making it difficult for educators to provide personalised attention and support to each learner. Added to this, socio-economic factors, notably poverty, exacerbate these challenges, creating additional barriers to concentration and effective learning. Additionally, societal issues such as domestic violence and substance abuse complicate student behaviour and attitudes toward education, compounding the hurdles for teachers and administrators alike. In sum, the socio-economic and socio-cultural setting of disadvantaged schools significantly shapes the learning environment, with poverty, unemployment, and familial dynamics fuelling absenteeism, behavioural disruptions, and parental disengagement. This is compounded by a scarcity of resources, infrastructure, and educators. As a result, learners from low-income backgrounds who are situated in these areas often face unique obstacles that hinder their access to educational resources and opportunities, further widening the gap in academic achievement between them and their more privileged peers. These persistent challenges continue to impact the effectiveness of SMTs in rural high schools within the Mopani-West District.

The Value of the Study

First and foremost, this study will benefit all educators within the Mopani-West District as it seeks to improve academic outcomes in rural high schools. The study sought to identify and establish effective strategies employed by SMTs to address this problem, with the ultimate goal of raising academic standards and improving educational outcomes for the learners in the region. The findings of this study can prove to be invaluable to the Department of Basic Education in South Africa. By shedding light on the unique challenges faced by rural schools and the role of SMTs in addressing these challenges, by providing insights that inform the formulation of policies and interventions tailored to the specific needs of such schools. This can lead to more effective and targeted support for the improvement of education in rural areas.

SMTs play a pivotal role in shaping the educational environment of a school. Understanding the best practices employed by successful SMTs in addressing academic challenges can lead to the development of targeted training and professional development programs for these teams. This, in turn, will enhance their effectiveness in addressing poor academic performance in rural high schools.

Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges experienced by SMTs in rural high schools situated in South Africa's Mopani-West District to improve academic outcomes in these specific educational contexts. Academic underperformance has persisted as a longstanding issue in these schools, posing a significant concern for regional advancement. Upon meticulous analysis of the gathered data, the research underscored the major obstacles that impact SMTs in elevating academic performance within these rural schools. Various obstacles faced by SMTs were identified, including insufficient instructional resources, a shortage of qualified educators, insufficient infrastructure, and poverty and inequality. Moreover, the absence of technology creates stark disparities between these schools and more privileged ones. The study also highlighted the impact of inadequate infrastructure on learning as one of the pressing concerns that compromise quality teaching and learning. These challenges significantly hamper the quality of education and, by extension, the impact of SMTs.

Recommendations

The Department of Education must prioritise ample resources for rural high schools in the Mopani-West District. This entails funding for infrastructure, educational materials, technology access, and tailored teacher training programs to address specific needs, foster an environment conducive to learning, and bridge educational gaps in the region.

Encouraging SMTs to craft data-centric strategic plans for academic advancement is crucial. Such blueprints should delineate clear, measurable objectives and actionable initiatives at the school level. Emphasising comprehensive, data-driven strategies fosters tangible improvements, ensuring educational enhancement aligns with specific goals.

Continuous professional development is vital for SMTs to refine their leadership and management mastery. Training programs must centre on honing decision-making, fostering collaborative teams to counter societal issues, and cultivating innovative problem-solving abilities to circumvent infrastructural challenges and educator shortages. Empowering SMT members with these skills ensures adept leadership and fosters an environment conducive to effective management practices.

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