

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM STATEMENT, HYPOTHESIS AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter intends to introduce the thesis titled “The impact of the hidden curriculum on the South African school leaving examination in the Northern Province.” As an introductory chapter, it intends to discuss the relevance of the topic as well as the problem statement, hypothesis, aims and objectives of the research and research methodology.

This chapter focuses on the performance of Northern Province learners in the South African school leaving examination from 1994 up to 2001. It compares the performance of Northern Province learners in the South African school leaving examination with the performance of learners of other provinces and argues that the ongoing poor performance of learners of the Northern Province might result from the impact of the hidden curriculum.

This chapter argues that the performance of learners of the Northern Province as indicated by the South African school leaving examination results, needs to be viewed and interpreted against the background of both the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum and that the neglect of either of the two curricula will result in unfounded conclusions.

1.2 RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC

While most countries rely on the school leaving examination for multipurpose functions, the value and the importance of the school leaving examination differ from country to country and community to community. South Africa is one of the countries which attaches high value to the school leaving examination results. The Northern Province Education, Arts, Culture and Sport (2000:2) asserts that:

“... the grade 12 examination results have become a yardstick for measuring the credibility of our education system ... [and] are also used as a yardstick to gauge the quality of our learners and the capability to further their studies at tertiary institutions.”

While it is acknowledged that poor learner performance in the South African school leaving examination is a problem faced by all the provinces of South Africa, the intensity of this problem is not the same in all the provinces. Using the South African school leaving examination results as an indicator, one can argue that education in the Northern Province is failing to comply with the expectations of the public. The education situation in the Northern Province is clearly depicted by the Northern Province Education, Arts, Culture and Sport (1996:4):

“Your province, your government and your people are calling on you to come forward to help rid us of the shame that has befallen our education system. It is your participation in the process of democratic school governance that will turn our schools into institutions that will earn our communities pride of highest pass rates.”

The appalling situation in the Northern Province was asserted by the former Northern Province MEC for Education (Motsoaledi 1996:3) who defined it as “a disaster in human development”.

Throughout the early years of the democratic government, viz. from 1994 to 1999, the Northern Province obtained the poorest and the lowest pass rate of all the provinces (see Tables 3.6 - 3.11). It was only in the years 2000 and 2001 that the Northern Province managed to obtain the last but one and the last but four positions as compared to other provinces.

In view of the fact that from 1994 to 1999 the Northern Province had the largest number of candidates while in 2000 and 2001 it had the second largest number of candidates who entered for the South African school leaving examination as compared to other provinces, its high failure rate is a matter of grave concern (see Tables 3.6 - 3.14). Taking into account that during the above-mentioned period the Northern Province had never obtained a percentage pass rate of more than the South African percentage pass rate, the impact of its failure rate on the whole of South Africa cannot be ignored as is revealed by the following table (Department of Education 1997, 1999, 2001).

Table 1.1 The percentage pass rate of the Republic of South Africa and Northern Province between 1994 and 2001

Year	Pass rate (%)	
	South Africa	Northern Province
1994	58,0	44,4
1995	53,4	37,8
1996	54,4	38,8
1997	47,4	31,9
1998	49,3	35,2
1999	48,9	37,5
2000	57,9	51,4
2001	61,7	59,5

Despite the gloomy picture of the school leaving examination in the Northern Province, there are some schools which are worth commending as remarked on by the former Northern Province MEC for Education (Motsoaledi 1996:2) that not all is bleak in the province as there are silver linings accompanying these results.

The Northern Province is characterised by various extremes and dramatic contrasts. Using the school leaving examination to evaluate education in the Northern Province, a clear demarcating line can be drawn between three main groups of schools.

The first group consists of those schools which have a culture of producing very good results in the school leaving examination. Though such schools are very few in number, they have managed to produce very good results throughout the closing years of the apartheid education system and the early years of democratic education. Such schools are known to produce very good results in the school leaving examination and they have managed to retain and maintain that culture.

The second group consists of those schools which have a tradition of being average with regard to the school leaving examination results.

The third group consists of the schools which have a culture of producing very poor results in the

school leaving examination. Such schools have managed to maintain that culture for many years. These are the schools which are mainly responsible for the Northern Province's (and the whole country's) poor learner performance in the South African school leaving examination.

Though the above three groups of schools follow almost the same formal curriculum, they annually produce results, the quality of which differ greatly.

In an attempt to find a solution for poor learner performance in the South African school leaving examination, numerous studies have been conducted from various perspectives. Mathonsi (1986) attributed poor learner performance to socio-economic and political factors, while Mbingeleli (1997) viewed the same problem in the Kathorus district from the dimension of the universal aspects of schooling. Sheppard (1998) focussed on a school-based indicator model for improving the quality of education in South Africa. Motsoaledi (1996) attributed poor learner performance in the Northern Province to historical racial disparities in allocating resources. Molepo (1999) attributed poor learner performance to poor parental empowerment while Thulare (1992) attributed poor learner performance to poor managerial skills of the principals.

In an attempt to find a solution for poor learner performance in the South African school leaving examination, various reports and surveys were conducted by the National Department of Education and by the Northern Province Education, Arts, Culture and Sport, which include the following:

- Department of Education (2001), Report on the Senior Certificate Examination
- Department of Education (2000), Report on the Senior Certificate Examination
- Department of Education (1999), Report on the 1999 Senior Certificate Examination
- Department of Education (1999), Preliminary report of the 1998 Senior Certificate examination results
- Department of Education (1998), Preliminary report on the 1997 Senior Certificate examination results
- Department of Education (1997), 1996 Examination Results

While the above reports of the Department of Education focus mainly on the performance of learners in the South African school leaving examination, they provide information with

regard to the whole examination, *inter alia*, the administration of the examination, problems encountered during the marking of the scripts, monitoring of the examination, continuous assessment, reasons for poor performance, SAFCERT and its moderation role, initiatives to improve the performance of learners, international benchmarking, etc.

- The Department of Education (1997) School Register of Needs Survey focuses on physical facilities, the condition of buildings, services provided, equipment and resources available, etc. This report affirms the poor resources of the Northern Province schools as compared to other provinces. According to this report, the Northern Province tops all other provinces with regard to a lack of school buildings, power (electricity), a lack of water in schools, etc. The report reveals that the Northern Province is amongst the worst off provinces in terms of a lack of telephones, toilets, laboratories, workshops, cookery centres, media centres and libraries.
- The Department of Education (1995), Report of the Committee to review the organisation, governance and funding of schools focuses on the inherited models of school ownership and funding, constitutional issues relevant to ownership, governance and the funding of schools, the framework of the proposed system, norms and standards for the financing of schools' implementation of the framework, capacity building, etc.
- Northern Province Education, Arts, Culture and Sport (2001), Official announcement of the 2001 grade 12 examination results
- Northern Province Education, Arts, Culture and Sport (2000), Official announcement of the 2000 grade 12 examination results
- Northern Province Education, Arts, Culture and Sport (1999), Official announcement of the 1999 grade 12 examination results
- Northern Province Education, Arts, Culture and Sport (1998), Official announcement of the 1998 grade 12 examination results.

While the above reports of the Northern Province Education Arts, Culture and Sport focus mainly on the performance of the Northern Province learners in the South African

school leaving examination, they include, *inter alia*, strategies and initiatives to improve the performance of learners, winter enrichment classes, preparatory examinations, continuous assessment, etc.

- The Northern Province Education Arts, Culture and Sport (1998), Culture of learning, teaching and service (COLTS) which gives guidelines on the punctuality of learners and educators, observance of full school hours, absenteeism, attendance of lessons, sufficient work and regular assessment, the role of governing bodies, crime in schools, etc.

Notwithstanding the good intentions of the above-mentioned surveys, reports and related research which have been conducted in this area, and notwithstanding the slight improvement in the pass rates in 2000 and 2001, learner performance in the South African school leaving examination in the Northern Province remains poor (refer to Tables 3.6 -3.14).

While most of the intervening strategies, programmes and related research focussed mainly on searching for the solution from the formal curriculum viewpoint, the intention of this study is to investigate the ongoing problem of poor learner performance in the Northern Province in the South African school leaving examination from the dimension of the hidden curriculum. While the hidden curriculum is used as one of the lenses of viewing and interpreting this ongoing problem, this study wishes to acknowledge various dimensions which impact on learner performance in the South African school leaving examination in the Northern Province. The study contends that continuous poor learner performance in the South African school leaving examination in the Northern Province may probably be attributed to, *inter alia*, the continuous neglect of the impact of the hidden curriculum.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

In an attempt to define the research problem, Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (1990:62) argue that a research problem is a question or statement about the relationship between variables.

In this study, the research problem focuses on the relationship or correlation that exists between two variables, viz. the South African school leaving examination results and the hidden curriculum. Though the research problem consists of questions or statements about the

relationship, it has to comply with certain criteria in order to ensure its significance. Ary *et al.* (1990:51-53) assert that:

“Ideally the problem should be one whose solution will make a contribution to the body of organized knowledge in education. The problem should be one that will lead to new problems and so to further research. The problem must be one that is researchable. The problem must be suitable for the particular researcher.”

In selecting the problem, I have checked the above-mentioned criteria and found fit to carry the study through to completion as I have some interest and experience in this area. Bailey (1994:37) asserts that:

“There are several factors affecting problem selection, including the research paradigm a researcher identifies with, the researcher’s values, the researcher’s methodology, unit of analysis chosen, and whether the study is to be conducted over time or at a single point in time.”

The problem statement of this study is based on the following questions:

- Can the differences in the South African school leaving examination results of various schools in the Northern Province be partly attributed to the impact of the hidden curriculum?
- How does the hidden curriculum impact on the South African school leaving examination in the Northern Province?

While the above questions remain at the core of the problem statement, further related sub-questions are developed for further substantiation and explanation, viz.:

Can the differences in the South African school leaving examination results of various schools in the Northern Province be partly attributed to the impact of the hidden curriculum through:

- attitudes as argued by, *inter alia*, Willis (1977) and Jackson (1990);
- punctuality and attendance as argued by, *inter alia*, Dreeben (1968), Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Apple (1995);

- attendance of afternoon studies as argued by, *inter alia*, Jackson (1990);
- timetabling, written work, or syllabi as argued by, *inter alia*, Lynch (1939) and Cusick (1973);
- the mediation of discipline and school policies as argued by, *inter alia*, Gatto (1992), Snyder (1971), Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Dreeben (1968);
- support services and staff development as argued by, *inter alia*, Gatto (1992), Lynch (1989), Bowles and Gintis (1976);
- motivation as argued by, *inter alia*, Jackson (1990), Dreeben (1968) and Lynch (1989); and
- variables like gender, age, experience, qualifications, subject group, etc. as argued by, *inter alia*, Willis (1977) and Lynch (1989)?

1.4 HYPOTHESIS

This study postulates that a relationship or correlation exists between the South African school leaving examination results and the hidden curriculum in the Northern Province. In defining the hypothesis, Babbie and Mouton (2001:643) argue:

“It is a statement of something that ought to be observed in the real world if the theory is correct. A hypothesis is essentially a statement that postulates that certain relationships (correlation or causality) exists between two or more variables.”

As the hypothesis postulates that a certain relationship exists between two or more variables, the hypothesis of this thesis has been formulated as follows:

The differences in the South African school leaving examination results of various schools in the Northern Province can be partly attributed to the impact of the hidden curriculum.

In this study the above-mentioned statement, similar to a hypothesis, will be used to direct the investigation. Although the concept chosen to formulate the hypothesis is complex and multidimensional, it serves as a statement to guide the research. Ary *et al.* (1990:111) argue:

“The hypothesis provides direction to the researcher’s efforts because it determines the research method and type of data relevant to the solution of the problem.”

This study intends to test whether the expectations that the above hypothesis represents are found to exist in the Northern Province or not. In attempting to show the multipurpose functions of the hypothesis, Ary *et al.* (1990:111) argue:

“A good hypothesis ... must have explanatory power; it must be testable; it must be in agreement with the preponderance of existing data; it must be stated as clearly and concisely as possible and it must state the expected relationship between the variables.”

Although the above-mentioned hypothesis cannot be judged prior to its empirical testing, based on experience and perusal of literature, I view it as having explanatory power to direct the intended research.

Based on the hypothesis and the problem statement of this thesis, I intended to investigate whether there is a relationship between the South African school leaving examination results of various schools in the Northern Province and the hidden curriculum as it manifests itself through variables like attitudes, punctuality, attendance of afternoon studies, timetabling, written work and syllabi, discipline and school policies, support services and staff development, motivation, acceptance of responsibility for the final results, gender, age, experience, qualification, subject group, etc.

1.5 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The formulation of the research objectives has been basically determined by two factors, viz. the type of research goal and the researcher’s cognitive interest. In defining the function of the research objectives, Mouton (1996:101) argues that the research objective or purpose gives a broad indication of what researchers wish to achieve in their research.

Babbie (1998:90) mentions three types of research objectives, viz. exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. While recognising their close relationship, I view the objectives of this research project as being more explanatory in nature. Although Mouton and Marais (1990:45) assert that

the major aim of explanatory studies is to indicate causality between variables or events, this study intends to determine the relationship between the South African school leaving examination results and the hidden curriculum without any claim of causality.

My cognitive interests include both the individual interest like obtaining a post-graduate degree and the institutional interests which include my present occupation and experience as a secondary school principal. Mouton (1996:104) asserts that cognitive interests are those factors that motivate or drive the researcher to undertake a particular study. The following cognitive institutional factors motivated me to embark on this type of study:

- **Promoting mutual understanding between learners and educators with regard to learner performance**

Instead of viewing the performance of learners solely from being a function of formal instruction whereby some learners are labelled as being lazy, delinquents, arrogant, over-politicised, unintelligent, and stubborn (Snyder 1971; Willis 1977), this study aims at informing educators to view performance of learners from both dimensions of formal instruction and the learners' mastery of the hidden curriculum. By viewing and understanding performance of learners from both the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum, conflicts and disruptions are eliminated as both educators and learners are equally involved in creating and shaping their own social environment.

- **Promoting mutual understanding between educators, parents and education authorities with regard to performance of learners**

Instead of viewing the school leaving examination results solely as a function of formal instruction whereby parents and education authorities make some hasty and unfounded conclusions (Northern Province Education, Arts, Culture and Sport 1999) which are usually accompanied by derogatory labels attached to the school (educators, learners and all the stakeholders), this study emphasises the need to consider both formal instruction and the learners' mastery of the hidden curriculum in interpreting the results of various schools. Although educators have greater responsibility in the performance of learners, this study aims at informing parents and authorities that the school leaving examination results cannot be used as a function of formal instruction without considering all other

factors.

- **Improvement of learning, teaching and performance of learners in the South African school leaving examination**

By acknowledging the possible impact of the hidden curriculum on the school leaving examination results, both learners and educators will seek ways of counteracting its negative impact. This study aims at exposing the negative effects of the hidden curriculum without denying all other possibilities. Since it is not possible to root out all forms of negative effects of the hidden curriculum and since the hidden curriculum is closely interwoven with the formal curriculum, the aim of this study is to expose the negative effects of the hidden curriculum to its possible recipients, viz., learners and educators. Learners and educators can hardly resist or counteract what they do not know. Martin (1976:12) asserts that:

“Having knowledge and skill concerning hidden curricula can be a form of self-defense against the onslaught of unasked-for learning states.”

The negative effects of the hidden curriculum can only be effectively counteracted if both educators and learners can be made aware of the possibility of their existence.

- **Contributing to the existing body of scientific knowledge**

While this study aims at improving the performance of learners, like any other study, its ultimate aim is to contribute to the existing body of scientific knowledge (Mouton 1996:104) by reflecting on what I regard as the commonly neglected dimension of the school curriculum, viz., the hidden curriculum. This study aims at contributing to the optimisation of human potential and national development through critical interpretation of the concept *hidden curriculum* and its possible impact on the school leaving examination results of various schools in the Northern Province and possibly in South Africa as a whole.

While acknowledging that much has been said about the notion *hidden curriculum*, very little is done to recognise its existence and impact. Berkhout and Bergh (1994:49) assert that:

“... without a critical interpretation of the hidden curriculum, policy proposals and changes which are currently under discussion cannot contribute to the optimisation of human potential and national development ... a wrong filter effect through the hidden curriculum could lead to the failure of the good intentions of educational reform.”

The ultimate aim of this study is to determine whether the differences in the South African school leaving examination results in the Northern Province can partly be attributed to the impact of the hidden curriculum.

The study aims further at helping learners, educators and other stakeholders to counteract the impact of the hidden curriculum through the identification of the relations and patterns of behaviour that could be contributing to poor learner performance in the South African school leaving examination.

1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to explain research methodology, Babbie and Mouton (2001:647) view methodology as:

“The methods, techniques, and procedures that are employed in the process of implementing the research design or research plan, as well as the underlying principles and assumptions that underlie their use.”

In this study, research methodology reflects on the procedures that are employed in order to investigate whether the hidden curriculum impacts on the South African school leaving examination results of various schools in the Northern Province.

Babbie (2001:18) asserts:

“Methodology (a subfield of epistemology) might be called the science of finding out ... how social scientists find out about human social life.”

In order to “find out”, three major aspects of social, scientific enterprise are necessary, viz. theory,

data collection and data analysis.

In implementing the research design, the study is structured as follows: An analysis of the concepts *the hidden curriculum* and *the school leaving examination* as viewed nationally and internationally will be conducted. An analysis of the concept *hidden curriculum* shall be explained mainly from two broad theoretical approaches, viz., the functionalist and the neo-Marxist perspectives. The analysis will be supported by the relevant critical literature review in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 focuses on a brief history of the school leaving examination in South Africa and in the Northern Province as impacted by the hidden curriculum.

While acknowledging that the Northern Province Department of Education has numerous district offices, due to the time and cost factor, the survey will be conducted only in one district office, viz. the Soutpansberg district (see Chapter 4). On the basis of the survey which will be conducted in the Soutpansberg district, on the basis of the universal characteristics of the Soutpansberg with other Northern Province district offices, *inter alia*, numerous former departments of education, former advantaged and disadvantaged schools, racially and ethnically divided schools, etc. and without ignoring its particularistic characteristics, the study postulates that what shall be found in the Soutpansberg district can also be found in the other Northern Province districts.

In order to ensure representativeness and unbiasedness in selecting schools, I requested the assistance of a research consultant (University of Pretoria, Department of Information Technology) in performing a random selection of schools (see Appendix E). A merit list which indicates the top, middle and bottom performing schools of all Soutpansberg district secondary schools which sat for the 1999 South African school leaving examination, was supplied to the research consultant (see Appendix D). Subsequently thirty secondary schools from a population of 65 schools were randomly selected by the research consultant. The randomly selected schools consisted of 10 top, 10 middle and 10 bottom performing schools (see Appendix E).

Due to the lack of the necessary computer skills, I sought the assistance of a research consultant in checking and correcting the draft questionnaires in order to ensure that they comply with the requirements of computer data capturing. The research consultant performed the final data processing (refer to Chapter 4).

For analysis and initial interpretation of the collected data, two methods were applied, viz., Spearman's rank order correlation and stepwise logistic regression (see Chapter 5).

Chapter 6 focuses on the findings, interpretation of data, recommendations and the conclusion.

1.7 CONCLUSION

While acknowledging various factors from several dimensions which impact on the grade 12 learner performance, the intention of this study is to investigate the ongoing problem of poor learner performance in the Northern Province in the South African school leaving examination from the dimension of the hidden curriculum.

In conducting this study, I am aware of the interrelatedness of the hidden curriculum and the formal curriculum and that neither of them can be studied in isolation.

Although I am aware of the ongoing impact of socio-economic factors, resource allocation and utilization disparities in the school leaving examination in the Northern Province, this study does not intend to give a report on the latter factors as that has been extensively done, which include, *inter alia*, a school register of needs (Department of Education 1997), Report of the Committee to review the organisation, governance and funding of schools (Department of Education 1995), etc. Although the hidden curriculum is used as an additional lens for viewing and analysing this ongoing problem, the field of this study does not claim to be the only factor which impacts on the performance of learners in the school leaving examination.