CHAPTER 1
BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION

1.1   INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION

Scratch the surface on an excellent school and you are likely to find an excellent principal. Peer into a failing school and you will find weak leadership. That, at least, is the conventional wisdom. Leaders are thought to be essential for high-quality education. But is this indeed true – and if so, exactly how does leadership work? (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003:1).

One of the major challenges facing secondary school principals in South Africa is the continued decline in the performance of learners in the matriculation examination. This happens at a time when the country is faced with acute skills shortages in various sectors of the economy, thus forcing the country to transform its education system generally, and the curriculum in particular, in an attempt to provide skills that would allow citizens to adapt in this rapidly changing world. The following table represents the unemployment rate in South Africa, which can be partly attributed to shortages of skilled personnel:

TABLE 1.1:   **Unemployment rate in South Africa (Adapted from CIA World Fact book, 2009)**

Year	Unemployment rate	Rank	Percentage change	Date of information
2003	37.00%	18		2001
2004	31.00%	24	-16.22%	2003
2005	26.20%	161	-15.48%	2004
2006	26.60%	168	1.53%	2005
2007	25.50%	172	-4.14%	2006
2008	24.30%	169	-4.71%	2007
2009	22.90%	170	-5.76%	2008 est.

The changing education system and new curriculum imply a change in the roles and expectations for principals as school leaders. In accordance with this view, Steyn (2008:889) (cited in Slater, McGhee, Capt, Alvarez, Topete & Iturbe, 2003) regards

improved leadership and management as a way to provide better quality education. Leithwood and Riehl (2003:2) argue that accountability regarding the performance of learners has put pressure on actors at all levels, from learners themselves to teachers, principals and superintendents. Principals are no longer regarded only as managers, but as leaders of schools as learning organizations, with a duty to exercise effective school leadership to ensure education reform and improvement in the performance of learners. The implication of Leithwood and Riehl's (2003) contention is that principals have to be prepared effectively in order to create good schools. They have to be able to transform human energy in schools into desired learner academic and social growth, to serve all learners well, and to react to the increasingly complex environment of the 21st century.

The purpose of this study is therefore to investigate variables related to instructional leadership in principalship and their contribution to the improvement of learner performance in the matriculation examination. This study views the shift from the old curriculum to a new curriculum as the first step towards curriculum transformation in South Africa, and it is hoped that this will serve as a vehicle to realize the values and ideals which are reflected in the preamble to the constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, Act 108 of 1996).

It will no doubt require a capable school leadership corps to effectively implement and manage the realization of the ideals and values referred to in the preamble to the constitution. The leadership literature has consistently questioned the extent of a school's impact on learner performance, whether the level of performance can be attributed to the leadership displayed in a school (Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2004), and also the importance of leadership in an organization. The conclusion in all cases has consistently been that school leadership (particularly instructional leadership) substantially boosts learner performance (Waters *et al.,* 2004) and that leadership is considered to be a vital precondition for an organization's success (Onsman, 2003). It follows that an investigation of the variables related to instructional leadership, and the impact of these variables on the improvement of the performance of learners in the matriculation examination, needs to be conducted.

1.2   BACKGROUND

My engagement with a study of this magnitude and complexity emerged out of a plethora of communications, formal and informal, with individuals and groups, on matters related to the

decline in the achievement of learners in the matriculation examination. These communications included strategic planning meetings, learner achievement intervention strategy meetings, and comments on debates and press releases on the matter. These communications always involved individuals and groups from differing intellectual, social and political backgrounds, all intent on establishing the main cause(s) of the decline in the matriculation pass rate, and the possible role that instructional leadership may play in the education process in order to remedy the problem. All these interactions have revealed that there have to be some variables which, when coupled with effective school leadership, could positively impact on the improvement of learner performance in the matriculation examination. The following section is intended to provide further insight into the background of this study.

This section has provided an overview of the performance of learners in the matriculation examinations, in order to have a clear theoretical picture of the challenges facing principals with regard to learner performance. For ease of reference, this study highlights three time periods, the first of which reflects the status of the education system from 1994 to 1999, followed by the improvement in the pass rate from 2000 to 2002, and then the national pass rate for the years from 2004 to 2008.

Fleisch and Christie (2004:13) indicate that the years from 1994 to 1999 saw the matriculation examination results continuing to reflect inequalities in the education system. These results reflect the differences in learner performance between black and white pupils, which could be traced back to the scourge of the apartheid era. The years from 2000 to 2002 saw a 20% increase in the national pass rate from 47,8% to 68,9%. Within this period, the number of schools with a pass rate of less than 20% declined from 1034 to 242. This improvement looked promising, but an analysis of the results from different provinces presented a less satisfactory picture. Whilst the improvement in the national pass rate appeared to be phenomenal, the number of learners who passed with tertiary education endorsements remained low at 16,9% in 2002.

In 2007, the national pass rate was 65,2%, a decline of 1,3% from the 66,6% in 2006, and a 1,7% decline from the 68,3% of 2005. From 2004 to 2007, an overall decline of 5,5% was recorded from a pass percentage of 70,7% in 2004 (South Africa Yearbook, 2006/2007; 2008/2009). In 2008, grade 12 learners wrote the first National Senior Certificate examination based on the new curriculum, the National Curriculum Statement (NCS). The

pass rate was 62,5%, a 2,7% decline from the 65,2% of 2007. The above information can best be represented in the following diagram:

TABLE 1.2   Representation of the decline in the pass rate in the matriculation examination

Years	Pass percentage	Improvement percentage	Decline percentage
2000-2002	47,8 – 68,9%	21%	
2004	70,7%	1,8%	
2005	68,3%		2,4%
2006	66.6%		1,7%
2007	65,2%		1,3%
2008	62,5%		2,7%
2004-2008	70,7 – 62,5%		8,2%

1.3   PROBLEM STATEMENT

The fluctuations in the pass rate raise alarm not only for the national and provincial departments of education, but also for other sectors in civil society. The present skills shortage in South Africa can be attributed to the slow pace at which learners leave high school and go on to universities and other institutions of higher learning. The situation also indicates that the number of economically active individuals, particularly the youth, is declining. Overall, it means that the government is working at a loss because the output (individuals becoming economically active) is incompatible with the input (the amount of money spent on the education of one learner in the country). It was therefore proposed that an in-depth study should be conducted with the aim of broadening the investigation of variables related to instructional leadership and their contribution towards the improvement of the matriculation results.

1.4   PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the variables related to instructional leadership and their contribution to the performance of learners in the matriculation examination. This investigation was prompted by the decline in the matriculation examination results in South African public secondary schools.

1.5   RATIONALE AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

A number of reasons prompted me to engage in this study. Firstly, I was greatly intrigued by matters related to instructional school leadership and related challenges. Secondly, curriculum transformation, implementation and management, and the extent of principal preparation for the necessary instructional leadership to drive these processes, are also areas of great interest to me. Based on the reasons highlighted above, I am of the view that it is research of this magnitude, during an era of transformation in this country and worldwide, that will shed light upon and solve the intellectual puzzle related to the role of instructional leadership in the improvement of learner performance in the matriculation examination.

1.6   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions that directed this study consist of a main question which is divided into subsidiary questions which have operationalized the inquiry. The main research question is as follows:

What are the variables related to instructional leadership practices of secondary school principals and what is their effect on learner performance in the matriculation examination?

In order to address this main question, the following subsidiary questions guided the inquiry:

a) *How can instructional leadership possibly contribute to the improvement of learner performance?*
b) *How do heads of departments (HODs) and deputy principals perceive the role of their principals regarding instructional leadership?*
c) *How are principals prepared with regard to their role as instructional leaders?*

While all the subsidiary questions can be accorded the same weight with regard to the information that they have afforded this study, the second subsidiary question was expected to have a stronger impact, in that a special questionnaire was designed for HODs and deputy principals, in order to establish their perceptions with regard to the role of their principals as instructional leaders.

1.7   RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed in this study is a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, popularly referred to as mixed methods research. Kemper, Springfield and Teddlie (2003) define mixed methods design as a method that includes both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis in parallel form. Bazely (2003) defines this method as the use of mixed data (numerical and text) and alternative tools (statistics and analysis). It is a type of research in which the researcher utilizes the qualitative research paradigm for one phase of a study and the quantitative paradigm for another phase of the study.

It is common to use various methods sequentially. In an explanatory design, quantitative data are usually collected first and, depending on the results, qualitative data are gathered next, to elucidate, elaborate on or explain the quantitative findings. Typically, the main thrust of the study is quantitative and the qualitative results are secondary. Thus the qualitative phase may be used to augment the statistical data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:25).

Burke and Onwuegbuzie (2005:1) indicate that mixed methods research is a natural complement to using either of the traditional qualitative or quantitative methods in isolation. They define it as the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines qualitative and quantitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language in a single study. They further indicate that on a philosophical level, mixed methods research is a "third wave" or third research movement; a movement that moves past paradigm wars by offering a logical and practical alternative.

For the purpose of this study, both quantitative and qualitative research designs and methodology were appropriate. The qualitative design was appropriate in as far as it enabled the researcher to interact with the principals with regard to their practice of instructional leadership and how this practice can address the current decline in the matriculation pass rate. Since the building blocks of quantitative research are variables, and the focus of this study is to investigate the variables related to instructional leadership, a questionnaire, which is a quantitative research tool, was administered to principals to solicit information which might not have been obtained through the interviews.

1.8   VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

As this study entails the use of both qualitative and quantitative data, it is not limited to the two factors, validity and reliability, which are traditionally associated with quantitative research. When working with qualitative data, the concepts of trustworthiness, dependability, transferability and credibility are also used. MacMillan and Schumacher (2001:407) define validity as the degree to which the interpretations and concepts have mutual meanings between the participants and the researcher. Reliability, on the other hand, is defined by Silverman (2004:285) as the degree to which the findings are independent of accidental circumstances during the research process. Reliability is closely related to assuring the quality of field notes and guaranteeing the public access to the process of their publication. Joppe (2000:1) defines reliability as the extent to which results are consistent over time and are an accurate representation of the total population under study. If the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the data collection instruments are considered to be reliable.

The following processes for ensuring validity and reliability, legitimizing the data, and finally lending credibility to the research report were used in this study: triangulation, which includes data triangulation and methodological triangulation, thick descriptions and peer review. The details of each of these processes, including their definitions, their purpose and the way they benefitted this study, are explored in the research design and methodology chapter of this thesis.

1.9   CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

The main concepts in this study, *learner performance and instructional leadership* and are defined in order to counteract any possible confusion with different meanings of similar concepts in the social sciences. These concepts are critical to the understanding of the discourse in this study and detailed explanations of how they interact with one another in this study, are elucidated in appropriate sections of this thesis.

1.9.1   LEARNER PERFORMANCE

Boyd (2002:155) explains learner performance in terms of changes in abilities, temperament, motivation and situation, each of which mediates or affects the other The concept encompasses changes in behaviour and attitudes of the learner. It explains the fact

that after the learner has been taken through an instructional programme, the learner sees things differently and begins to act in a responsible manner. In this study, learner performance is measured in terms of the matriculation pass rate in the Bushbuckridge schools for the past five years (2004 to 2008).

1.9.2   INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

The concept "instructional leadership," according to Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford (2006), has its origins in the 19th century under the inspection system that existed in North America, England and Australia. The concept rose to prominence again in the United States in the 1970s when the instructional dimension of the role of the principal was emphasized. From the 1960s onwards, the definition of this concept has included "any activity in which the principal engaged in order to improve instruction" (Gurr *et al., 2006).* Enueme and Egwunyenga (2008:13) view instructional leadership as a blend of supervision, staff development and curriculum development that facilitates school improvement.

According to Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009:3), instructional leadership focuses on the leader's (principal's) influence on student achievement: how he/she positively affects teachers and the outcomes of teaching, and raises learner performance. Current research by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstron (2004) and Waters, Marzano and MacNulty (2003) emphasizes the role of the principal as an instructional leader in setting directions, developing the educators on matters of instruction, and generally making the school work.

Both 20th and 21st century commentaries on instructional leadership emphasize the view that instructional leadership encompasses those actions that a principal takes, or delegates to others, in order to promote growth in student learning. According to Wildy and Dimmock (1993:144), a principal must be able to define the purpose of schooling, set school-wide goals and implement strategies to achieve those goals. He/she must provide educators and learners with all the resources necessary for effective learning to occur; supervise and evaluate teachers in line with the performance of their learners; initiate and coordinate in-house staff development programmes; and create and nurture collegial relationships with and among teachers.

In concert with the above scholars' views and assumptions about instructional leadership, Elmore (2000; 2005) and Daresh (2007) maintain that all primary activities undertaken by a

school's leadership should be tightly coupled to the core technology of schooling, which is teaching and learning. This view implies that a principal's primary role is instructional leadership and, as such, he/she must direct changes in terms of teaching and learning. Demonstrating leadership to others in the school (teachers, heads of departments and deputy principals) is included in the role of the principal as an instructional leader.

Similar to the above views, Daresh (2007) and Elmore (2000) propose a definition of instructional leadership that differentiates it from school leadership in general. They suggest that instructional leadership is a type of leadership that should guide and direct instructional improvements associated with learner performance.

1.10   ASSUMPTIONS OF THE STUDY

In order to proceed with this research study, I made the following assumptions drawn from the instructional leadership literature and personal experience from my interaction with principals:

- Instructional leadership is one among many leadership tasks of the principal.
- The practice of instructional leadership involves developing educators and improving their teaching skills.
- Principals and educators have different perceptions and understanding of the concepts of instructional leadership and supervision.
- The principal understands his/her role as an instructional leader; and his/her engagement with educators on issues of curriculum delivery positively influences the performance of learners.

1.11   LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is an exploration of the variables related to effective instructional leadership and the contribution of these variables to the improvement of results in the matriculation examination. For a study of this magnitude and complexity, there might be arguments for and against the particular methods of inquiry that were used. To ensure that this study maintained a specific focus, the data collection process was confined to the Bushbuckridge region of the Mpumalanga Province. The fact that each province in South Africa is unique is acknowledged in this study, to avoid generalization of the findings as being representative of the circumstances, experiences, and challenges facing principals throughout the country.

Bushbuckridge is the largest region in the Mpumalanga Province, with fourteen education circuits compared to the other three provincial regions. Since its incorporation into this province in 2007, Bushbuckridge has been the worst performing region with regard to learner performance (see graphs in chapter 3). The matriculation results of 2009 indicate that this region performed poorly, not only in comparison with its sister regions in the province, but it was the worst performing region in the whole country. This poor performance may be attributed to a lack of motivation on the part of principals and teachers, thus rendering Bushbuckridge a demotivated region.

1.12   OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

CHAPTER 1 presents an introduction to the topic of the study, the background to the study, problem statement, rationale and contribution of the study, as well as an indication of the methodology used. The main concepts underpinning the study are also clarified in this chapter.

CHAPTER 2 is a review of the related literature in order to create a theoretical platform upon which this study is built. An in-depth study and analysis of both international and African literature was conducted.

CHAPTER 3 provides an explanation of the conceptual framework of the study.

CHAPTER 4 is a description of the research design and methodology. The instruments used in this study, the questionnaires and interviews, are thoroughly explained in this chapter.

CHAPTER 5 presents the results of the quantitative data analysis.

CHAPTER 6 presents the results of the qualitative data analysis.

CHAPTER 7 is the concluding chapter of the thesis, comprising a synthesis of the findings from the quantitative and qualitative research, recommendations, contributions of the research, suggestions for further research, and concluding remarks.

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