


Exploring the influence of collaborative leadership on Grade 12 mathematics results in a low-resourced secondary school

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Background: This case study examines the role of collaborative leadership in Grade 12 Mathematics results. The article challenges the notion that collaborative leadership is not a significant factor in improving Grade 12 Mathematics results, particularly in low-resourced secondary schools in South Africa.

Objectives: This study seeks to offer an alternative perspective and highlight the positive influence of collaborative leadership on Grade 12 Mathematics results in a low-resourced secondary school.

Methods: The research uses the Collegial Model as the theoretical framework. Utilising a qualitative method, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with members of the School Management Team (SMT), the chair of the School Governing Body (SGB), and the Circuit Manager (CM) from the provincial Department of Education (DoE). Additional data were collected through on-site observations at the school.

Results: The findings indicate that collaborative leadership via the SMT, SGB, and CM improves Grade 12 Mathematics results in a low-resourced secondary school.

Conclusion: The article concludes that collaborative leadership relationships empower low-resourced secondary schools to elevate Grade 12 Mathematics results.

Contribution: This research challenged the norm and contributes to a pathway of collaboration between the SMT, SGB, and CM and its positive effect.

Keywords: school management team; school governing body; circuit manager; collaborative leadership; mathematics results; low-resourced secondary schools; collegial model; Grade 12.

Introduction

Currently in South Africa, the leadership of a school is not limited to the principal. Kruger et al. (2022) state that the principal acts in three different capacities. They report to their staff, the School Governing Body (SGB), and the Department of Education (DoE). Many schools have a School Management Team (SMT) that mainly consists of the principal, deputy principal(s), and Heads of Departments (HODs). The parents of the learners in the school are represented by the SGB, and a Circuit Manager (CM) is assigned to every school by the provincial DoE (DoE, 2024).

To sustain or improve academic performance, all the above-mentioned parties play a critical role in the everyday functioning of the school. The principal, together with the SMT, is responsible for the everyday academic activities of the school, while the SGB supports the school in maintaining and improving academic performance. The CM from the DoE must ensure that all academic activities at the school take place in the allocated time and that all the necessary academic requirements are met (Kruger et al., 2022). The collaborative network between these three parties is essential for academic performance, especially in Grade 12 Mathematics. The current Grade 12 mathematics results proved that collaboration is needed indeed. After the completion of the 2024 Grade 12 National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination, only 35.7% of all the Grade 12 learners in South Africa wrote the NCS exam for mathematics. A further concern is that only 3.9% obtained more than 80% (SOS, 2024).

Collaborative leadership is not necessarily present in all schools. In previous research, many principals stated that members of the SGB do not know their roles in the school, a factor which adversely affects the school's operations and performance (Basson & Mistry, 2019; Hartell et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to Hartell et al. (2016), a parent leading the SGB, with parents

forming the majority of the SGB, can be problematic in low-resourced schools. The prevalent illiteracy in rural regions and the insufficient preparation of parents for their roles as SGB members also pose significant challenges. Many schools play the blame game among the leadership groups for bad academic performances (Schlebusch, 2020).

However, apart from negative stereotyping over the roles of the SGB, CM and leadership in low-resourced schools, this study aims to add to the discourse and provides a different view on how collaborative leadership can contribute to improving Grade 12 Mathematics results.

Literature review

Good leadership makes a difference in organisational performance (Hafeez & Akhtar, 2022). Leadership is a product of interaction, changes in perception, and understanding among individuals. The concept of leadership implies that an educational leader must maintain a healthy balance between task-oriented and people-oriented leadership styles to ensure teachers' accountability (Shonubi, 2014).

One of the main goals of leadership corps within a school is to improve the learners' academic outcomes (Kapur, 2018; Theron, 2022). Educational leaders, however, are faced with challenges regarding improving the academic performance of all learners.

A study by Kruger et al. (2022) reported that the principal of the school acts in three different capacities, namely conducting the management of the school, and interacting with the DoE and the school community. With these three positions, the principal must lead and manage the school, report to the DoE (the employer), and report to the wider community, which includes parents or guardians and alumni (Kruger et al., 2022).

Good leadership facilitates collaboration, communication, feedback, influence, and professionalism through the establishment of a vision and a value system. Good leadership presupposes having consistent policies to delegate and empower others, and sharing the leadership responsibility (Dahie et al., 2015).

Ziduli et al. (2018) argued in their study that the principal's leadership style is one important factor, among many others, in influencing the academic performance of learners, especially in rural schools. In this context, Hartell et al. (2016) worry that urgent matters frequently overshadow important ones. Many principals believe that they spend too much time on administrative tasks, budgeting, and dealing with other school-related challenges, leaving insufficient time for collaborating with staff and tackling instructional problems that arise in the classroom.

Furthermore, school leadership is no longer restricted to a person or title (Kapur, 2018). Leadership has become a collective effort by the staff, distributed among all the teachers, support staff, and the broader community.

Successful school leaders need to focus on capacity building, motivating others, and developing exceptional leadership skills within their staff to create favourable conditions for learning. Based on their findings, Ntuta and Schurink (2010) recommend that all staff members should be involved in every activity related to the management of the school, according to its guidelines and policies. The staff, learners, parents, community members and alumni should be involved and take responsibility for the daily activities and programmes of the school.

Blank and Villarreal (2015) report that schools with healthy relationships with the community are more likely to gain their support and loyalty in difficult times. This support can include opportunities for parents to come to the school and talk to staff, to use the school facilities, and to see the school as a resource for both the children and the community. Good leadership enhances engagement among the management, staff, and learners, who are the key components of the learning experience (Lumpkin et al., 2015). Hafeez and Akhtar (2022) summarise it metaphorically by stating that the collaboration of stakeholders is the heartbeat of a school's performance.

As Mathematics is a concern in South Africa, good leadership is important to improve and maintain good mathematics results, especially for Grade 12 learners. In the studies of Theron, (2016 & 2022), he referred to leadership as a key component for schools to perform in Mathematics and deliver good results every year in the Grade 12 NCS exam.

Theoretical framework

As collaboration forms an integral part of this study, the theoretical framework for this study is couched in the Collegial Model of collaboration. The Collegial Model states that, through discussion, an organisation determines its policies and makes decisions. According to Coleman and Anderson (Eds.) (2000), the Collegial Model supports the principle of participatory governance, and, therefore, encourages collaboration between stakeholders with different roles. Mestry and Govindasamy (2013) mention that collaboration can also be regarded as the ability of SMTs, SGBs, and CMs to work together, based on trust, understanding, and shared goals. This framework is relevant to this study, as the collaboration between the SMT, SGB, and CM facilitated improved Grade 12 learner results, especially in Mathematics in the participating school.

Research methods and design

A qualitative research approach can make use of a single case study design, a research approach in which one or a few instances of a phenomenon are studied (Ed. Given, 2008). The case study in this research project was the teaching and learning environment of a Quintile 1 secondary school¹ in the Fezile Dabi district in the Free State province. Table 1 illustrates

1. A quintile 1 school is a low-resourced school highly dependent on the DoE for financial and human resource support, along with resources for effective teaching and learning.

the results of Grade 12 learners in Mathematics, which were used as an indicator for selecting the participating school.

For this study, it is important to understand the relationship between Table 1 and the sample. The timeframe of the results in Table 1 correlates with the time the principal, SGB chair and CM started to work closely together. This is the rationale behind the exploration of the influence of collaborative leadership in a low-resourced school on Grade 12 mathematics results.

Sample and data collection

Purposive sampling was used in this study to collect data via interviews and observations. The SMT of the school consists of the principal, one deputy principal, one acting deputy principal and seven HOD members. The sample comprised of the principal (who is also a Grade 12 Mathematics teacher), the deputy principal (who teaches Grade 10 Mathematics), the Head of Department for Mathematics at the school, a Further education and training (FET) Mathematics teacher, the chair of the SGB, who is a parent and a local police officer, and the Circuit Manager from the Free State Department of Education (FSDoE). The principal was appointed in 2015 and has been teaching at the school for the last 30 years. The SGB chair has served on the SGB since 2015 and has chaired the SGB since 2018. The CM has been assigned to the school since 2013 and worked with the principal, deputy principal, and SGB chair since 2015.

Interviews

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observations. Interviews were conducted with the following participants:

- Participant 1 (P1) = Principal
- Participant 2 (P2) = Deputy Principal
- Participant 3 (P3) = HoD for Mathematics
- Participant 4 (P4) = FET Mathematics teacher
- Participant 5 (P5) = SGB Chair

TABLE 1: Number of Grade 12 learners versus the number who achieved a passing mark at the participating school in Mathematics from 2016 to 2020.

Variable	Grade 12 mathematics pass rate				
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of learners	38	32	37	22	25
Number of learners who passed	19	27	34	17	22
Pass rate (%)	50	85	92	77	88

TABLE 2: Observation matrix.

Number	Variable	Observation
1.	School	-
1.1	Buildings and facilities	The facilities and buildings were those of a school with little financial support, although teaching and learning occurred in a safe environment. All buildings were maintained and were in fair condition. The classrooms were large enough, with enough desks and chairs, and a blackboard to write on. The school grounds were fenced around the perimeter. There were two computer laboratory and one Mathematics laboratory.
1.2	Leadership	The principal of the school was visible most of the time. He was present in the venue where the Grade 12 learners wrote their exam, and handed out the papers to the learners. After handing out the papers, he walked around the school to observe whether the assessments of the other grades were running smoothly. The general impression was one of order and functionality.
2.	Classrooms	-
2.1	Resources	The Mathematics laboratory had an interactive whiteboard connected to a computer. Apart from the computer labs, the Mathematics laboratory was the only other classroom with a computer. The other classrooms were well-equipped with desks, chairs, a blackboard and textbooks. These textbooks and/or notes were for the learners at the school. At the end of the year, the materials would be returned to the school. If the books were too expensive to buy, the school copied the textbooks and/or notes for the learners.

- Participant 6 (P6) = Circuit Manager

The interviews began with one open-ended question from the interviewer. The interviews progressed based on each participant's response. The initial open-ended question posed to the participants was: 'Please tell me what has contributed to the good performance in Grade 12 Mathematics at your school?'

Observations

Observations also formed part of the data collection process. An observation matrix (OV) was compiled to record and analyse the observations made during a visit to the participating school. The school was observed holistically, both inside and around the premises, to note the contributions of the SGB and the DoE. Table 2 represents a summary of the recorded observation.

The interviews with the SGB chair and the CM were conducted after the researcher concluded the observations of the school facilities. This allowed the researcher to refer to the observations during the interviews. Some of the findings recorded in the observation matrix correlated with the analysis of the interviews. These correlations between the interviews and the observations assisted the researcher in understanding the impact of collaborative leadership on the Grade 12 Mathematics results in the participating school.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from the interviews. Transcribing the interviews allowed the researcher to familiarise himself with the provided information, resulting in a better and deeper understanding of the collected data. The thematic analysis process involved analysing and identifying applicable themes. The analysis of the interviews provided an understanding of how the relationship between the principal, SGB chair and CM might have positively affected learners' Mathematics results. The analysis of the interviews was used to structure the observation matrix (Table 2).

Data verification

The credibility and transferability of the study results were established to ensure its trustworthiness. In this study, all the participants gave consent and knew what was expected of

them. To ensure the credibility of the study, the researcher adhered to the above norms. Stahl and King (2020) stated that the credibility of a study can be established by ensuring the findings are aligning with reality. Because of the qualitative nature of the study, the findings cannot be generalised. The results are transferable and may be of value to the DoE, high schools, and teachers in Further Education and Training schools to improve Grade 12 Mathematics results.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Free State General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) on 13 March 2020 (No. UFS-HSD2018/0899). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), the researcher is primarily responsible for addressing the ethical issues in a study. The Free State Department of Education (FSDoE) also granted permission to conduct this research in the participating school.

No harm was done to the participants in this study. Participation in this study was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time. The identity of the participants and their schools were treated confidentially and were not named in the report of this study. The participants were also informed that their identity would not be disclosed in any publications or conference articles. They were consulted and informed in advance of the visits for both the interviews and observations. The questions asked in the interviews were not personal, and the personal privacy of the teachers was respected and protected. The school principal was informed in advance of the study and its objectives. The author also requested permission from the principal to involve the teachers of the school in the study. All the participants signed a consent form. All the collected data were protected with a password. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymity (using pseudonyms) and proper data storage, with all data kept for 5 years.

Results

After transcribing the interviews and recording the observations in the observation matrix, the following themes and subthemes were identified from the collected data:

Theme 1: Leadership within the school

As stated before, the main function of effective school leadership is to positively influence learners' academic performance. In addition, the interviews and observations in this study showed that good leadership is an integral part of the sustained success of Grade 12 learners in Mathematics. This claim is corroborated by evidence from the observations and interviews, from which two aspects came to the fore.

Sub-theme 1.1: Principal

As mentioned in the literature review, the principal plays a significant role in the leadership of the school. It was observed that the principal was visible on the school grounds and

actively involved in the daily activities of the school (see Table 2, number 1.2).

The SGB chair stated that the leadership of the principal is key to the academic performance of the school:

'But his leadership is very good, and he is not a biased person. He is a person who is doing what he says. He stands on his word. He is a resilient person in what he knows. And I can assure you since he became principal then the school changed totally ... But now there is order.' (P5, male, SGB Chair)

The CM was also full of praise for the leadership of the principal:

'Every school must have strong leadership. You can see it at that school. And he is hands-on. The top leadership of the school is hands-on. After appointing him, you can see the dust settled, and learning and teaching started, you know, shaping its course.' (P6, male, CM)

The principal headed the SMT of the school and played an important part in achieving the improved Grade 12 Mathematics performance. He was also the Grade 12 Mathematics teacher at the school, with a good track record of success.

Sub-theme 1.2: School management team

The principal spoke very appreciatively of his SMT and the transparency of the decisions in the school:

'They are very supportive. All the decisions are taken collectively. We start with this, it's the SMT taking a decision and once this decision is taken at the SMT level, then we go through to the staff. We are not making decisions and pulling them through. If there might be different perspectives, that ultimately, we have, we have the same vision and we move in the same direction. We meet weekly.' (P1, male, principal)

During the interview with the SGB Chair, he also stated the importance of the SMT:

'The approach of the management, the school's principal. He engages with the HODs and permits the HOD to get that person whom you think is the right person.' (P6, male, SGB Chair)

Based on the evidence above, the SMT conducted its work in line with what Molefe (2013) regards as the main duty of an SMT, which is to ensure that effective and efficient teaching and learning take place, and to be responsible for managing the daily activities of the school. Apart from the effective SMT, the SGB also provided supportive and positive governance. The SGB chairperson and the principal had been good friends for a long time. This probably contributed to the successful collaboration that led to the enhanced academic performance of Grade 12 Mathematics learners:

'I know him, we've schooled together ...' (P5, male, SGB Chair)

Not only was the management within the school very good, but its governance by the SGB also had a positive impact on the improvement of Grade 12 Mathematics results.

Theme 2: Leadership and support from outside the school

Sub-theme 2.1: Support from the school governing body

The leadership of a good school is not only in the hands of the principal but of the whole community. In general, an SGB is responsible for governing the school in such a way that support is provided to increase the functionality of the school. The SGB should not interfere in the day-to-day activities but should oversee the governance of the school (Basson & Mistry, 2019; Kruger et al., 2022).

At the participating school, the SGB was very supportive and, together with the principal, they did their best to sustain the academic performance of the learners. Both the CM and the principal were very appreciative of the SGB:

'It was not a peaceful school ... until the SGB and the department got involved.' (P1, male, principal)

'Then the learners get tea and bread provided by the SGB. Yes, highly supporting. Yes very well. I can say, without any fear of contradiction, that this is the best SGB in the township.' (P1, male, principal)

The deputy principal and the HoD thanked the SGB for their support:

'You know, I happen to have been part of the SGB the previous term. In terms of supporting, particularly curriculum, in most of our meetings, at the end of each term, we sit down and also analyse the results. We check where we have strengths and where our weaknesses are. We discussed how do we bring the SGB on board in terms of supporting other problems.' (P1, male, principal)

'Yes, the staff and SGB assisted us in sleeping and stay with the Grade 12 learners at the school.' (P3, female, HOD)

The SGB provided support to the school in numerous ways:

'We are very supportive. Through our learners, however, we support all the programs that the department is involved with. The SGB, we support with the meals so that they can get the meals because you cannot study without eating so we make sure that we allocate money for their meals. We have a program for the exams. Here the teachers will also be involved. Then here the SGB, we do have compensation for them. There is an incentive for them. Then we managed to get a tower in our school. So, we make a contract with those people. And they pay us a lump sum of this money and then the other money you can just pay monthly. And then they did and we get that money and we buy a vehicle. Teaching and learning support also, yes we are getting the right support.' (P5, male, SGB chair)

A creative and entrepreneurial approach, as mentioned above, in an SGB can help even the most financially deprived school to achieve better results. The interventions by the SGB became more pronounced after the chair of the SGB joined the SGB in 2015, and became chair in 2018. The implementation of after-school meals for Grade 12 learners, as well as the financial income via the network tower, correlated with improved Mathematics results, as shown in Table 1.

Sub-theme 2.2: Parental and community support

The SGB represents the parents of a school, but in the case of the participating school, the support was not only limited to the SGB but also included support from other parents and the greater community. The school was not isolated from the community but was located in the middle of the township (see table 2, number 1.1).

The HoD for Mathematics at the school applauded the support from the parents:

'The parents are very helpful and hands-on. They help us a lot. We bring in the parents. We invite them (parents) to school. We call a parent meeting and then we project the results of those learners. And also the community ... they are here to assist. The parents can be called and then we can negotiate.' (P3, female, HOD)

Furthermore, the SGB chair also applauded the support from the parents and the community:

'The parents are involved ... we called the meeting, with the grades. So we also tasked those parents to keep an eye on the kid.' (P5, male, SGB Chair)

The CM elaborated on the effect of the SGB via the parents and the community on the Mathematics results of the school:

'Parents send their children there because there's school today.' (P6, male, CM)

'It was all like a new dawn, but parents took everything upon themselves to make things work. They started to repair the toilets and make sure that everything was ok. The parents at that school and their community are involved. The school gates are open for them. Starting from the leaders, but the parents must be hands-on, too. They must know what their children are doing at school. The school must involve parents by giving information every time. How do you learn how your child is doing? In what we call sectional meetings and they're being held there.' (P6, male, CM)

Theme 3: Department of education

As the participating school was a Section 21, Quintile 1 school, it was highly dependent on the FSDoE for financial and human resource support, and for resources in support of effective teaching and learning (White & Van Dyk, 2019). The FSDoE, through the office of the CM, supported the school in every possible way to provide quality teaching and learning:

'As the circuit manager, I'm trying to encourage the spirit of training amongst themselves.' (P6, male, CM)

The principal of the school was very appreciative of the support provided by the DoE and the CM for the school:

'Yes, the FSDoE is contributing a lot. The department provided it ... so the media centre is there.' (P1, male, principal)

The deputy principal also indicated that he was working closely with the CM:

'The circuit manager is highly supportive ... when he sees we have a kind of challenge, he will support us ... He will mostly talk to the principal and the SMT. He motivates us as much as he can. He is a very proud man who is very proud of his circuit.' (P6, male, CM)

The HoD also mentioned the support from the CM, especially in terms of resources and financial support:

'The government provides us with all those resources ... We set an investigation and then they provide us with the test.' (P3, female, HOD)

It seems from the observations that the DoE and the SGB supported the school in terms of resources to enhance teaching and learning (see Table 2, number 2.1).

The involvement in the the school by the SGB chair was evident. This was evident on how he spoke about the DoE and CM:

'Yes, other money is funded by the department ... that is for the whole school and not matrics only. We have got good support from our district manager.' (P5, male, SGB chair)

From the views of the above participants, the CM confirmed that the FSDoE, through the office of the CM, was trying to support the school in every possible way:

'We've got this thing called Inter Directorate Support. They come and talk with learners who need support. Especially to learners from child-headed households. The FSDoE will also come up with a feeding scheme where learners will get meals from the school. Generally, they are supporting the schools.' (P6, male, CM)

The good relationship that the CM had with the SMT and the SGB, assisted the school to make sure that it had all the relevant resources it needed, including human resources.

Discussion

The section discussed above presents the thematic analysis of the data collected through interviews and observations, along with the identified subthemes. In the discussion below, findings are presented regarding the impact of collaborative leadership in the school. These findings relate to teaching and learning, and social and financial support that have a direct or indirect impact on the improved mathematics results.

Theme 1: The school management team

Chigona and Tunjera (2022) state that the competencies of the members of the SMT affect the quality of teaching and learning. In this study, empirical data were collected which proved that the principal and the SMT worked together. From the data, there was mutual appreciation from the SGB and CM to the principal and the SMT for their work in the school to improve Grade 12 Mathematics results.

Theme 2: School governing body

Kruger et al. (2022) mention the difficulties a principal may experience while working with the SGB. However, from the collected data, it seems as if the opposite occurred in the participating school. The data show that the SMT, SGB, and parents of the school had a very good relationship and that they were all supportive of the well-being of the learners and the school. The CM was full of praise for the SGB and the

work they did in the school. The principal, SGB chair, and CM knew each other well and worked well together. The SGB and the other parents also assisted the school. The SMT was very appreciative of the SGB, especially in the way that they supported the school financially, which improved the academic performance of the school, especially in Mathematics. Furthermore, the SGB and parents were also appreciative of the support provided to the school by the SMT and the CM.

Theme 3: Circuit manager

The last component of this collaborative leadership was the support from the FSDoE through the office of the CM. Schlebusch (2020) states that schools often do not receive the support they need, and role-players blame each other for poor Grade 12 academic performance. However, in this study, key role-players, namely the SMT, SGB chair, and the community, mentioned their appreciation towards the CM and the support received by the school from the FSDoE.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it focussed only on a single case study, which means that it cannot be generalised to all low-resourced secondary schools. In light of the above limitation, this study recommends conducting further research by broadening its scope by including more participating schools and stakeholders.

Conclusion and recommendations

The literature shows that good academic performance of learners in a school does not only depend on the leadership of the principal. This is supported by the views of Hafeez and Akthar (2022), who emphasise the importance of collaborative leadership in a school. The findings of this study demonstrate that there is collaboration among the school's stakeholders. This collaborative leadership has assisted and supported the school, which resulted in enhanced academic performance of Grade 12 learners, especially in Mathematics. Through the collaboration of the SMT, SGB and CM, the school managed to provide meals to Grade 12 learners after school. Additional income was acquired by hosting a cell phone tower on the school premises, which the SGB ploughed back into the teaching and learning activities of the school, especially for the Grade 12 learners in terms of arranging extra classes after the school hours, over weekends and on holidays. The CM trusted the leadership of the school and supported the school in terms of teaching and learning resources. Ultimately, the Grade 12 learners at this Quintile 1 school and their academic results are the main beneficiaries of this collaborative leadership.

The following recommendations are suggested to contribute to the discourse in this field of research:

- Utilise the findings of this article in other quintile schools in the same district

- Encourage communities through the SGB to support the school and principal
- Recommend to schools, via the DoE, that they add more role-players to the collaborative leadership cohort of the school.

Through the lens of the Collegial Model of Collaboration, it was evident that the collaboration between the SMT, SGB, and CM at the participating school positively impacted the academic performance of the learners, especially in Grade 12 Mathematics results.

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