





Exploring the Strategies used by the School Management Teams (SMTs) in Addressing Poor Academic Performance Post-pandemic in Rural High Schools of Mopani West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies used by the School Management Teams (SMTs) in dealing with poor academic performance in rural high schools of Mopani West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study utilized a qualitative methodology, specifically employing an interpretative case study design. The study employed purposive selection, a type of non-probability sampling, to pick one principal, their heads of departments (HoDs), and learners from each of the six sampled schools in the Mopani-West area to participate in the study. Out of the sample, three schools have shown outstanding performance, while the remaining three schools exhibited underperformance. The process of data collecting involved conducting semi-structured interviews, while the acquired data were analyzed using theme analysis. The results demonstrated that the active participation of parents, local leaders, and volunteers in outreach activities conducted by SMTs offers important resources and specialized knowledge to cater to the specific requirements of students in remote regions. The results also indicated that the SMTs support programs not only enhance academic achievement but also cultivate a feeling of pride and ownership within the community, demonstrating the twin advantages of these initiatives. Through engaging in collaboration with people of the local community, educators can get a more profound comprehension of the cultural milieu and obstacles that learners encounter, enabling the implementation of educational interventions that are more customized and pertinent. These programs frequently incorporate mentorship, tutoring, and extracurricular activities to establish a comprehensive learning environment.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of School Management Teams (SMTs) in tackling low academic achievement in rural high schools in South Africa has a long-standing presence in the country's educational system, as it strives for fair and high-quality education for all students.¹ Mncube and Ngema have asserted that South Africa has

¹ Dumisani Wilfred Mncube and Thandiwe Ngema, "Enhancing School Management Teams in Promoting Sustainable, Equitable Resource Allocation in Rural Schools," in *Contextualising Rural Education in South African Schools* (BRILL, 2023), 148–63.

encountered substantial obstacles in its education system, namely in rural regions that have traditionally been neglected and confronted with limitations in resources. The apartheid era worsened these discrepancies, as education was segregated based on race, resulting in unequal opportunities for high-quality schooling. According to Mncube and Ngema, this historical influence has had a long-lasting effect on the school system, particularly in rural areas where there have been constraints on infrastructure, resources, and teacher proficiency.²

In response to these difficulties, the South African government implemented a range of educational changes after the end of apartheid.³ Mosoge and Mataboge argue that studying the impact of SMTs in tackling poor academic performance in rural high schools in South Africa is crucial due to the ongoing educational difficulties experienced in these areas. The educational system in South Africa has faced persistent challenges related to inequality, unequal distribution of resources, and poor academic performance. These concerns are particularly pronounced in rural areas, where there is limited access to high-quality education and resources.⁴ Garan asserts that rural high schools frequently face many obstacles that contribute to subpar academic achievement.

Various factors, including poor infrastructure, insufficient teaching staff, limited access to educational technologies, socioeconomic imbalances, and cultural obstacles, can have a substantial impact on the learning environment.⁵ These obstacles are worsened by structural problems, such as administrative inefficiencies and a deficiency of strategic leadership inside schools. According to a study conducted by Mosoge and Mataboge, SMTs, which consist of principals, educators, and administrative staff, have a crucial impact on the overall operation of schools. Their responsibilities include developing and executing policies, overseeing resources, creating a supportive learning environment, and offering instructional guidance.⁶

Nevertheless, the efficacy of SMTs in tackling inadequate academic performance in rural high schools continues to be a topic of investigation and examination.⁷ Rural schools frequently face the challenge of having low resources which has an impact on different aspects of education.⁸ The availability of textbooks, library resources, and current technology is frequently limited, impeding the process of acquiring knowledge and hampering learning experiences.⁹ The absence of textbooks has a direct impact on the availability of reading materials, while the absence of library facilities restricts autonomous learning. Insufficient computer and internet availability impede the development of digital literacy, placing rural students at a disadvantage in comparison to their urban counterparts.¹⁰ Furthermore, the insufficiency of competent educators has a direct effect on the standard of education.¹¹ The presence of excessively populated classes and inadequately qualified educators results in a dearth of personalized attention and degraded mastery of subjects.¹² The scarcity of resources leads to student disenchantment and diminished

² Mncube and Ngema, "Enhancing School Management Teams in Promoting Sustainable, Equitable Resource Allocation in Rural Schools."

³ Joseph Mosoge Madimetsa and Khololo Collen Mataboge Saltiel, "Empowerment of the School Management Team by Secondary Schools Principals in Tshwane West District, South Africa," *Educational Research and Reviews* 16, no. 4 (April 30, 2021): 93–103, <https://doi.org/10.5897/ERR2020.4076>.

⁴ Saadet Garan, "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 Students," *Independent Journal of Management & Production* 13, no. 1 (March 1, 2022): 185–209, <https://doi.org/10.14807/ijmp.v13i1.1599>.

⁵ Madimetsa and Saltiel, "Empowerment of the School Management Team by Secondary Schools Principals in Tshwane West District, South Africa."

⁶ Mncube and Ngema, "Enhancing School Management Teams in Promoting Sustainable, Equitable Resource Allocation in Rural Schools."

⁷ Fred Bidandi, Ambe Nofor Anthony, and Claudia Mukong, "Collaboration and Partnerships between South African Higher Education Institutions and Stakeholders: Case Study of a Post-Apartheid University," *Discover Education* 1, no. 1 (December 12, 2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-022-00001-2>.

⁸ Bidandi, Anthony, and Mukong, "Collaboration and Partnerships between South African Higher Education Institutions and Stakeholders: Case Study of a Post-Apartheid University."

⁹ Nkosana Sibanda and Brian Kwazi Majola, "Barriers and Challenges Related to Cultural Diversity Management Within Schools in South Africa," *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review* 6, no. 9 (September 4, 2023): 157–69, <https://doi.org/10.47814/ijssr.v6i9.1489>.

¹⁰ Sibanda and Majola, "Barriers and Challenges Related to Cultural Diversity Management Within Schools in South Africa."

¹¹ G. Wills, "South African Teacher Shortages as Revealed through Class Sizes and Learner-Educator Ratios," 2023.

¹² Wills, "South African Teacher Shortages as Revealed through Class Sizes and Learner-Educator Ratios."

drive.¹³ Insufficient infrastructure has a detrimental effect on both students and educators.¹⁴ Inadequate educational facilities, including classrooms, libraries, and sanitation, impede access to education and have a negative impact on both physical and psychological well-being.¹⁵ Financial constraints and transportation challenges contribute to the insufficient participation of parents.¹⁶

In their 2023 study, Mekgwe and Maseko examined the formation of a high-performing school management team with a specific emphasis on recruiting talented individuals to enhance service delivery.¹⁷ Research findings indicate that subject matter experts (SMTs) possess specific skills, knowledge, and qualities that enhance their capabilities, and developing these talents further results in effective service provision. The assessment evaluated the individual's skills in leadership, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Expertise encompassed comprehension of school rules and regulations, curriculum development, and implementation of effective teaching practices. The attributes included adaptability, resilience, ingenuity, and passion. In their study, Mekgwe and Maseko examined how school administration teams and teachers perceive the importance of the principal's instructional leadership in managing curriculum changes. The results of their study indicate that at certain schools, there is limited cooperation among principals, senior management team members, and instructors while implementing curriculum modifications. Similarly, it was discovered that district authorities within the Department of Education lack efficient collaboration among administrators, teachers, and SMT members, particularly when implementing curricular modifications. They stressed the importance of principals carefully and intentionally considering the establishment of collaborative school cultures, particularly when implementing curriculum modifications.¹⁸

Support techniques for struggling learners, such as personalized assistance and active engagement from the community, have been shown to be advantageous for the comprehensive development of learners.¹⁹ The transformative impact of educational technology is clearly demonstrated in its ability to address a wide range of requirements and bridge the gap between rural and urban areas.²⁰ Active participation from the community, including parents and local partnerships, has a substantial impact on academic success.²¹ Efficient allocation and development of resources, ensuring fair distribution and infrastructure improvement, are crucial for maintaining educational progress.²² Leadership, which is defined by its visionary strategies and inclusive decision-making processes, creates collaborative environments that promote academic achievement.²³ These comprehensive initiatives emphasize the need for a holistic approach to improve education in rural areas. The study's goal leads to the formulation of the following research question:

- What are the strategies used by the SMTs in addressing poor academic performance post-pandemic in rural high schools of Mopani West District?

The paper is structured as follows: it begins by examining the measures employed by SMTs to tackle low academic achievement after the pandemic in rural high schools located in the Mopani District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Subsequently, the researchers examine the pertinent literature concerning the approaches employed by SMTs in tackling subpar academic achievement in the aftermath

¹³ Sibanda and Majola, "Barriers and Challenges Related to Cultural Diversity Management Within Schools in South Africa."

¹⁴ Wills, "South African Teacher Shortages as Revealed through Class Sizes and Learner-Educator Ratios."

¹⁵ Vitallis Chikoko and Pinkie Mthembu, "The Impact of Poverty on Basic Education in South Africa: A Systematic Review of Literature," in *Systematic Reviews of Research in Basic Education in South Africa* (African Sun Media, 2021), 69–90, <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781991201157/03>.

¹⁶ Chikoko and Mthembu, "The Impact of Poverty on Basic Education in South Africa: A Systematic Review of Literature."

¹⁷ Tumelo Mekgwe and Nonhlanhla Maseko, "Parental Involvement in Supporting Academic Performance of Intermediate Phase Learners in a Low Socio-Economic Context," 2023.

¹⁸ Mekgwe and Maseko, "Parental Involvement in Supporting Academic Performance of Intermediate Phase Learners in a Low Socio-Economic Context."

¹⁹ Mirkhaitova Sohiba, "Application of Educational Technologies to the Process of Teaching," *Galaxy International Interdisciplinary Research Journal* 10, no. 12 (2022): 932–35.

²⁰ Sohiba, "Application Of Educational Technologies To The Process Of Teaching."

²¹ Mekgwe and Maseko, "Parental Involvement in Supporting Academic Performance of Intermediate Phase Learners in a Low Socio-Economic Context."

²² Sohiba, "Application of Educational Technologies to the Process of Teaching."

²³ Mekgwe and Maseko, "Parental Involvement in Supporting Academic Performance of Intermediate Phase Learners in a Low Socio-Economic Context."

of the epidemic. Finally, the paper outlines the research methodology used to collect and analyze data in order to reach significant results. Moreover, this study has the potential to provide empirical data to the current collection of scholarly works, offering practical suggestions for improving the performance of rural schools after the pandemic in the Mopani District and similar environments worldwide.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Support for struggling learners

Providing personalized assistance, additional tutoring, and access to educational materials and technology can greatly help students facing academic difficulties.²⁴ The community's engagement in providing assistance to learners who are facing difficulties is highly significant, as highlighted in research conducted by Ramango.²⁵ Involving not just parents, but also community leaders and other stakeholders in the educational process produces a more expansive and supportive learning environment that goes beyond the physical boundaries of the school.²⁶ The research conducted by Ramango emphasizes that cooperation between schools and the community can result in a multitude of advantageous initiatives.²⁷ Ramango has demonstrated that these initiatives effectively improve academic performance and motivation in rural high school students.²⁸ Research conducted by Folarin has shown that feedback and formative assessment have a beneficial effect on student learning outcomes.²⁹ Continuous evaluations are essential instruments for educators in rural high schools within the Mopani District to identify specific areas where academically challenged students need extra assistance.³⁰

Advocating for Continued Teacher Monitoring and Evaluation

Folarin argues that the implementation of monitoring and evaluation systems in South African schools is essential for addressing discrepancies in academic achievement, particularly in rural areas. According to Folarin, the systematic collection and analysis of data on many aspects of education, such as teacher-learner ratios, infrastructure, and curriculum, allows authorities to understand the specific difficulties faced by rural high schools in the Mopani District.³¹ According to Makoelle et al.'s research, successful monitoring and assessment in African educational institutions require cooperation between the government, local communities, and foreign organizations. Engaging stakeholders at many levels, such as educators, guardians, and students, promotes inclusive resource management procedures that are customized to the distinct requirements of each rural secondary school in the area.³² Mosoge and Mataboge assert that effective monitoring and evaluation systems necessitate being flexible and responsive.³³ Regular evaluation of resource allocation and intervention techniques is essential for addressing subpar academic performance in rural high schools.³⁴ Periodic assessments provide the quantification of advancements over a duration, pinpointing regions that require enhancements, and enabling well-informed resource reallocation.³⁵

²⁴ Sohiba, "Application of Educational Technologies to the Process of Teaching."

²⁵ Seipati Patricia Ramango, *The Role of School Management Teams in Developing an Inclusive Education Culture in Secondary Schools* (University of Johannesburg (South Africa), 2021).

²⁶ Ramango, *The Role of School Management Teams in Developing an Inclusive Education Culture in Secondary Schools*.

²⁷ Ramango, *The Role of School Management Teams in Developing an Inclusive Education Culture in Secondary Schools*.

²⁸ Ramango, *The Role of School Management Teams in Developing an Inclusive Education Culture in Secondary Schools*.

²⁹ Kehinde Folarin, "Poverty and Inequality in South Africa," *International Journal of Poverty, Investment and Development* 2, no. 1 (2021).

³⁰ Folarin, "Poverty and Inequality in South Africa."

³¹ Folarin, "Poverty and Inequality in South Africa."

³² Tsediso Michael Makoelle, Raj Mestry, and Pierre Du Plessis, *Schools Effectiveness and Schools Improvement in South Africa: A Guide for School Leaders* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023).

³³ Madimetsa and Saltiel, "Empowerment of the School Management Team by Secondary Schools Principals in Tshwane West District, South Africa."

³⁴ Andrina Granić, "Educational Technology Adoption: A Systematic Review," *Education and Information Technologies* 27, no. 7 (August 5, 2022): 9725–44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-10951-7>.

³⁵ Bidandi, Anthony, and Mukong, "Collaboration and Partnerships between South African Higher Education Institutions and Stakeholders: Case Study of a Post-Apartheid University."

Involvement of Parents and Community

Active parental engagement fosters a loving domestic atmosphere where parents not only actively participate in their children's education but also provide academic assistance and consistently monitor their progress.³⁶ Active parental participation has a favorable correlation with improved academic achievement, as it fosters a sense of accountability and motivation among learners.³⁷ Studies conducted by scholars such as Folarin, emphasize the importance of collective responsibility within communities for enhancing the quality of education. They stress that when parents actively participate, it fosters collaboration among parents, teachers, and school administrators. According to Bidandi et al.'s research, the collaboration between parents, teachers, and the wider community fosters a sense of cohesion, with the school being an essential component of the community.³⁸ Mekgwe and Maseko emphasize the crucial importance of parental engagement in education by emphasizing the relevance of actively involving parents to strengthen and enhance students' learning experiences through collaborations between schools, families, and communities.³⁹ They further add that active parental engagement leads to parents becoming advocates for the school's success and increases their likelihood of investing time and money in supporting the school's activities.⁴⁰

Fostering Teacher Professional Development

Efficient professional development programs are crucial in providing educators with the necessary skills and knowledge. These programs enable teachers to utilize cutting-edge teaching strategies, therefore improving learner results.⁴¹ It is crucial to take into account the research conducted by Motlalepula et al. in this particular situation. Their work highlights the significance of integrating education with the cultural surroundings of the local community. Engaging in continuous professional development helps instructors enhance their understanding of the local environment, enabling them to adapt their teaching methods to meet the specific needs of their students.⁴² Incorporating technology into instructional methods has been shown to increase learner engagement and foster the development of critical thinking skills. In areas like the Mopani District, where educational resources are often scarce, equipping teachers with the skills to successfully utilize technology has the potential to bring about significant and positive changes. This concept is reinforced by Garan who emphasizes the significance of teacher education in digital literacy and the use of online resources to narrow the educational disparity between rural and urban regions.⁴³ Collaborative learning communities play a crucial role in facilitating the professional growth of instructors. Engaging in collaborative learning communities promotes a lively interchange of ideas, experiences, and effective methods among educators, fostering an environment that supports ongoing development and enhancement.⁴⁴

Mitigating Teacher Shortages

Sibanda and Majola argue that the lack of highly skilled instructors in rural South African schools is a major factor in the low academic achievement seen. Their research emphasizes the necessity of using focused recruitment tactics and providing incentives to lure educators to remote regions.⁴⁵ Al-Kubaisi et

³⁶ Mekgwe and Maseko, "Parental Involvement in Supporting Academic Performance of Intermediate Phase Learners in a Low Socio-Economic Context."

³⁷ Madimetsa and Saltiel, "Empowerment of the School Management Team by Secondary Schools Principals in Tshwane West District, South Africa."

³⁸ Bidandi, Anthony, and Mukong, "Collaboration and Partnerships between South African Higher Education Institutions and Stakeholders: Case Study of a Post-Apartheid University."

³⁹ Mekgwe and Maseko, "Parental Involvement in Supporting Academic Performance of Intermediate Phase Learners in a Low Socio-Economic Context."

⁴⁰ Mekgwe and Maseko, "Parental Involvement in Supporting Academic Performance of Intermediate Phase Learners in a Low Socio-Economic Context."

⁴¹ Ramango, *The Role of School Management Teams in Developing an Inclusive Education Culture in Secondary Schools*.

⁴² Mahlatsi Motlalepula, Matsolo Mokhampanyane, and Gawie Schlebusch, "The Role of School Management Teams in the Education of Learners from Disadvantaged Socioeconomic Backgrounds in South Africa," *Proceedings of ADVED*, 2022, 242–48.

⁴³ Garan, "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 Students."

⁴⁴ Alan B Buthelezi and Oluwatoyin Ayodele Ajani, "Enhancing Participative Management Practices among Secondary Schools in Patriarchal South Africa," *Work*, 2022.

⁴⁵ Sibanda and Majola, "Barriers and Challenges Related to Cultural Diversity Management Within Schools in South Africa."

al., highlight that teacher shortages are not exclusive to South Africa but are widespread in many African nations. Their advocacy focuses on implementing comprehensive policies and strategic long-term planning to enhance staffing in rural schools. Al-Kubaisi et al., conducted research that provides valuable insights into effective teacher recruitment strategies employed in different countries.⁴⁶ This study highlights the importance of investing in teacher education and professional development in order to develop a sustainable and skilled teaching staff. South Africa can implement applicable techniques, based on successful models from other countries, to tackle the staffing difficulties in rural high schools. Makhalemele & Tlale provide a pragmatic method for recruiting teachers in rural locations.⁴⁷ Advocates assert that a sense of purpose and the chance to engage in meaningful work are essential elements that attract teachers to neglected places. Developing a robust sense of community and implementing support mechanisms for teachers are successful tactics for increasing the appeal of rural schools to potential instructors.⁴⁸

Improvement of School Infrastructure

Al-Kubaisi et al. argue that having sufficient infrastructure is essential for creating a favorable learning environment, encouraging student involvement, and facilitating academic success.⁴⁹ The Minister of Basic Education in South Africa emphasized that substandard infrastructure, such as dilapidated classrooms, lack of electricity, insufficient sanitation facilities, and limited resources, presents substantial obstacles to effective teaching and learning.⁵⁰ This has a direct impact on educational quality and results in unfavorable academic outcomes Al-Kubaisi et al. found that the state of rural schools in South Africa, specifically those located in the Mopani District, has a substantial impact on academic achievement. They emphasized the significance of insufficient infrastructure in rural schools, leading to increased rates of teachers leaving and limited availability of technology, thereby impeding students' exposure to contemporary educational approaches.⁵¹ Omolawal emphasized the cumulative impact of deficiencies in textbooks, libraries, and laboratories in rural schools, which restricts students' ability to get hands-on information and develop essential analytical abilities. Omolawal posits that there is a positive association between improved infrastructure and higher levels of learner performance and satisfaction.⁵² Recent research conducted by Al-Kubaisi et al. indicates that addressing deficiencies in infrastructure leads to a more conducive learning environment, which in turn has a significant impact on academic performance.⁵³

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Human Relations theory, a prominent paradigm in organizational behavior, was developed as a response to the deficiencies of classical management theories that failed to consider the human factor in work environments.⁵⁴ The Hawthorne studies, conducted between 1924 and 1932 at the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne Works in Chicago, demonstrated that social factors have a significant impact on workers' productivity and behavior. This finding challenges the traditional focus on task efficiency.⁵⁵ The study emphasized the significance of taking into account human requirements, sentiments, and interpersonal interactions within organizational settings.⁵⁶ Elton Mayo, an esteemed Australian psychologist, is a leading advocate of the Human Relations Theory. Mayo's contributions at Hawthorne were crucial in developing this theory since he highlighted the importance of social interactions, informal

⁴⁶ Huda Al-Kubaisi, Sayed Shahbal, and Amna Khan, "Transformation Of School Management; Reflection Of Educational Management," *Journal of Pharmaceutical Negative Results*, 2022, 2228–40.

⁴⁷ Thabo Makhalemele and Lloyd DN Tlale. "Managing inclusive schools in South African schools: A transformational leadership perspective." In *School leadership for democratic education in South Africa*, Routledge, 2021, 149-171.

⁴⁸ Ramango, *The Role of School Management Teams in Developing an Inclusive Education Culture in Secondary Schools*.

⁴⁹ Al-Kubaisi, Shahbal, and Khan, "Transformation Of School Management; Reflection Of Educational Management."

⁵⁰ David Fernández Bellver et al., "Crafts as a Key Factor in Local Development: Bibliometric Analysis," *Heliyon* 9, no. 1 (2023).

⁵¹ Al-Kubaisi, Shahbal, and Khan, "Transformation Of School Management; Reflection Of Educational Management."

⁵² Samuel Ayodeji Omolawal, "Human Relations Theory," *Ilorin Journal of Human Resource Management* 5, no. 01(2021): 1–8.

⁵³ Al-Kubaisi, Shahbal, and Khan, "Transformation Of School Management; Reflection Of Educational Management."

⁵⁴ O. Ojo, "The Application of Elton Mayo's Human Relations Theory and Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Y to Achieve Organization Objectives" 11, no. 1 (2023).

⁵⁵ Omolawal, "Human Relations Theory."

⁵⁶ Ojo, "The Application of Elton Mayo's Human Relations Theory and Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Y to Achieve Organization Objectives."

groupings, and the psychological elements of work environments.⁵⁷ Mayol's research demonstrated that elements such as acknowledgment, attention, and a sense of belonging had a significant influence on individuals' attitudes and performance in the workplace.⁵⁸ The principles of the Human Relations theory center on comprehending human behavior inside organizations. The major topics encompassed in this study are communication, leadership styles, group dynamics, motivation, and the psychological requirements of individuals in professional environments.⁵⁹

These principles are relevant for analyzing the function of SMTs in tackling subpar academic achievement in rural high schools. Opting for the Human Relations theory for this study is logical as it centers on the dynamics of interpersonal interactions inside companies.⁶⁰ This hypothesis provides insight into the impact of school leaders on student's academic performance in rural high schools located in the Mopani District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. These schools operate within intricate social and cultural environments. The study examines the influence of staff relationships, communication patterns, and motivation on the academic performance of students in these schools. By employing this theory, the study aims to demonstrate the impact of School Management Teams on students' academic performance by examining their interactions, communication, and motivation strategies inside these specific educational institutions. The Human Relations theory is very applicable to the investigation of the correlation between SMTs and subpar academic achievement in rural high schools. The framework examines the impact of leadership styles, communication methods, and team dynamics among SMTs on the school climate and learner achievement. The study seeks to reveal practical insights for enhancing academic achievements in certain educational situations by examining the psychological and social components associated with this idea.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a case study research approach. The study was conducted using an interpretative case study approach, which involved interpreting the data collected. Interpretative case study research is a powerful methodological approach that allows for a thorough examination of complicated events in real-life situations. Interpretative case study research focuses on exploring the significance, explanations, and personal experiences within a particular setting. Researchers often employ this methodology to obtain comprehensive and varied data by utilizing numerous sources of evidence such as interviews, observations, and documents. The goal is to achieve a holistic picture of the case. To address the issue of poor academic performance in rural high schools in the Mopani District, Limpopo Province, South Africa, a research design is proposed. This design would comprise a thorough investigation of the SMTs. SMTs have a vital role in determining strategies, policies, and implementation methods in education. The role of SMTs can have a substantial impact on understanding and potentially addressing the variables that contribute to poor academic achievement.⁶¹

Utilizing an interpretative case study enables researchers to thoroughly investigate the intricate dimensions of the participation of SMTs. This methodology enabled a comprehensive examination of several factors, including administrative choices, leadership methods, resource distribution, community involvement, and educational programs. In the rural schools of the Mopani District, using this approach allowed for a detailed comprehension of how SMTs operate within particular socio-economic, cultural, and educational circumstances. By utilizing several methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis, this qualitative approach enabled researchers to collect data, facilitating a thorough comprehension of the difficulties and possibilities found in these educational institutions. Robinson states that interpretative case study research offers a strong framework for examining the complex interaction of

⁵⁷ Tetsuya Takahashi, "The Acceptance of Human Relations Theory in Japan," in *Translating and Incorporating American Management Thought into Japan: Impacts on Academics and Practices of Business Administration*, ed. I. Mitsui, K. Isomura, and Y. Takeuchi (Springer, 2022), 53–70.

⁵⁸ Ojo, "The Application of Elton Mayol's Human Relations Theory and Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Y to Achieve Organization Objectives."

⁵⁹ T. Takahashi, "The Acceptance of Human Relations Theory in Japan," in *Translating and Incorporating American Management Thought into Japan. Translational Systems Sciences*, ed. I. Mitsui, K. Isomura, and Y. Takeuchi, vol. 30 (Singapore: Springer, 2022).

⁶⁰ Granić, "Educational Technology Adoption: A Systematic Review."

⁶¹ S. Daud, *Research Design. In Carbon Nanotubes: Fabrication Using the Arc Discharge Process* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023).

components within a particular setting. Robinson also highlights the significant value of interpretative case studies in providing profound insights into educational environments and the involvement of stakeholders such as SMTs.⁶²

In the South African education system, Motlalepula et al. have emphasized the importance of using research methods that are specific to the region. They stress the usefulness of interpretative case studies in understanding the complex educational issues faced in rural areas.⁶³ The interpretative case study research approach played a crucial role in thoroughly investigating the participation of SMTs in addressing low academic achievement in rural high schools in the Mopani District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The interpretative case study research approach enabled the examination of complex dynamics and contextual nuances that impact educational results by providing a strong framework. The insights from this research have been quite beneficial in proposing specific interventions and providing guidance for policy suggestions.

The study was conducted in the N'wanedzi Circuit, which is located in the Mopani West District of the Limpopo Province in South Africa. The Mopani West District, due to its distinct geographical and socio-economic features, encounters particular difficulties that affect the educational accomplishments of students. The existence of rural high schools exacerbates these difficulties, necessitating the SMTs to develop measures to alleviate subpar academic achievement.

Selection of the Participants

This study utilized a purposive sampling method to select participants. This non-probability sampling is a research method characterized by the intentional selection of participants based on predetermined criteria, excluding randomization (Vitale, 2023). This approach allowed the researchers to target specific demographics or groups of interest, enhancing the study's focus. This technique becomes particularly valuable in research when the aim is to gather targeted information from individuals with pertinent expertise, experiences, or perspectives.⁶⁴ Six schools from the Mopani-West District, N'wanedzi Circuit, were intentionally selected to participate in this research project, which aims to investigate the impact of SMTs on improving learner academic performance (LAP). This encompassed school principals, their department heads, and students. Approximately 20 individuals actively participated in this investigation. Their profiles are described as follows:

Table 1: Profile of the Participants

Participants	Profile and Experience
Principals from the sampled school	During this study, 6 principals participated in this study. They had experience ranging from 2 to 10 years as principals. Ranging from 50 to 56 years of age, 2 female and 4 male educators. The principals aim to identify these 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.	During this study, 6 heads of departments participated in this study. They had experience ranging from 3 to 10 years as departmental heads. Ranging from 50 to 56 years of age, 2 female and 4 male educators aimed at teaming development, nurturing a culture of continuous learning and growth among their staff members, collaborating with stakeholders is essential, as they work to improve communication and address stakeholders' needs effectively. Encouraging innovation and creativity as well as fostering adaptive problem-solving approaches was also part of their agenda.

⁶² Oliver C Robinson, "Conducting Thematic Analysis on Brief Texts: The Structured Tabular Approach.," *Qualitative Psychology* 9, no. 2 (2022): 194.

⁶³ Motlalepula, Mokhampanyane, and Schlebusch, "The Role of School Management Teams in the Education of Learners from Disadvantaged Socioeconomic Backgrounds in South Africa."

⁶⁴ Ezezi Isaac Obilor, "Convenience and Purposive Sampling Techniques: Are They the Same," *International Journal of Innovative Social & Science Education Research* 11, no. 1 (2023): 1–7.

Learners from the sampled schools	In this study, 6 learners (3 Boys and 3 Girls) from the six sampled schools grade 11 to 12 participated in this study. Aged from 16-18, 6 learners highlighted the challenges (as quoted in the findings) they are facing in their day-to-day learning experiences.
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The data was displayed utilizing the subsequent codes. The codes P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6 were assigned to the statements made by principals from schools S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, and S6, respectively. The departmental heads were designated as DH1, DH2, DH3, DH4, DH5, and DH6, while the learners were designated as L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, and L6. This was carried out in accordance with their respective schools, which were represented as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, and S6. The prioritization of understanding experiences and viewpoints in qualitative research approaches renders this approach highly valuable. Purposive sampling is an essential component of qualitative research because it enables researchers to deliberately choose informants, cases, or events that provide distinct and illuminating viewpoints on the research issue. Deliberately choosing participants with specified characteristics allowed for the collection of extensive data, which in turn provided a detailed examination of the phenomenon being studied. The utilization of this focused sampling technique improved the caliber of the collected data, hence enabling a more intricate analysis and comprehension of the research inquiry.

Data Collection

The choice of semi-structured interviews as the preferred interview style was emphasized because of its crucial role in offering a flexible and detailed strategy for studying complex educational phenomena. Semi-structured interviews provide a middle ground between structured and unstructured methods. They involve a set of preset questions but also allow for open-ended discussions and investigation of participants' perspectives.⁶⁵ Khoa et al. emphasized the significant benefit of using semi-structured interviews in educational research because they can gather detailed qualitative data, enabling researchers to thoroughly investigate the complexities of educational processes and gain a profound understanding of participants' beliefs, motivations, and experiences. They further highlighted that interviews offer the opportunity to investigate complex educational topics, such as learner engagement, classroom dynamics, and policy implementation. They provide the flexibility to delve into specific areas of interest and reveal hidden patterns, challenges, and opportunities in the field of education.⁶⁶ Semi-structured interviews promoted participant involvement and cultivated a sense of ownership in the research process. The utilization of these interviews facilitated a deep sense of agency and empowerment among participants by engaging educators, learners, and other stakeholders in the collaborative construction of knowledge.

Data Analysis

The study has given significant respect to thematic data analysis, a strong qualitative methodology, because of its ability to reveal detailed narratives and patterns in research inquiries. This approach allowed researchers to identify overarching themes that arise from the perspectives and experiences of participants. It permitted a thorough exploration of the intricate complexity of the research issue. By employing thematic data analysis, researchers effectively explored the complex layers of data, revealing significant insights and formulating comprehensive conclusions. This methodology enabled researchers to thoroughly investigate the complex dynamics of SMT interventions in the unique setting of the Mopani District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. By employing thematic analysis, researchers identified reoccurring themes such as the challenges faced by educators while implementing SMT tactics, community collaboration, allocation of resources, and learner viewpoints. The selected topics provided a thorough comprehension of the influence of SMTs on academic achievements in rural schools. Thematic analysis was crucial for examining many aspects of qualitative data, leading to a thorough understanding

⁶⁵ Omolola A. Adeoye-Olatunde and Nicole L. Olenik, "Research and Scholarly Methods: Semi-structured Interviews," *JACCP: JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF CLINICAL PHARMACY* 4, no. 10 (October 2, 2021): 1358–67, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jac5.1441>.

⁶⁶ Mohsen Hejsalembrahmi, Bui Thanh Khoa, and Bui Phu Hung, "Qualitative Research in Social Sciences: Data Collection, Data Analysis, and Report Writing," *International Journal of Public Sector Performance Management* 9, no. 4 (2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJPSPM.2022.10038439>.

of complex and multiple occurrences. Thematic data analysis allowed for a thorough examination of the social, cultural, economic, and educational factors that impact the effectiveness of SMTs in rural high schools

Ethical Considerations

This study incorporated ethical considerations. Prior to commencing this project, the researchers applied for ethical clearance to the University of Limpopo's TREK (Ethics Committee) to conduct research. Ethical clearance was approved by the ethics committee, and the research study was assigned the number "TREC/244/2023: PG". The researchers took the initiative to seek permission from the Department of Education (specifically, the Mopani West District, N'wanedzi Circuit) to do the research. Upon acquiring authorization, they acquired informed permission from all the participants included in the sample, verifying their comprehension of the study's objectives, prospective hazards and advantages, as well as their entitlement to withdraw at any moment. The teachers also consented to participate in this study. Researchers need to ensure that participants participating in the study understand the goal, processes, and the hazards associated.⁶⁷ During the process of collecting data, care was taken to uphold the confidentiality and identity of the participants, which is an essential aspect of ethical considerations. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms have been instead of revealing their real names in this research.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Strategies the SMTs use to address poor learner academic performance support for struggling learners

The findings in this study underscored the pivotal role School Management Teams (SMTs) play in rural schools, particularly in developing and implementing innovative teaching and learning strategies. These teams are instrumental in helping rural schools navigate unique challenges, especially those related to limited access to educational resources. SMTs collaborate with teachers to devise strategies that maximize available resources, effectively engage learners, and customize the curriculum to suit the local context. Teacher 3 (T3), working in a rural school, highlighted the supportive role played by SMTs. This emphasis is supported by T3 who stated:

"Our SMTs provide guidance on curriculum implementation and innovative teaching methods, helping us adapt to our unique context. They encourage us to think creatively and maximize what we have."

They guide educators in implementing the curriculum and employing innovative teaching methods tailored to the specific context of the school. Their encouragement fosters a culture of creative thinking among teachers, urging them to make the best use of the resources at hand. Moreover, the study emphasized the significance of SMT involvement in areas like Life Orientation, particularly in guiding learners regarding career choices. Principal 4 (P4) stressed the role of the SMT in advising Life Orientation educators on how to assist learners in making career decisions starting from grade 9. P4 stated:

"The SMT should ensure that parents and grade 9 learners are invited on a yearly basis to come to school and be guided on subject choices. They should set a benchmark percentage needed for learners to choose say Science stream subjects."

The SMT's responsibility includes organizing annual events inviting both parents and grade 9 learners to the school. These sessions aim to provide guidance on subject choices and set benchmarks for criteria, aiding learners and parents in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of learners for informed decision-making about subject streams, such as Science. This proactive involvement of SMTs illustrates their critical role in not only facilitating innovative teaching strategies but also guiding learners through important academic decisions, ultimately enhancing the educational experience in rural schools.

⁶⁷ Nazmul Hasan et al., "Ethical Considerations In Research," *Journal of Nursing Research, Patient Safety and Practise*, no. 11 (August 28, 2021): 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.55529/jnrpsp11.1.4>.

Advocating for continued teacher monitoring and evaluation

SMTs in rural schools play a crucial role in overseeing and supporting teachers' performance through regular monitoring, feedback, and guidance. This oversight is instrumental in identifying areas where professional development is necessary to enhance teaching quality. Teacher 4 highlighted the positive impact of this approach, emphasizing how the SMTs have established evaluation systems that promote continuous improvement among educators in saying:

"The SMTs have set up evaluation systems that encourage us to continually improve. They are committed to our development. We receive constructive feedback and support to become better educators."

They receive constructive feedback and dedicated support aimed at refining their teaching skills. Principal 6 (P6) further elaborated on the process of monitoring teacher performance by explaining the post-assessment analysis carried out by educators stating:

"Every educator is expected to do item and error analyses after learners have written their tests. This assists them in seeing which questions and/or topics were the most challenging or easier for the learners in order to come up with improvement strategies for that subject. Each educator has to write the improvement strategies for his or her subject in order to improve learner performance. All these strategies have to be submitted to their subject heads that will consolidate them to come up with the school's improvement strategies focusing on individual subjects."

This approach not only fosters a culture of ongoing improvement among educators but also ensures that strategies to enhance learner performance are tailored to the specific challenges identified within each subject area. The collaborative effort among teachers and subject heads in developing school-wide improvement plans reflects a proactive and comprehensive approach to enhancing teaching quality and learner outcomes in rural schools.

Involvement of Parents and Community

The research findings highlight the challenge of involving parents and the local community in rural educational settings. SMTs play an active role in addressing this challenge by taking proactive steps to engage parents and the community in the educational process. They organize various activities, including meetings, awareness campaigns, and events aimed at fostering the idea of education as a shared responsibility. Learner 3 (L3) expressed appreciation for the efforts made by SMTs in organizing community meetings, emphasizing that these initiatives have made parents feel more involved in their children's education. The learner mentioned:

"SMTs have organized community meetings, which have made our parents feel more involved in our education. We see the value of them being part of our education process."

This involvement is seen as valuable by learners, recognizing the significance of parental engagement in their educational journey. Principal 5 further supported this notion by highlighting the methods used to engage parents in addressing academic concerns. The principal commented:

"I communicate using my phone or through WhatsApp or text messages with parents wherever there are issues to be given to the parents. We sometimes invite parents to a parent consultation meeting where educators have a one-on-one session with the parent to talk about their children's performance or progress."

These efforts illustrate the proactive approach of SMTs and school leadership in bridging the gap between the school and parents or the community. By facilitating various forms of communication and organizing meetings that allow direct interaction between educators and parents, they actively involve stakeholders in supporting and monitoring learners' academic progress. Such engagement fosters a collaborative environment where all parties recognize and fulfil their roles in supporting the educational journey of the learners.

Fostering Teacher Professional Development

The research findings underscored the responsibility of SMTs to ensure that teachers have access to continuous professional development opportunities. SMTs actively facilitate various avenues for teacher growth, which may include workshops, training sessions, or collaborations with educational institutions. Teacher 5 expressed gratitude for the proactive approach of SMTs, acknowledging the impact of these opportunities on improving teaching skills. They highlighted how these training sessions and workshops, organized by the SMTs, have significantly enhanced their abilities as educators. Teacher 5 (T5) emphasized the SMTs' understanding of the importance of maintaining up-to-date knowledge and skills among teachers. T5 appreciated by stating:

"Thanks to the SMTs, we've attended training sessions and workshops that have improved our teaching skills. They understand the importance of keeping our knowledge and skills up-to-date."

This proactive stance by SMTs in providing professional development opportunities demonstrates their commitment to enhancing the quality of education by investing in the continuous growth and skill development of teachers. By facilitating access to training and workshops, SMTs contribute significantly to the ongoing improvement of teaching practices in rural schools.

Mitigating Teacher Shortages

The principals of these schools have implemented various strategies to address teacher shortages, including employing retired teachers, utilizing substitute teachers, and involving learner teachers. While these measures help alleviate the shortage to some extent, they can inadvertently lead to larger class sizes and heightened demands on resources and teacher workloads. Teacher 6 (T6) highlighted another strategy employed by the school, emphasizing the reliance on the education department's intervention in hiring educators where there is a shortage. This statement is sported by T6 who stated:

"The school relies on the department's intervention in employing educators where there is a shortage. In some instances, the School Governing Body (SGB) appoints substitute temporary educators for a short period that will be paid by the SGB where there is a serious need or shortage. Sometimes the SMT uses team teaching where teachers teach topics that they specialize in."

These diverse approaches showcase the efforts made by schools to cope with teacher shortages. However, while these strategies mitigate the immediate impact of the shortage, they also introduce challenges such as larger class sizes and increased pressure on resources and teacher workloads. The collaborative approach of team teaching and the involvement of temporary educators demonstrate innovative ways to manage the shortage while maintaining the continuity of education.

Improvement of School Infrastructure

The school principals and SMT members have undertaken various initiatives to enhance school infrastructure, including renovations, community fundraising efforts, and partnerships with local organizations. These strategies have significantly impacted academic performance by creating a more conducive learning environment, enhancing learner comfort, and positively influencing academic achievements. Learner 5 emphasized the challenges faced in learning environments by stating:

"It's hard to concentrate when our classrooms are uncomfortable and unsafe. Better facilities would motivate us to study harder."

Teacher 6 (T6), who is part of the SMT, outlined steps taken to address this issue. T6 mentioned: *"The SGB appoints service providers to come and repair broken learner desks or tables in order to solve learner furniture shortages. Sometimes the school requests learner furniture from other schools that have surplus learner furniture to assist."*

These efforts to improve infrastructure, particularly in ensuring adequate and functional furniture for learners, underscore the commitment of the school and its SMT to creating a more conducive and comfortable learning environment. By addressing issues related to infrastructure, they aim to enhance the overall learning experience and academic performance of the learners.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results demonstrated that the active participation of parents, local leaders, and volunteers in outreach activities conducted by SMTs offers important resources and specialized knowledge to cater to the specific requirements of students in remote regions. The results also indicated that the SMTs support programs not only enhance academic achievement but also cultivate a feeling of pride and ownership within the community, demonstrating the twofold advantage of these activities. Through engaging in collaboration with people of the local community, educators can get a more profound comprehension of the cultural backdrop and obstacles that learners are encountering, thus enabling the implementation of educational interventions that are more customized and pertinent.

Tilovova's research substantiated the idea that these programs not only enhance academic achievement but also cultivate a feeling of pride and ownership within the community, thereby demonstrating the dual advantage of these initiatives.⁶⁸ Through engaging in collaboration with people of the local community, educators can acquire a more profound comprehension of the cultural milieu and obstacles that learners are encountering, so enabling the implementation of educational interventions that are more customized and pertinent. Furthermore, the inclusion of external organizations and stakeholders, as proposed by Tilovova, introduces fresh viewpoints and additional resources that can enhance and enhance the educational experiences of learners. Nuncio et al. have also emphasized the importance of community engagement in improving academic achievement and retention rates in rural schools. Their research highlights the favorable influence of community involvement on educational results. These programs frequently incorporate mentorship, tutoring, and extracurricular activities to establish a comprehensive learning environment.⁶⁹

The study conducted in rural schools in the Mopani District highlighted the pivotal significance of SMTs in developing new teaching practices. SMTs work together with teachers to promote innovative use of existing resources in order to tailor instructional approaches to the specific local environment. The SMTs play an active role in assisting students with their subject selection, notably in the Life Orientation course. They organize annual activities to provide guidance and support to students in making well-informed decisions. SMTs are responsible for monitoring and evaluating teacher performance, offering comments and assistance to promote ongoing enhancement. This includes the examination of post-assessment data to identify difficult subjects and the development of customized strategies for improvement in each area. The cooperative endeavor among educators and topic leaders demonstrates a proactive strategy to improve the quality of instruction and the achievements of learners. The involvement of parents and the community has been identified as a barrier, however, the senior management teams are actively making efforts to overcome this obstacle. They coordinate community gatherings and establish ongoing communication with parents, actively engaging them in the educational process and addressing any academic issues, promoting a cooperative atmosphere. Emphasizing the importance of professional development for teachers, SMTs organize workshops and training sessions to enhance teaching skills.

The dedication to ongoing development among educators emphasizes the proactive approach of SMTs in improving teaching methods. In order to address the issue of teacher shortages, schools adopt a range of techniques, such as hiring retired teachers, deploying substitute teachers, and involving student instructors. These approaches are intended to address shortages while ensuring instructional continuity, despite the obstacles posed by greater class numbers. Efforts to enhance school infrastructure encompass renovation endeavors, fundraising activities, and collaborations with local organizations. These initiatives strive to establish a learning environment that is more favorable, by tackling problems such as uncomfortable classrooms and a lack of furniture. Ultimately, these efforts have an impact on academic motivation and performance. In summary, the results demonstrate that SMTs play a proactive and versatile role in tackling difficulties in rural schools. They are involved in a wide range of activities, including implementing creative teaching techniques, engaging with the community, providing assistance to

⁶⁸ Guzal Rustamovna Tilovova, "Improving Mother Language Programs in Schools," *European Journal of Innovation In Nonformal Education* 3, no. 4 (2023): 121–27.

⁶⁹ Rhoderick V. Nuncio et al., "An E-Learning Outreach Program for Public Schools: Findings and Lessons Learned Based on a Pilot Program in Makati City and Cabuyao City, Laguna, Philippines," *Evaluation and Program Planning* 82 (October 2020): 101846, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2020.101846>.

teachers, improving infrastructure, and more. Their goal is to enrich the educational environment for learners in the Mopani District.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, it is recommended that efforts should be aimed at enhancing infrastructure to highlight their commitment to establishing an improved educational setting. Although the hurdles are complicated and interwoven, the proactive efforts of SMTs demonstrate a strong commitment to overcoming these issues and improving the quality of education for learners. Continued assistance and inventive tactics will be crucial for enhancing academic accomplishments and cultivating an atmosphere that promotes holistic education and development in these schools.

CONCLUSION

The complex obstacles faced by SMTs in their efforts to enhance academic achievement in rural high schools of Mopani West Districts have had a dramatic effect on the overall educational experience. The results indicated that the active participation of parents, local leaders, and volunteers in outreach activities conducted by SMTs offers important resources and specialized knowledge to cater to the specific requirements of students in remote regions. The results also indicated that the SMTs support programs not only enhance academic achievement but also cultivate a feeling of pride and ownership within the community, demonstrating the twin advantages of these initiatives. Through engaging in collaboration with people of the local community, educators can acquire a more profound comprehension of the cultural milieu and difficulties that learners are encountering, so enabling the implementation of educational interventions that are more customized and pertinent. The report argues that carefully monitoring teacher performance, involving parents and the community, facilitating professional development, and managing teacher shortages with innovative techniques demonstrate their dedication to improving educational results despite limited resources.

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