

Chapter 1

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY, PROBLEM FORMULATION AND AIMS

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Various authors in the literature on the principal's instructional leadership role hold various views on what instructional leadership is or entails and how it influences the academic performance of learners. The view of Smith, Sparkes and Thurlow (2001: 10) is that instructional leadership is the time the principal devotes to educational as opposed to administrative tasks in order to provide direction to the process of teaching and learning at school. This definition implies the principal's commitment to the core mission of the school.

As part of the task of instructional leadership, Smith **et al.** (2001: 11) assert that the principal, in order to influence the learners' academic performance, should perform the following tasks:

- # Establish the school's academic goals.
- # Provide motivation to the educators and the learners.
- # Support the educators and the learners with the needed instructional resources.
- # Communicate high performance expectations to the educators and the learners.

- # Design policies and procedures by which to promote teaching and learning at school.

In the present study, all of the above-mentioned assertions will be addressed extensively in chapter two.

According to Murphy, Hallinger, Weil and Mitman (1983: 145) when the principal carries out the instructional leadership tasks, the point of departure should be the determination of the desired academic goals for the school, for example, a specific pass rate for the grade 12 class per year, the formulation of the policies that promote teaching and learning at school, and finally the practices and behaviours that are consistent with the already determined school goals and formulated school policies. The policies can be about the study periods at school while practices and behaviours can include the honouring of instructional times by both the educators and the learners, the writing of tests and preparatory examinations, the preparing of worksheets for learners by teachers and many more.

As part of the principal's responsibilities at school, Whitaker (1997: 156) argues that instructional leadership is the most critical responsibility for the school principal. This implies the significant influence the principal's leadership has on the success of the school in its core mission. Supporting this view on the significant influence of the principal on academic success of the school are Hallinger and Heck (1998: 158) and Smith **et al.** (2001: 01) who argue that schools that make a difference in students' learning and academic success are those led by principals who make a significant and measurable contribution to the quality of what transpires in classrooms.

That the learners' academic success is directly related to the principal's instructional leadership is supported by many authors (Cheng, 1994: 311; Donmoyer & Wagstaff,

1990: 22; Heck, 1992: 22; Leitner, 1994: 221; Garman, 1995: 27). For these authors, the principal impacts on student academic performance indirectly by influencing the teacher's behaviour and attitude towards the core mission of the school in various ways. The teacher's behaviour and attitude, in turn, influence the learners' attitude to academic work and learning. The question that arises is whether principals in low achieving secondary schools of some regions in South Africa such as Vryheid effectively influence the teachers' behaviour and attitude to academic work and subsequently the learners' learning.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

1.2.1 Background to the problem

The Vryheid region is one of eight educational regions making up the Kwazulu-Natal province (see figure 1.1). The region, as in the year 1999, had 88 schools with full-time grade 12 classes (Kwazulu-Natal Education Department, 1999: 01).

According to Du Plooy (1999: 12), the bulk of schools and learners are in rural areas in the Vryheid region. He further states that the schools' facilities such as the classrooms and toilets, water supply, staff establishment and supply of instructional materials such as the textbooks in over 61% of secondary schools in the region are inadequate to meet the educational challenges. This suggests that over 61% of secondary schools in the Vryheid region share common characteristics. Therefore, one would expect the academic achievement of learners, particularly grade 12 learners who write the same school-leaving examinations, not to differ significantly.

The academic achievement of grade 12 learners in the Vryheid region during the years 1997, 1998 and 1999 formed the point of departure for the current study on instructional leadership. During the years 1997, 1998 and 1999 the academic achievement of grade 12 learners in the secondary schools of Vryheid region showed

great differences. While a few secondary schools in this region, in spite of their rural location, have had a plausible academic achievement, ranging between 75% to 100% pass rate in the final provincial examinations for a period of three to five years, more than half of the secondary schools of the Vryheid region, during the same period achieved academically below 50% (Kwazulu-Natal Education Department, 1999: 01). Table 1.1 below illustrates, both in numbers and percentages, the secondary schools that achieved academically below 50% in the provincial final examinations during the 1997, 1998 and 1999 academic years.

Figure 1.1: Educational regions in KwaZulu-Natal



Source: KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education: Annual Report (1996:13).

Table 1.1 Statistics for grade 12 examination results in the Vryheid region

Year	No. of schools with grade 12 class	No. of schools with performance below 50% pass rate	Percentage of schools performing below 50% pass rate
1997	73	44	60
1998	79	46	58
1999	88	46	52

Source: Kwazulu-Natal Annual Report - Senior Certificate Examinations: Statistics for Vryheid (1997: 02; 1998: 02; 1999: 01).

The educational situation, as reflected in Table 1.1 shows that more than half of the secondary schools achieved academically below 50% during the years 1997, 1998 and 1999. This means that more than half of the learners who wrote the final examinations in this region did not pass the grade 12 provincial examinations in this region during the said years. This academic performance raises concern.

Adding to the concern about more than half of the secondary schools achieving academically below 50% was the fact that within the category of academically low achieving secondary schools (achieving below 50%) some secondary schools showed a continued decline in their year-end grade 12 pass rates. In an attempt to remedy the educational situation similar to that found in the Vryheid region's low achieving secondary schools, Dubin (1991: 38) suggests greater emphasis on instructional leadership in schools as he asserts that during the period of declining student academic achievement and wavering public confidence in schools, principals must furnish instructional leadership in schools. Sharing the same view as Dubin is Garman (1995: 27) who asserts that the academic achievement of learners is tied

directly to the school principal and his or her instructional leadership efforts to lead, manage and supervise teachers and school programmes.

It is the concern with the great differences in the academic performance of grade 12 learners in the Vryheid region's secondary schools that this study was undertaken to investigate the possibility that the instructional leadership role of principals is one of the factors responsible for the great differences in the schools' pass rate in the grade 12 year-end examinations. The researcher undertook this study to identify the performance gaps in the carrying out of instructional leadership tasks by secondary school principals in the Vryheid region.

As a matter of concern, one may ask how do principals in the selected secondary schools of Vryheid region influence the learners' academic achievement through their respective instructional leadership practice. Can the differences in the learners' academic performance in the selected secondary schools of Vryheid region during the years 1997, 1998 and 1999 be explained in terms of differences in the practice of instructional leadership by principals of such schools ?

The present study, therefore, aimed at investigating, in a comparative manner, the difference in principal's instructional leadership of high and low achieving secondary schools of Vryheid region. The researcher undertook the study with a view to explain differences in academic performance of grade 12 learners as caused by the differences in the principals' practice of instructional leadership in the selected secondary schools of Vryheid region.

1.2.2 Statement of the problem

In a study the statement of a problem is often a declarative statement in a question form. This attempt to focus on a stated goal gives direction to the research process and must be limited enough in scope to make a definite conclusion possible (Best & Kahn, 1993: 39). For the current study, the problem statement was as follows:

1.2.2.1 Main problem

Is there a significant relationship between the practice of instructional leadership by principals of secondary schools and the overall academic achievement of grade 12 learners in the Vryheid region (Kwazulu-Natal)?

Owing to the fact that most research problems in their nature are too large or complex to solve without subdividing, Leedy (1993: 70) suggests that the main research problem should be divided into more workable parts called sub-problems. Accordingly, the following sub-problems emanating from the main problem were formulated:

1.2.2.2 Statement of the sub-problems

Sub-problem 1

What is instructional leadership and how does it influence the learners' academic achievement?

Sub-problem 2

To what extent do principals in the selected secondary schools in the Vryheid region carry out instructional leadership ?

Sub-problem 3

What do principals need to perform optimally in their instructional leadership role in order to ensure improved learner academic performance?

1.3 AIMS OF RESEARCH

According to Steyn and Hoberg (1999: 192) the aims identified in research are directly linked to the main problem and sub-problems of the research. Accordingly, the main aim and the sub-aims of the current study were formulated as follows:

1.3.1 Main aim

The main aim of this study was to determine whether there is a significant relationship between the practice of instructional leadership by principals of secondary schools and the overall academic achievement of grade 12 learners in the Vryheid region (KwaZulu-Natal).

1.3.2 Sub-aims

Based on the sub-problems of the study, the following sub-aims were formulated for the current study.

Sub-aim 1

To determine, through literature study, the nature of instructional leadership and how it influences the learners' academic performance in schools.

Sub-aim 2

To determine through a quantitative empirical study, the extent to which principals, in the selected secondary schools of the Vryheid region (Kwazulu-Natal), carry out instructional leadership.

Sub-aim 3

To determine and describe what principals need to perform optimally in their instructional leadership role at schools to ensure improved learner academic performance.

1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Groenewald (1995: 43), Leedy (1993: 125), Mouton (2001: 55), Smit (1995: 15) and Welman (1992: 06) a research design is a plan of how the researcher decides to approach the formulated research problem. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2001: 30-31), in research design the researcher describes the procedures for conducting the study as well as the methods of collecting the empirical data. This section, therefore, explains the approaches used in carrying out the study undertaken, namely, literature study, empirical research, and quantitative as well as *ex post facto* research approaches.

1.4.1 Literature study

According to Gay (1992: 38), a literature study means the systematic identification, location and analysis of documents, namely, periodicals, books and other research reports, containing information related to the research problem. Also sharing the

same view are Wallen and Fraenkel (1997: 54) who argue that literature study, in research, is about reading books, articles and research reports in order to find out what has already been done about the topic or problem that the researcher is investigating. For Leedy (1993: 87), a literature study is the exploration of existing knowledge on the problem or topic of study. The assertion by Bell (1992: 126) is that only books and articles which relate directly to the topic should be included in the literature study.

As reasons for the importance of a literature study, Mouton (2001: 87) maintains that it enables the researcher to:

- ensure that he/she does not merely duplicate a previous study;
- discover how other scholars have theorized about the subject he or she is researching;
- find out about the most widely accepted empirical findings in the field of study;
- identify the available instrumentation that has proven validity and reliability, and
- identify the most widely accepted definitions of key concepts in the area of research.

For this study, a detailed literature study is carried out in chapter two. The focus is on what instructional leadership entails and how it affects the learners' academic achievement.

1.4.2 Empirical research

Empirical research is defined by Wallen and Fraenkel (1997: 04) as the part of research that involves the collection of first hand information about the research

problem. Arguing in support of this view, Mouton (2001: 53) maintains that through empirical research, information in whatever form (data, documents, interviews, speeches, diaries, questionnaire responses and test scores) is gathered, then analysed and finally interpreted in order to address the problem being investigated.

According to Leedy (1993: 139) all data, all factual information and all human knowledge must reach the researcher either as words or numbers. If the empirical data are verbal, the methodological approach is said to be qualitative, and if the data are numerical, the approach is said to be quantitative (Leedy, 1993: 139). According to Sprinthall, Schmutte and Sirois (1991: 100) the difference between qualitative and quantitative research is in the nature of data-gathering techniques and the actual data gathered. When both qualitative and the quantitative research approaches are used simultaneously, Harris and Bell (1994: 71) and Hitchcock and Hughes (1995: 324) describe it as triangulation. In the current study, triangulation was carried out through what Hitchcock and Hughes (1995: 324) call data triangulation. Data triangulation means that empirical data are collected from more than one person (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995: 324).

Accordingly, for the current study data were collected from all grade 10 to 12 educators in the selected secondary schools of Vryheid region. The empirical research for the present study was conducted following the quantitative and the ex post facto research approaches.

1.4.3 Quantitative research approach

According to Best and Kahn (1993: 89), quantitative research consists of those studies in which data are collected and analysed in terms of numbers. Leedy (1993: 139) supports Best and Kahn that if data are collected in numerical form, the research is

quantitative in nature. The authors like Sprinthall **et al.** (1991: 101) distinguish the quantitative research from other research as follows :

- # The situation being studied is studied in quantitative terms (data are described in numerical form).
- # Questionnaires are used as the research instruments.
- # The researcher begins the research process by formulating the hypothesis statements.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned authors' views on quantitative research, the present study on instructional leadership in the selected secondary schools of Vryheid region was carried out quantitatively. The study began by formulating the hypothesis statements (see section 3.9), the questionnaires were used as the research instruments, the empirical data were collected in numerical form through the questionnaires, and the collected data analysed through the contingency tables (calculating frequencies). According to Harris and Bell (1994: 64), and Sibaya (1996: 70), a questionnaire is a collection of written statements or questions relating to the situation or phenomenon being studied.

The adoption of a quantitative approach in carrying out the case study on instructional leadership of principals in the selected secondary schools of Vryheid region was in line with the view of Hitchcock and Hughes (1995: 316) who maintain that some case studies are quantitative in nature. Bell (1992: 50) also argues that case studies, which are generally considered to be qualitative studies, can also use quantitative techniques. In addition to the use of a quantitative approach, the present study leaned heavily on the ex post facto approach to research.

1.4.4 Ex post facto research approach

An ex post facto research is defined by Borg and Gall (1996: 537) and Leedy (1993: 305) as the research that investigates the possible cause-and-effect relationship between the independent variable(s) and the dependent variable(s). This view concurs with that of Cohen and Manion (1994: 146) who point out that ex post facto research searches back in time for the possible factors seemingly associated with certain occurrences or conditions. In the present study, the principals' instructional leadership - an independent variable was studied after it had exerted its effect on the learners' academic achievement – a dependent variable.

Cohen and Manion (1994: 147) further argue that ex post facto research is particularly suitable in a study of groups that are already different in some respect because, through ex post facto study, the researcher searches retrospectively for the factor(s) that brought about the difference. In the current study, the difference is between the overall academic achievement of schools with grade 12 classes in the Vryheid region. The present study investigated the possibility of explaining the difference in the overall grade 12 class academic achievement of the selected secondary schools in the Vryheid region in terms of differences in the principals' instructional leadership practices.

1.5 DEMARCATION OF RESEARCH

According to Le Roux (1999: 35) demarcation of research specifies the boundaries purposefully established for the study to ensure that the research topic is effectively researched. Le Roux further asserts that demarcation of research in a quantitative study should indicate the time zone, place and sample of the population within which research is to be carried out.

The empirical research for the study on principals' instructional leadership and its influence on learners' academic achievement was conducted in the Vryheid region in Kwazulu-Natal province. Three low achieving secondary schools and the three high achieving ones, in the grade 12 final examinations, were purposefully selected for this research. The schools' overall grade 12 class academic achievement during the years 1997, 1998 and 1999 in the Vryheid region was used when dividing the schools into two categories, namely, the low and the high achieving schools. The respondents for the study were all grade 10 to 12 educators with a minimum of two years' teaching experience from the selected secondary schools.

1.6 DEFINITION OF TERMS

The key words in the research title are operationally defined as follows:

1.6.1 Principal

The word principal as used here means an educator who is appointed to be the head of the school (Kwazulu-Natal Education Department, 1996: 04). This definition is in line with the view of Smith **et al.** (2001: 10) who maintain that the principal at school may be referred to as the head teacher. These authors further assert that, as the head teacher, the principal becomes the controller of the classroom processes, namely, teaching and learning at school. Though the principal oversees everything at a school, Potgieter, Visser, Van der Bank, Mothata and Squelch (1997: 14) maintain that, among other things, the principal's role entails performing the following duties :

- # Administration and organization of day-to-day teaching and learning at school.
- # Organization of all the activities which support teaching and learning at school.
- # Deciding on textbooks, educational materials and equipment to be bought.
- # Managing personnel and finances at school.

According to Trotter and Ellison (2001: 44), the principal's role at school entails managing the policy; managing the teaching and learning; managing the people and managing the school resources.

1.6.2 Instructional leadership

In the literature on instructional leadership, there are as many definitions of the concept as there are people who have defined it. Keefe and Jenkins (1991: vii) define instructional leadership as the provision of education, resources and support to teachers and students by the principal for the improvement of teaching and learning at school. According to Donmoyer and Wagstaff (1990: 21), instructional leadership is the principal's significant impact on student opportunities to learn in the classroom.

De Bevoise (1984: 15) defines instructional leadership as all actions that a principal takes or delegates to others to promote growth in student learning. In this research instructional leadership means all the efforts and actions the principal takes to ensure that effective teaching and learning takes place at school.

1.6.3 Role

According to Babbie (1998: 46), the role of a person in an institution is a set of expected behaviours in that institution. In the same way Whisenand (1996: 14) defines the role as the behaviour requirements expected of a person filling a particular position in an organization. By phrases "expected behaviours" and "behaviour requirements" as used in the two above-mentioned definitions of role, one can argue that such phrases refer to obligations and expectations associated with the position a person holds in an institution, for example, the obligations associated with the principalship position at school would amount to his/her role at school.

According to Armstrong (1998: 206), the term role describes the part that is played by individuals in fulfilling their job requirements. In his further clarification of the concept role, Armstrong (1998: 280) strongly supports Babbie (1998: 46) and Whisenand (1996: 14) when he says: "Role indicates the specific forms of behaviour

required to carry out tasks contained in a position in an institution” (Armstrong, 1998: 280).

1.6.4 Learner

The word learner as used in this research means the child who receives education at school on full-time basis (KwaZulu-Natal Education Department, 1996: 04). The National Committee on Education Support Services (NCESS) (1998: vii) as well as Potgieter **et al.** (1997: vii) define learner as any person, whether a child or an adult, who receives education or must receive education in terms of the South African Schools Act (Act No. 84 of 1996). The NCESS (1998: vii) further specifies that learners range from people engaged in early childhood education through to adult education, and that terms 'pupils' and 'students' at schools are replaced by the term 'learners'.

1.6.5 Academic performance

The terms academic performance and academic achievement are used interchangeably. Leitner (1994: 220) defines academic performance as the student's level of performance on a standardised test and examination. For Nuttall (1995: 269) academic performance means the demonstration of competence in a test or examination. Competence as defined by Nuttall (1995: 269) means what a person knows and can do. Thus, academic performance in a test or examination can be understood to mean the demonstration of what and how much learners know in their academic school work and what they can do. What and how much learners know is usually reflected in their results on standardised tests and examinations, for example, the learners' academic performance in the grade 12 final examinations.

1.6.6 Case study

The common definition of a case study amongst many authors is that a case study is an examination of a single individual (unit) or a group of individuals, for example, an event, a process, a policy or an institution (Babbie, 1998: 282; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998: 54; Borg & Gall, 1996: 402; Verma & Mallick, 1999: 114). In the current study on instructional leadership and its influence on learners' academic performance, the three selected high achieving secondary schools in Vryheid region as a group were studied as a case versus the other three selected low achieving secondary schools, also as a group forming another case.

1.7 CHAPTER DIVISION

According to Kumar (1999: 245) the chapter division is an outline of the chapters into which the study is divided. Kumar uses the term chapterisation to refer to the division of the study into chapters. He further maintains that related themes in a study should be combined to form one chapter. Therefore, against this background, the current study is organized as follows:

Chapter 1: Motivation for the study

This chapter consists of the background and motivation of the study, statement of the problem, aims of research, research design, demarcation of research, definition of terms, and the outline of chapters of the study.

Chapter 2: Instructional leadership and related aspects

This chapter contains the review of literature with information on the meaning and global characteristics of instructional leadership as well as the principal is instructional leadership and its influence on the learners' academic achievement.

Chapter 3: Research design and methodology

This chapter presents the detailed explanation of research design, methods and procedures followed in carrying out the study, and research instrument used for collection of data for this research. The sampling procedure and the selection of cases for the study as well as the hypotheses to be tested by the empirical data also form part of this chapter.

Chapter 4: Analysis of data and interpretation of results

This chapter presents the analysis of data and interpretation of results. The null-hypotheses formulated in chapter three were also tested in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Summary, findings, conclusions and recommendations

This chapter concludes the research with the summary, findings, conclusions, limitations of the study, recommendations and topics for further research.

1.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter was mainly an orientation to the problem of study. The main concern in this chapter was the introduction of the problem to be studied to the reader. It covered areas such as the background and motivation of the study, statement of the problem, aims of research, demarcation of research, definition of terms, and the outline of the five chapters into which the study is divided.

In the next chapter, the literature on instructional leadership will be explored. The emphasis in the literature study will be on determining what instructional leadership entails, and how it impacts on learners' academic performance.