

The Influence of Instructional Leadership on the Performance of Students in South African Schools

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Abstract: The quality of educational outcomes has emerged as a critical factor in determining the progress and success of both societies and individuals. Studies suggest that effective instructional leadership impacts learner outcomes in schools. The objective of the study is to explore the influence of instructional leadership on the performance of students in South Africa. The study employed the qualitative approach with a case study design to investigate the impact of instructional leadership on the performance of students. Purposive sampling was used to select six participants. Semi-structured interviews were adopted to gather data, and thematic analysis was utilised to identify themes and patterns that emerged from the study. The findings of the study showed that an improved school environment and positive school cultures contribute to enhanced performance of students. In addition, the study discovered that addressing the individual learning differences of students and removing barriers to learning is key to enhancing students learning. Consequently, there is a need for instructional leaders to emphasise teaching and learning, as well as establish a clear school vision to improve the learning culture and school environment. The study concluded that instructional leadership play a significant role in fostering the quality of teaching and learning practices in schools. The findings of this study imply that schools should emphasise and empower leaders with instructional leadership skills to achieve improved educational outcomes in schools.

Keywords: instructional leadership, learning outcomes, school environment, school culture, student performance, teaching and learning.

Pengaruh Kepemimpinan Instruksional terhadap Kinerja Siswa di Sekolah-Sekolah Afrika Selatan

Abstrak: Kualitas hasil pendidikan telah muncul sebagai faktor kritis dalam menentukan kemajuan dan keberhasilan masyarakat maupun individu. Berbagai studi menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan instruksional yang efektif berdampak pada hasil belajar siswa di sekolah. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengaruh kepemimpinan instruksional terhadap kinerja siswa di Afrika Selatan. Pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus digunakan untuk menyelidiki dampak kepemimpinan instruksional terhadap kinerja siswa. Teknik purposive sampling digunakan untuk memilih enam partisipan. Wawancara semi-terstruktur diterapkan untuk mengumpulkan data, dan analisis tematik digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi tema serta pola yang muncul dari penelitian ini. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa lingkungan sekolah yang lebih baik dan budaya sekolah yang positif berkontribusi terhadap peningkatan kinerja siswa. Selain itu, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa menangani perbedaan individu dalam pembelajaran siswa serta menghilangkan hambatan dalam belajar merupakan kunci dalam meningkatkan hasil belajar siswa. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan kepemimpinan instruksional yang menekankan pada pengajaran dan pembelajaran, serta menetapkan visi sekolah yang jelas guna meningkatkan budaya belajar dan lingkungan sekolah. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kepemimpinan instruksional memainkan peran penting dalam mendorong kualitas praktik pengajaran dan pembelajaran di sekolah. Temuan penelitian ini mengimplikasikan bahwa sekolah seharusnya menekankan dan memberdayakan para pemimpin dengan keterampilan kepemimpinan instruksional untuk mencapai hasil pendidikan yang lebih baik di sekolah.

Kata kunci: kepemimpinan instruksional, hasil belajar, lingkungan sekolah, budaya sekolah, kinerja siswa, pengajaran dan pembelajaran.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the quality of teaching and learning outcomes has emerged as a critical element that determines the progress and success of societies and individuals. Research findings have shown that strong instructional leadership is essential in evaluating educational quality and enhancing student achievement (Day et al., 2016). These studies suggest that effective instructional leadership has a significant impact on learner outcomes within schools. As highlighted by Shava & Heystek (2021), such leadership is directly linked to improved instructional quality. Instructional leaders are not only responsible for overseeing curriculum development and teacher training but also for cultivating a positive learning environment.

Additionally, the socio-economic context of South African schools calls for instructional leaders who can effectively utilise limited resources while driving performance, making their role crucial in overcoming contextual challenges (Chigwata et al., 2019). Mpu & Adu (2021) emphasise that the educational reforms in South Africa after apartheid require school leaders who are capable of implementing inclusive practices and addressing disparities in school. Considering these considerations, there is an urgent need for further Research into the influence of instructional leadership on student learning and performance.

Findings show that the impact of instructional leadership on learner performance in South African schools is both complex and multifaceted. Naidoo & Mestrys (2019) research highlights that instructional leadership directly influences the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. Principals who actively oversee the curriculum and support teacher development create a more conducive learning environment (Mthanti & Msiza, 2023). Additionally, the socio-economic context of many South African schools demands instructional leaders who can effectively manage resource constraints while maintaining high academic standards (Bajinath, 2018). The role of instructional leadership is vital in addressing the systemic challenges faced by these schools. In the post-apartheid South African educational landscape, reforms call for instructional leaders who can promote inclusive pedagogical practices and confront the existing inequalities within the schooling system (Netshidzivhani & Molaudzi, 2024). Netshidzivhani & Molaudzi (2024) maintain that prioritising teaching and learning in schools empowers teachers and students to the

achievement of improved performance and learning outcomes.

Instructional leadership is fundamental to the success of a school, driving innovation and fostering a culture centred on transformation and continuous improvement. Instructional leaders accomplish this by setting achievable goals, providing professional development opportunities for teachers, monitoring classroom teaching and learning, and making informed decisions that impact the school (Mahlomaholo & Tsotetsi, 2022). The key functions of instructional leaders play a vital role in enhancing student performance. As noted by Day et al. (2016), instructional leadership is essential within the school environment because it seeks to improve instructional processes in the school. Gyamerah (2021) emphasises that the instructional leadership style operates on the belief that effective instruction directly influences student outcomes while also offering the necessary support to both students and teachers. According to Maponya (2020), the kind of support provided by instructional leadership is considered an important aspect of school and student success. The role of instructional leadership is critical for the overall well-being of the school, as these leaders make pivotal decisions that shape learning outcomes. Thus, they cultivate an atmosphere that promotes successful teaching and learning.

The role of instructional leadership in schools is an ongoing area of Research because of its complexity and evolving nature. The knowledge about the conceptualisation of this leadership style is widely studied, but its impact on students' performance still needs to be improved, and deeper insight into it is needed. To contribute to this study and fill the identified gap, this study aims to contribute to discourse concerning the different aspects of instructional leadership in teaching and learning. Such insight into institutional leadership is crucial for informing evidence-based practices, adding to conversations around instructional leadership, and improving the quality of schooling. In addition, this study explores instructional leadership's influence on teaching and learning in South African schools. Specifically, the study endeavours to understand how instructional leadership foster a supportive school environment to promote teaching and learning for the achievement of learning outcomes. Through this investigation, the study intends to identify the key practices of principals within South African schools.

The theories underpinning this study are the transformative leadership theory proposed by Burns (1979) and the instructional leadership theory developed by Leithwood & Louis (1982). These theories are utilised because they complement each other effectively and enhance the school environment that supports both teachers and students.

When Burns's (1979) transformational leadership theory and Leithwood & Louis's (1982) instructional leadership framework provide a useful approach that can enhance the performance of students, transformational leaders are characterised by their ability to inspire and motivate (Burns, 1979). They can ignite a passion for learning in both students and teachers. By setting clear expectations and providing support, instructional leaders create an environment where teachers are empowered to deliver effective instruction (Leithwood & Louis, 1982).

The strong connection that occurs between these two leadership models is crucial. Whilst transformational leaders can inspire teachers to accept innovative teaching approaches and align their practices with the curriculum, instructional leaders can provide the needed support and guidance to ensure the achievement of learning outcomes (Ng, 2019). Promoting a positive school culture and professional development of teachers allow school leaders to create a sustainable system where students thrive. Ultimately, the combined impact of transformational and instructional leadership can lead to significant improvements in student achievement, particularly at critical stages of student development. These leadership theories are illustrated in Figure 1 (Professional Development Models) below.

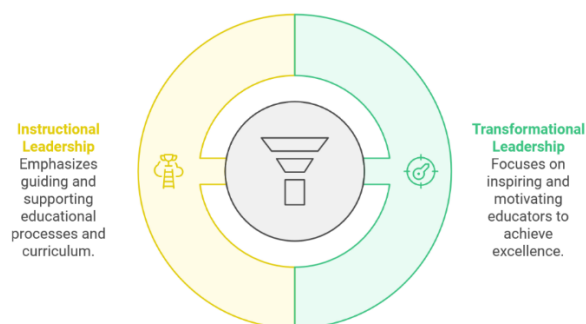


Figure 1. Professional Development Models
Source: Ng (2019).

The diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the two primary leadership styles that play a significant role in student performance: instructional leadership and transformational leadership theories. Instructional leadership, as described in

Figure 1.1 above, focuses on guiding and supporting curriculum development and the instructional process (Ng, 2019). This leadership style by Ng (2019) deals with setting clear expectations, providing continuous feedback, and offering teachers opportunities for necessary professional development. Instructional leadership, in contrast with transformational leadership, focuses on inspiring and motivating teachers to achieve commitment to educational goals and excellence (Ng, 2019). As indicated by these findings, the instructional leadership approach contributes to the creation of a positive school culture that fosters collaboration and partnership among the school staff. In addition, it helps to empower teachers to make decisions that impact student learning experiences.

The blend of instructional and transformational leadership styles enhances student performance and progress in school. While instructional leadership contribute to improved teaching practices and curriculum implementation, transformational leadership cultivate a supportive school climate that promotes effective teaching and learning.

Literature findings demonstrate that instructional leadership plays a multifaceted role in ensuring students' achievement and progress. Various dimensions of instructional leadership have been explored in the literature. Each of these dimensions plays a role in shaping the educational experiences and outcomes for students. Masuku's (2011) findings discuss how instructional leadership establishes a clear educational vision to foster a positive school culture. Particularly, these are school leaders who cultivate a shared vision and create an atmosphere of trust and collaboration that can promote a conducive learning culture of trust that motivates both teachers and students (Ikram et al., 2021). This principle, as explained by Ikram (2021), is essential in setting the tone for holistic curriculum development for the entire school system.

Furthermore, Ikram et al. (2021) stress the need for schools' curricula to align with expected standards and quality education, which is fundamental for effective instructional leadership. This form of leadership, as outlined by findings by Ikram et al. (2021), fosters close collaboration with educators and ensures that the curriculum is rigorous, relevant, and tailored to the needs of students. Similarly, Booyse & Du Plessis's (2017) findings revealed the importance of curriculum alignment. These findings illustrated how curriculum alignment ensures that students are assessed in accordance with

what they are taught. Such an outcome ultimately enhances the readiness of students for high-stakes examinations. As indicated by Mestry (2017), strong leadership with appropriate skills in curriculum design can lead to improved performance in assessments. The crucial role of instructional leadership is to ensure robust curriculum leadership, which in turn enhances student performance. By providing support, guidance, and resources, instructional leaders facilitate the implementation of student-centred curricula.

Curriculum development is crucial for effective instructional leadership, significantly influencing the quality of education for learners (Gunawan & Adha, 2021). Instructional leaders are key in shaping the curriculum to ensure it aligns with academic standards while addressing the specific needs of senior high school students (Tsiligiris & Hill, 2021). By engaging in curriculum development, these leaders can customise the educational experience to tackle the unique challenges faced by learners, thereby enhancing their preparedness for exams and future opportunities. Furthermore, effective leaders not only supervise this development but also provide guidance and support to teachers during the successful implementation of the curriculum. This strategy fosters a culture of continuous improvement, ensuring that students benefit from a comprehensive and enriching educational experience (Tsiligiris & Hill, 2021; Gunawan & Adha, 2021). Ultimately, curriculum development acts as a significant tool for instructional leaders, empowering them to drive positive change and elevate academic performance among students.

Instructional leadership is crucial for improving student academic performance by supporting teachers through continuous development. Effective leaders conduct classroom observations, offer constructive feedback, and provide personalised professional development to enhance teaching practices (Heck, cited in Cansoy, 2019). By fostering a culture of continuous improvement, these leaders empower teachers to refine their instructional strategies to meet the unique needs of senior learners (Kilag et al., 2023). Investing in teacher professional development equips educators with essential skills for delivering effective instruction, ultimately benefiting students through more engaging classroom experiences. This commitment to ongoing learning for teaching staff cultivates a mindset of inquiry and adaptability, ensuring that teachers are well-equipped to address the evolving needs of

learners while remaining attuned to the latest pedagogical trends and Educational Research (Al Jbour et al., 2024). Anticipated Transformations and Implications for Human Progress. *American Journal of Education and Practice*, 8(2), 1-41. In summary, professional development for teachers is a crucial link between instructional leadership and learner success, enhancing the overall quality of education and contributing to improved academic outcomes.

The Role of Instructional Leadership in Enhancing Student's Learning Outcomes

Instructional supervision plays a vital role in instructional leadership and has a significant impact on the academic performance of students. Instructional leaders foster accountability and continuous improvement by observing classrooms, providing constructive feedback, and engaging in reflective discussions with teachers (Heck, cited in Cansoy, 2019). This process of supervision enables leaders to identify both the strengths and areas needing support among teachers, facilitating targeted professional development to enhance teaching practices. As a result, consistent instructional supervision fosters more effective, student-centred teaching strategies, which ultimately benefit learners through improved instruction (Brooks et al., 2021). Moreover, instructional supervision supports the implementation of curriculum and instructional strategies that are tailored to the specific needs of students (Gordon & Espinoza, 2020). According to Pak et al. (2020), effective instructional supervision enables leaders to monitor curriculum pacing, engagement, and assessment alignment with learning outcomes. This continuous improvement cycle enhances performance and better prepares students for high-stakes assessments and future endeavours (Gosnell, 2023).

Instructional leadership plays a vital role in enhancing student performance through data-driven decision-making, addressing issues of equity and diversity, and fostering partnerships within the community. By analysing learner performance data, educational leaders can identify areas that require improvement and implement targeted strategies to address these weaknesses, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes (Day et al., 2016; Rodrigues & Lima, 2021). Effective leaders recognise the unique needs and challenges faced by students from diverse backgrounds and are committed to ensuring equitable access to resources, opportunities, and support systems (Hale, 2023). This approach helps bridge achievement gaps and

empowers all learners to excel academically (Castellano, 2021). Pashmforoosh et al. (2023) state that instructional leadership goes beyond schools; institutions that engage with parents and community stakeholders gain better support, resources, mentorship, and connections. These elements enrich the educational experience and better prepare learners for their endeavours beyond Grade 12 (Scott et al., 2020).

Instructional leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the academic performance of learners (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). By prioritising visionary leadership, curriculum alignment, teacher supervision, and data-driven decision-making, instructional leaders can create an environment conducive to academic excellence (Ikram et al., 2021). When leaders set clear educational goals, collaborate with teachers, and ensure alignment between curriculum and instruction, students gain a better understanding of expectations, leading to increased motivation and a greater sense of purpose (Meng, 2023). This, in turn, drives improved academic outcomes and prepares learners for high-stakes assessments and future endeavours (Cagle, 2023). Moreover, the positive school culture fostered by effective instructional leadership, characterised by support, inclusivity, and a commitment to excellence, empowers students to reach their full academic potential.

To explore this study, the following research question will guide the inquiry: How does instructional leadership influence the academic achievement of Grade 12 students in schools in South Africa?

2. Materials and Methods

Given the qualitative nature of the study, a qualitative approach was employed to investigate the influence of instructional leadership on student performance. One significant advantage of utilising a qualitative approach is its capacity to provide rich, in-depth insights into the behaviours and experiences of participants (Creswell & Path, 2018). This approach enables the researcher to explore the phenomenon thoroughly and uncover diverse perspectives. A case study design was adopted for the Research, as it facilitates a comprehensive exploration of a phenomenon within a specific context (Yin, 2014). According to Yin (2014), case study design is particularly effective when researchers aim to understand the complexities of real-world challenges and the causal factors contributing to such phenomena. Purposive sampling was employed to select six participants for this study, which included principals, three heads of

department (HODs), and two grade 12 students who were interviewed. The decision to use a smaller sample size of six participants allows the researcher to optimise time and resources by concentrating on the most relevant individuals (Campbell et al., 2020).

Semi-structured interviews were employed to gather data, as they enable researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, emotions, and thoughts (Belina, 2023). Thematic analysis was then utilised to identify emergent themes and patterns within the data. This method provides rich insights and a profound understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Jowsey et al., 2021). Given that the study was conducted in school settings, permission was obtained from the school principals, and participants provided their consent for the Research. All ethical considerations were thoroughly addressed. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned pseudonyms: PR for principals, ED for educators (1-3), and ST for students (1-2).

3. Result and Discussion

Theme 1: Positive School Cultures and Supportive Learning Environments

A prominent theme that surfaced from participants' responses was the pivotal role of leadership in fostering positive school climates and learning environments that enhance students' experiences. The feedback indicated that principals are instrumental in cultivating a school culture that prioritises student learning. PR emphasised his commitment to promoting respect and empathy among both students and teachers, which he believes is essential for creating a transformational school environment.

PR: *"In our school, I try to promote respect, empathy, and tolerance among students and teachers to transform the school environment. Transforming the school environment allows everyone, including all stakeholders, to work towards a common goal. Creating the right environment makes students and teachers feel valued. The feeling of being valued makes them improve their commitment towards teaching and learning."*

Similarly, a participant mentioned how their principal creates a supportive environment by pointing out that:

ED1: *"Our principal and the leaders create a positive environment that ensures that students from disadvantaged communities are assisted for them to thrive and thrive academically."*

On the other hand, participant ST1 argued how they used peer mentoring and anti-bully

programs to increase student commitment by asserting that;

ST1: "Our school make it a priority to promote inclusion for all students. We encourage programs like peer mentoring and anti-bullying to improve the school and classroom environment. Whilst this initiative may not improve students' learning experiences, the program does not really address the needs of students."

Overall, the participants agreed that establishing a supportive and inclusive school environment enhances student performance. Additionally, they emphasised that promoting respect and inclusion plays a crucial role in advancing teaching and learning, especially in rural communities. These findings indicate that while specific programs can improve student outcomes, it is essential for school authorities to ensure the consistent implementation of these initiatives.

Theme 2: Addressing Individual Differences and Removing Barriers to Learning

This theme addresses how the instructional leadership role of school leaders helps to address the individual needs of both teachers and students, as well as how they find solutions to barriers that affect teaching and learning in schools. Participant ED2 mentioned that;

ED2: "In our school, we use differentiated teaching and learning to address individual students' needs. Moreover, this has proved to be beneficial for students learning and the quality of education we provide. For example, teachers identify students with barriers to learning and come up with intervention programs to meet their needs."

Similarly, participant ED2 also mentioned how they have initiated differentiated teaching and learning support for teachers and students by saying that;

ED2: "Because of the learning barriers that our learners have, we are implementing differentiated instruction to improve teaching and learning in our school. We identify the learning barriers of learners and adopt strategies that seek to provide support to these learners."

Contrastingly, participant ST2 expressed concern about how leadership in the school have neglected the individual learning differences of students by highlighting that;

ST2: "I think that our teachers tend to overlook the fact that we as learners have our learning challenges which need to be addressed separately. While teachers focus on using a blanket approach to facilitating teaching and learning, the situation has not been helped due to large classes."

Participant PR supported the concern of ST2 by underscoring the importance of understanding the individual learning needs of students by saying that;

PR: "We as leaders and teachers must understand that our students have their individual learning needs. As such, appropriate instructional methods need to be used not only to support them but to address these challenges to improve their progress".

The study participants agreed on the importance of addressing the unique learning needs of students to improve educational outcomes. Many advocated for various teaching methods and learning facilitation techniques to ensure differentiated support for students. Furthermore, it was evident that contextual challenges, such as large class sizes and underqualified teachers, can hinder the provision of necessary support for students.

Theme 3: Curriculum Alignment with Teaching Outcomes

This theme emphasises the alignment between school curricula and classroom teaching and learning. Participants recognise the importance of this alignment, underscoring how school leaders and teachers use the curriculum to enhance student learning.

Participant ED3 explained how the school principal ensures that there is an alignment between curriculum and learning outcomes by asserting that;

ED3: "In our school, the principal and the leaders ensure that the curriculum and the learning outcomes are aligned. We, as teachers, are to make sure that whatever we teach learners in the class is informed by the school's curriculum. This makes learners to learn what is relevant but also to prepare them for the future".

Contrastingly, participant ST1 emphasised the need for the implementation of curriculum to be flexible for teaching as well as addressing the needs of students by claiming that;

ST1: "While curriculum alignment is important, it is also important for us to ensure that the curriculum implementation is flexible to address the different needs of our students. The current curriculum is too rigid and does not give room for it to be used to address the different needs of learners. This put unnecessary pressure on learners to perform at all costs".

On the other hand, participant PR mentioned how the performance of students has improved by rigorously aligning the curriculum to the learning outcome. PR said that;

PR: *"We have seen improvement in the performance of students because we recently reformed our curriculum and also ensured that it is aligned with learning objectives. This alignment has brought about teachers knowing what to teach learners for success.*

There appears to be a consensus among the study participants regarding the necessity for the school curriculum to align with learning outcomes that facilitate both teachers and students in achieving educational goals and enhancing performance. However, some participants voiced concerns about how this alignment addresses the individual needs of students.

Theme 4: Leadership Strategies for Improved Performance

This theme underscored the leadership strategies that school principals use to enhance the performance of students. Participants' responses showed varied leadership strategies that are used to improve the performance of students in school.

Participant ST2 pointed out how principals put in measures to ensure that there is accountability and motivation by both students and teachers by saying that;

ST2: *"In our school, the principal is showing a serious concern about teaching and learning and the behaviour of students and teachers. He ensures that school and class attendance are monitored and teaching and learning are not interrupted. This helps to create a sense of accountability and motivation."*

Participant ED1 was of the view that teaching and learning in school were adversely affected because most of the leaders were not effective in supporting teachers and students. ED1 argued that;

ED1: *"I think the role of leadership is critical in ensuring that appropriate leadership strategies are implemented to improve the quality of teaching and learning. However, one can see that not all leaders are equally effective as school leaders. The poor leadership makes the principals, teachers, and learners feel unsupported"*.

Participant PR, however, mentioned that his role as principal is instrumental in enhancing the performance of students by stating that;

PR: *"My leadership and the various strategies we adopt have been critical in improving the performance of the school and students. For instance, we ensure that teachers are given regular training and participate in the decision-making. These strategies contribute to enhanced learning of learners"*.

The responses from participants highlight the crucial role of school leadership in enhancing student performance. Most participants emphasised the significance of effective leadership in implementing strategies that drive educational goals, accountability, and motivation. Conversely, some participants noted that inadequate leadership can hinder the principal's efforts to foster a supportive environment for teaching and learning.

Discussion

The findings of the study highlighted a strong emphasis on enhancing the teaching and learning culture alongside the creation of a supportive learning environment. An improved school atmosphere emerged as a critical factor in enriching learning experiences and outcomes. Therefore, effective leadership within schools should play a crucial role in fostering a positive environment characterised by respect, inclusivity, and empathy. Such an environment not only promotes the well-being of students but also encourages school leaders to instil a sense of ownership, motivating both students and teachers to commit to quality education. However, to ensure that schools provide a supportive environment, it is essential to implement concrete strategies that address the diverse learning needs of all students, particularly those from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Masuku (2011) affirmed that instructional leaders can enhance the school environment by establishing a clear vision that fosters a positive school culture. Similarly, Ikram et al. (2021) contend that principals can create an atmosphere of trust and collaboration by nurturing a learning environment that inspires both teachers and students. These insights underscore the significance of instructional leadership in improving instructional activities and achieving favourable learning outcomes by enhancing the overall school environment. However, while these findings emphasise the crucial role of school leadership in promoting a positive climate and motivating educators and learners, it is essential to recognise that merely providing a vision and a supportive atmosphere is not sufficient. According to Cansoy (2019), to boost student performance, school leaders must monitor class attendance, provide constructive feedback, and facilitate personalised professional growth to enhance teaching practices. Supporting this view, Kilag et al. (2023) highlight the necessity for ongoing improvement initiatives aimed at empowering teachers to address student needs effectively. These findings illustrate how schools

can enhance their environments to support teaching and learning better.

Participants intimated that to improve teaching, teachers must not only be able to address the individual needs of students but also be able to remove possible barriers to learning. These findings highlighted the need to adjust teaching to the different needs and preferences of students. Thus, providing a differentiated and targeted approach can improve learning outcomes, particularly for students with learning barriers. To effectively address this challenge, school leaders must provide the necessary support and materials to empower teachers to employ differentiation pedagogies. Furthermore, systemic challenges like large classes and shortage of teachers need to be addressed to provide adequate and equitable support for effective student learning.

Ikram et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of aligning the curriculum with learning outcomes to address students' diverse needs and remove barriers to learning. This alignment, facilitated by effective instructional leadership, ensures that the curriculum is rigorous and differentiated to cater to individual student strengths and weaknesses. Gunawan & Adha (2021) further support this notion, highlighting the critical role of curriculum development in enhancing teaching and learning. Poulton (2020) underscores the importance of instructional leaders in shaping the curriculum to meet the specific needs of individual students. Al Jbour et al. (2024) and Rodrigues & Lima (2021) concur, emphasising the need for ongoing professional development and formative assessment to identify and address students' learning gaps. By focusing on individual student needs and tailoring instruction accordingly, instructional leaders can create inclusive and effective learning environments.

The findings emphasised the need for the curriculum to be aligned with instructional outcomes. Ensuring an alignment between teaching-learning and curriculum is vital for the achievement of enhanced instruction. As a result of this, school authorities are expected to provide the appropriate monitoring to ensure that curriculum implementation is adaptable and flexible to meet the changing needs of students. Again, responses show that curriculum implementation and alignment are effective when teachers are empowered by providing teachers with the necessary support for professional growth. Though curriculum alignment and implementation in schools are essential for the effective teaching of content, it

is, however, crucial for school leaders to address the student's needs as well as contextual factors that could impact teaching.

Ensuring curriculum alignment is essential for directing teaching and learning towards achieving the expected outcomes. Findings from the study indicate that curriculum alignment is crucial for improving teaching and learning in schools. Booyse & Du Plessis (2017) stress the importance of curriculum alignment, highlighting that it ensures that what students are taught aligns with how they are assessed. This alignment ultimately enhances students' preparedness for various assessments. Conversely, Mestry (2017) emphasises that robust curriculum implementation, supported by strong leadership, is necessary for improving student performance. Gunawan & Adha (2021) support this view, asserting that effective curriculum design is vital for quality teaching and learning, as well as for enriching students' learning experiences. However, Poulton (2020) argues that while strong leadership is important for improving curriculum design through a top-down approach, it can limit teachers' autonomy to innovate in their teaching methods. A balanced, collaborative approach could empower teachers to adapt the curriculum to meet students' needs.

Findings highlighted the importance of improving teaching through effective strategies. The adoption of effective leadership strategies can be key not only for school improvement but also for enhanced instructional activities in schools. According to the responses, school leaders who can influence teachers foster collaboration and make sure that appropriate decisions are taken that reflect the learning needs and instructional support to teachers. Such support to both teachers and students usually comes in the form of providing clear directions, setting high targets, and fostering and improving the environment. Such support ensures that school leaders create a school environment for teaching and learning. While leaders must deliberate about the leadership practices they adopt in addressing teaching and learning, it is also important for them to pursue continuous teacher development in education.

Research confirms that strong leadership strategies are essential for enhancing teaching and learning. Notably, Masuko (2011) found that instructional leadership establishes a clear vision and fosters a positive school culture, both of which are critical for improving teaching and learning. This conclusion is supported by Ikram et al. (2021), whose findings illustrate how school leaders create an atmosphere of trust and

collaboration by motivating both teachers and students. Booyse & Di Plessis (2017) emphasise the importance of leaders ensuring curriculum alignment to enhance student's learning experiences through effective instructional activities. While strong leadership plays a vital role in improving learning outcomes, Mestry (2017) argues that strict adherence to leadership directives can undermine teachers' authority in the classroom and should, therefore, be avoided. Similarly, Tsiligris & Hill (2021) suggest that school leaders should support teachers in becoming independent in their approach to the curriculum, allowing them to address the diverse needs of students in the classroom. Additionally, these authors assert that school authorities need to invest in professional development to equip teachers with the necessary skills to implement the curriculum effectively.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

The findings of this study highlight the essential role of school leaders in fostering a positive culture and supportive environment, which are crucial for enhancing teaching. Effective leadership is vital for creating an inclusive atmosphere that enables rigorous instructional practices, ultimately benefiting both students and motivating teachers to commit to their work. The study concluded that addressing students' needs and removing learning barriers is essential for effective teaching. It highlighted the importance of differentiated instruction to cater to individual learning preferences and tackle specific challenges. Participants noted that personalised teaching strategies can better meet diverse student needs, but concerns were raised about teachers using a one-size-fits-all approach. This emphasises the necessity for differentiated pedagogies to confront systemic learning barriers.

The alignment of curriculum with learning outcomes is crucial for enhancing teaching effectiveness and student progress. Findings show that properly implemented curriculum reforms lead to improved student performance. However, the rigidity of curriculum design limits teachers' ability to meet diverse learning needs. It is recommended that curriculum reforms offer flexibility, allowing teachers the freedom to decide on content and adapt to students effectively and creatively. In addition, the study highlights the importance of leadership strategies in enhancing teaching. Strong leadership fosters accountability and inspiration among students and teachers, while principals' supervision and attendance monitoring ensure effective teaching

and learning. This underscores the role of effective school leadership in creating a supportive environment, aligning with transformational leadership theories that suggest these approaches improve educational outcomes.

Lastly, this study's findings address the research question by examining the relationship between instructional leadership and the performance of Grade 12 students. Furthermore, the results highlight the effectiveness of instructional leadership, which is characterised by elements of both instructional and transformational leadership styles that impact learning outcomes. The alignment with the theoretical framework supporting this study is clear, particularly as it investigates how school leaders inspire and motivate both teachers and students to become engaged and committed.

Based on the findings, this study recommends that schools strengthen the pedagogical practices of teachers to facilitate effective teaching and learning. Additionally, it is important to enhance school leadership to empower teachers to implement a differentiated approach to instruction. Ensuring curriculum alignment and fostering a supportive school environment for teaching and learning are also crucial.

Focusing on the professional development of both leaders and teachers will promote flexibility in curriculum implementation and help create an environment that enhances teaching and learning outcomes. This, in turn, will empower students to excel in their studies. Table 1 below shows intervention strategies that instructional leaders can adopt to address challenges that affect teaching and learning in schools.

To enhance teaching and learning, schools must address several key challenges that negatively impact these processes, as outlined in Table 1. These challenges include weak leadership, ineffective teaching practices, a shortage of resources, lack of parental involvement, and student disengagement. Implementing these strategies, such as skills and professional development, allocation of resources, promoting parental involvement, and employing student-centred pedagogies, can help school leaders create a more engaging and inclusive school environment. When these strategies are successfully put into action, not only do teachers and students gain from a better learning experience, but students also achieve more. By addressing these challenges that come with teaching and learning, we can better support each student's unique way of learning. This helps us overcome the obstacles that often hold back

Table 1. Interventions to Improve Teaching and Learning in Schools

Challenge	Intervention Strategy	Contribution to Improved Teaching and Learning
Lack of clear vision and direction	Leadership development	Strong leadership can provide clear direction, goals and expectations for the school community. Effective leaders foster a positive culture and motivate teachers.
Ineffective classroom practices	Professional development	Teachers can acquire new skills and knowledge to enhance their instructional practices. Collaborative learning opportunities promote peer learning and innovation.
Limited resources and infrastructure	Resource allocation and management	Strategic resource allocation ensures that schools have the necessary resources to support teaching and learning. Effective infrastructure management can create a conducive learning environment.
Lack of parental involvement	Parent engagement strategies	Parental involvement enhances student learning and behaviour. Strong parent-teacher partnerships can create a supportive learning environment.
Student disengagement and underachievement	Student engagement strategies	Engaging instructional strategies can capture students' attention and motivate them to learn. Positive reinforcement and recognition can boost student self-esteem and motivation.

our schools from truly helping every child succeed.

A major limitation of this study is the small sample size of six participants that was used. While this smaller sample size allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the participants' perceptions and lived experiences, it also restricted the generalizability of the findings to the broader scope of the study. Involving teachers from a wider range of schools would have given these findings a richer and more nuanced understanding of the challenges they face. Using a wider scope of schools allowed us to explore how effective instructional leadership can support teachers and ultimately improve learning outcomes for all students.

Future researchers interested in the exploration of this study can use the mixed methods approach, which blends qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide an in-depth insight into pedagogies for improving teaching and learning in schools. In addition, future studies should use many schools and a bigger sample size of participants to enhance the adaptability and generalisability of the study.

This study contributes to the field of teaching and learning in schools by enhancing our understanding of the role of instructional leadership in improving the learning experiences of South African students. The findings emphasise the importance of creating a positive school environment, addressing students' needs, aligning the curriculum with learning outcomes, and implementing effective instructional strategies.

By highlighting the significance of instructional leadership in fostering a supportive school environment, the study aligns with existing research and offers practical

recommendations for school leaders. It underscores the necessity for strong leadership that promotes inclusion, addresses learning barriers, and ensures curriculum alignment. Moreover, the study stresses the importance of continuous professional development for teachers to refine instructional practices and meet the diverse needs of students.

This underscores the critical role of instructional leadership in enhancing students' learning outcomes. By addressing key challenges and proposing strategies and interventions, the study aims to inform school policies and improve instructional activities. As a result, this will enhance the learning experiences and overall performance of students.

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