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Perception of Secondary School Principals on Strategies for Improving Academic Performance: A Trajectory of UMkhanyakude Education District

Msawenkosi Sandile Mbokazi¹, Rachel Gugu Mkhasibe²

¹²Education Professional Practice, Faculty of Education, University of Zululand, South Africa

mbokazim@unizulu.ac.za, msembokazi@gmail.com

Abstract. The study outlines the findings from a case study that explored how the uMkhanyakude education district improved its academic performance in such challenging circumstances of the district. The performance chart of the district tabling results from 2008 to 2020 raised curiosity and interest to investigating the strategies employed by the district turn things around. The study adopted a qualitative method of enquiry employing document analysis and telephone interviews with principals of top-performing schools in the district. The findings revealed that transformative leadership, parental involvement in the form of izimbizo, adoption of schools with high enrolments, use of lead teachers, regular school visits, prescription of learner activities, well-planned extra-classes and introduction of Study camps raised learner academic performance in the district. The study recommends quality teaching and learning across the grades, parental involvement should be encouraged at all levels, two-way communication, regular support by the subject advisors and the unions.

Keywords. Academic performance, study camps, secondary schools, underperformance, intervention programme

Introduction

The province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) is comprised of ten district municipalities and one metro. Each district municipality consists of one education district office except metro which has two. The study focused on the uMkhanyakude district municipality which is located along the north coast of KZN and extends over 13855 km². UMkhanyakude education district is one of the twelve KZN education districts located in the uMkhanyakude district municipality. The district is bound by the Indian Ocean to the East, Mozambique to the North, the Kingdom of Eswatini to the Northwest and King Cetshwayo district to the South and the Zululand district to the West. The name of the district emanates from the famous yellow-barked fever tree, called "Acacia Xanthophioea", literally meaning "seen from a distance" or "shows light from afar" (Mbokazi, 2016). The name reflects among other things good luck, the uniqueness of its people and their hospitality, as well as the biodiversity and conservation history that the region is very proud of.

UMkhanyakude education district is comprised of 165 secondary schools most of which are classified as quintile 1 and 2 schools. Quintile 1 represents the poor of the poorest schools

while quintile 5, the most affluent ones (van Dyk and White, 2019). The district is one of the most socio-economically deprived district municipalities in South Africa, ranking 51 of the 55 most deprived (Patrick, 2020). The district attracts learners from the surrounding districts and countries. It is the first district in South Africa to have a cluster of schools in another country's soils, that is Lubombo cluster in the Kingdom of Eswatini. Lubombo cluster is implementing a South African National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) with the stewardship of the uMkhanyakude education district.

The district has been underperforming below 40% pass margin in the past few years and the reasons for such poor performance was arguable. Some of the reasons lamented by teachers, principals, district officials as well as politicians were that the district is underprivileged, under-resourced, poverty-ridden, encompassed by unemployment, deep rural, demotivation of staff and learners, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS. Everyone in the district accepted the plight and were reluctant to take action until 2012, when the new district leaders challenged the status quo. Teachers, principals and district officials were urged to cease lamenting on obstacles perpetuating underperformance in the district. They were made to understand that since they understood their circumstances as well as learners' academic performance they needed to align it to the turnaround strategies/intervention programmes of their schools. This was the turning point for the district underperformance. Since then, the district academic performance has been incrementing and transforming to the desired outcome. The district has repositioned itself from the last to the first three districts out of twelve as depicted in figure 2. The purpose of this empirical study is to identify intervention strategies employed by the uMkhanyakude education district to turn things around. The results of the study will assist other education districts and schools not only in South Africa but globally who are still struggling to produce desired academic outcomes. It will also assist the Department of Basic Education in preparing and planning for the underperforming education districts and schools.

Performance expectation of the Department of Basic Education (DBE)

The DBE expect all schools to perform above the threshold of 60% and any school performing below the threshold are said to be underperforming. For the district to be well-performing, each school must meet or exceed the threshold level of 60%. Schools or districts failing to meet the 60% threshold are declared underperforming and dysfunctional.

The trajectory of uMkhanyakude education

The performance of the uMkhanyakude education district has improved over a dozen years. The trajectory has been a long, challenging and daunting one. It unfolded in 2008 when the vibrant district leadership was first introduced as the chief education specialist in the office of the district director and later took the helm of the district in 2012. At that stage, the district was underperforming below 40% (figure 1) and that was accepted as a norm. Some schools failed all learners and most schools achieved far less than 50% with one, two or no bachelor at all. In 2009 the district improved its academic performance by 10% and 15% in 2010, however, a decline of 8% in 2011 was registered. In the history of the current district leadership, underperformance lasted for three years which must be applauded.

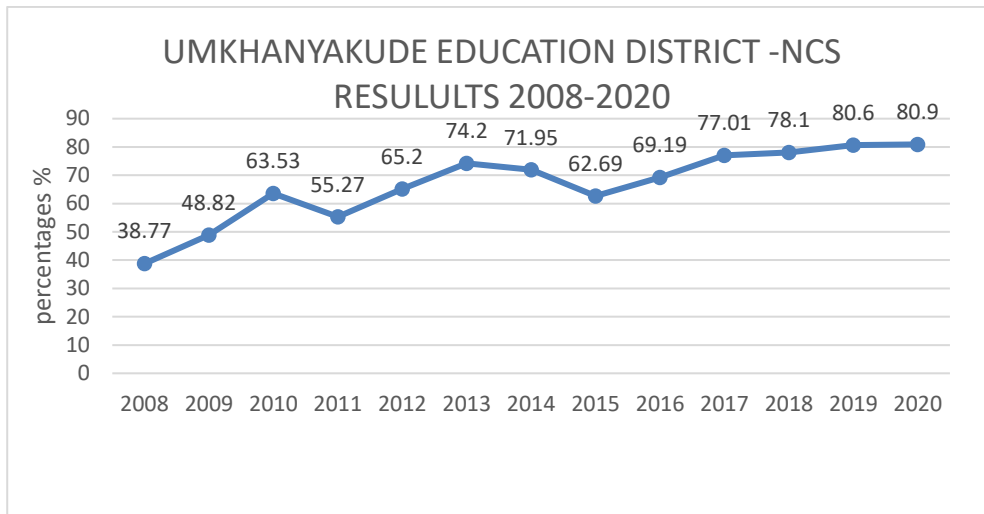


Figure: 1 Umkhanyakude Education District – NCS Results from 2008-2020

The year 2013, was the turning point year, in the history of the district. It recorded a high performance of 74.2% and shifted from the last position to the 8th in the KwaZulu Natal Province as can be observed in figure 2. It was a formidable trajectory with ups and downs. Against all odds, in 2020 the district improved the overall percentage from 80.6% to 80.9% as depicted in figure 2 and is sitting at position 3. One can now see a light from afar as the name of the district suggests.

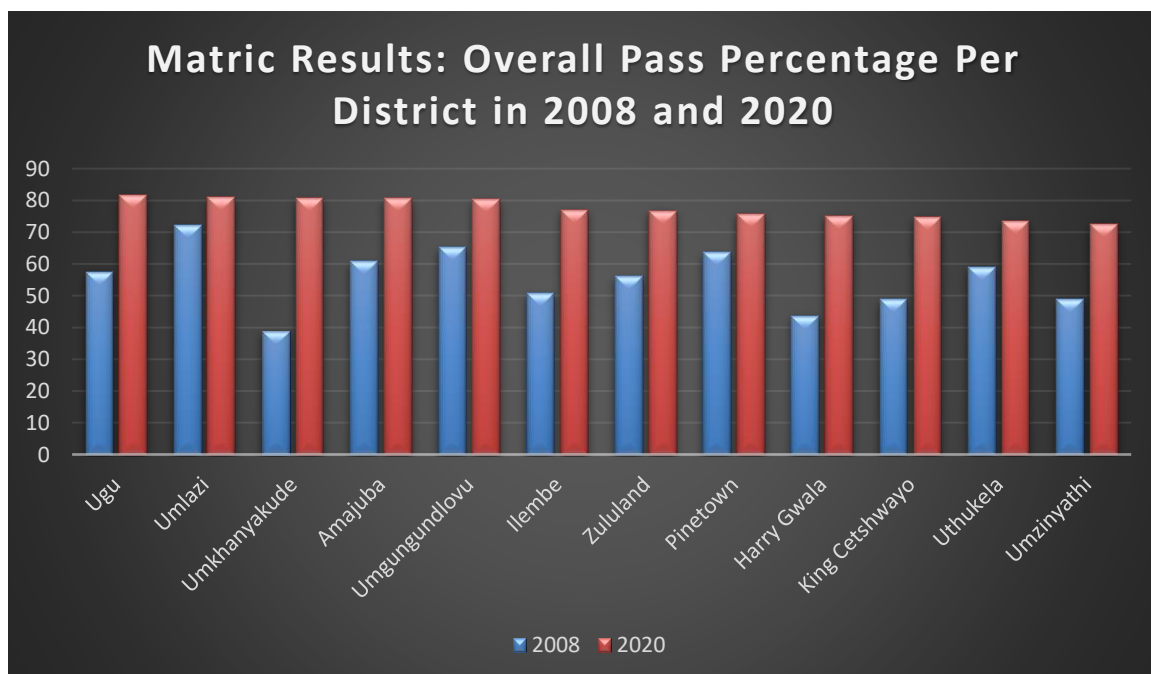


Figure: 2 KZN Department of Basic Education- Districts Performance (DBE, 2021)

Underperformance or poor performance remains a challenge in some districts in South Africa and it is unacceptable. ‘Underperformance means the failure to perform the duties of the role or to perform them to the standard required by the business’ (<https://www.plushr.com/blog/managing-your-team/hr-management>, accessed 25 August

2021). Whereas, Lamas (2015) defines underperformance as achievement below the expected performance. Notwithstanding the above definitions, the Department of Basic education defines underperformance in secondary schools as achievement below 60% pass rate in the National Senior Certificate Examinations. Underperforming schools in the district have been declining since **2013**. In the past, many schools in the district were performing at a level below 50% which resulted in the district underperformance (fig. 3). Currently, very few secondary schools are performing below the performance margin of 60%.

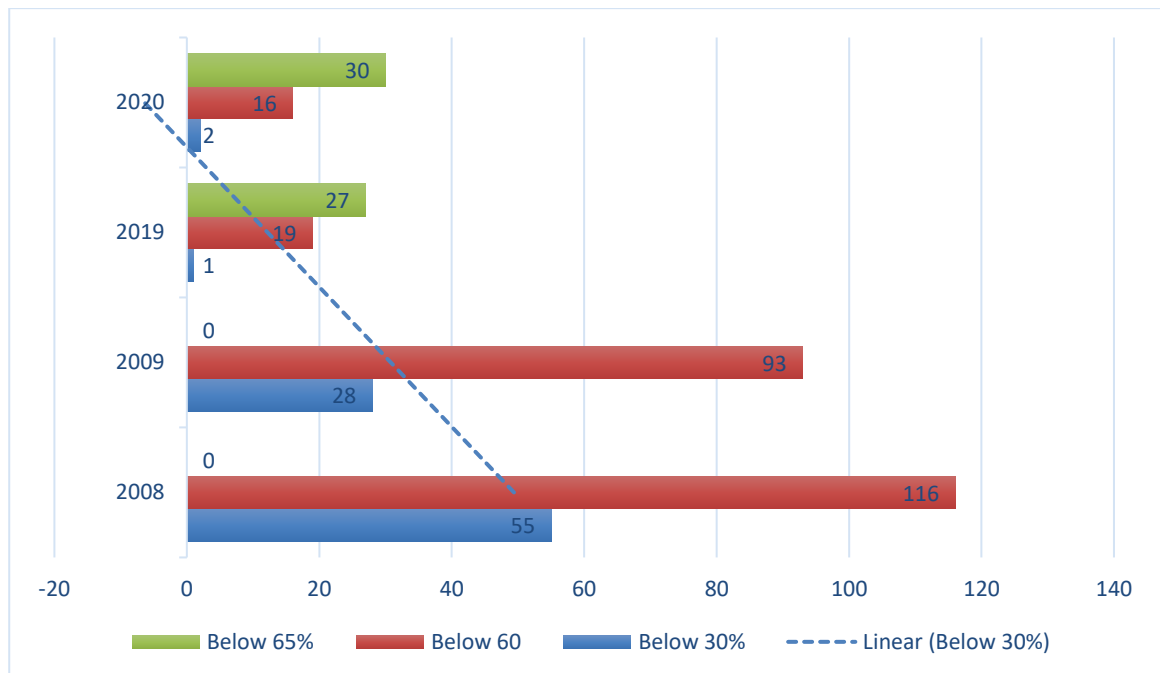


Figure 3 Declining underperforming schools

The bar graph in figure 3, indicates a decline in schools performing below 30%. In 2008 and 2009, a total of 83 schools performed below 30% and 209 below 60%. Whereas only 3 schools performed below 30% in 2019 and 2020 and 35 schools performed below 60%. Although some schools are still underperforming, their numbers have decreased drastically. The district has successfully eliminated zero performing schools. At this stage it is quite necessary to discuss the factors leading to underperformance of institutions, be it a school, circuit, district or any other institution.

Characteristics of underperforming institution

The education district or circuit is said to be underperforming because the majority of schools under their supervision are underperforming. Several factors are contributing to the underperformance of schools or districts namely, poor school management and leadership, lack of curriculum planning lack of resources, conflicts, poor management, unaccountability, poor improvement plan, lack of communication, uncontrolled work, lack of commitment, poor working conditions, loss of morale personal issues and unclear goals. A few of these characteristics will be highlighted below. Poor school management and leadership are common traits in underperforming districts (Setlhodi-Mohapi & Lebeloane, 2018). Underperformance and dysfunctionality in schools are caused primarily by a lack of leadership. Many schools in South Africa are striving to satisfy their individual,

community, and departmental success requirements. This is frequently linked to the school's management team's capacity, competency, and personality, especially the principal (DBE, 2018).

Underperforming institutions portray a lack of appropriate curriculum planning. Teachers plan as individuals and are never supervised. There is no proper lesson planning (DBE, 2018). The department heads and subject advisors do not check and monitor the plans to ascertain whether they are relevant to the departmental annual teaching plan. Such institutions do not plan for regular assessments to track learner progress. There is far too little writing done in many classes as the school management teams and subject advisors cannot monitor learners' written work.

Underperforming districts are characterised by a lack of resources (Mosoge, Challens, & Xaba (2018). In schools, resources include stationery, textbooks, duplicating papers, photocopiers, money and staff members. A shortage of resources results in the delivery of poor quality education. Education districts need to monitor procurement and delivery of Learner Support Material (LTSM) in all schools under its management.

Underperforming schools mostly are affected by conflict among staff members. School management teams are defying the principal and colluding with the staff to undermine his integrity. There is unnecessary time and resource loss due to principal and staff members wasting ample teaching and learning time to solve personal issues. In schools where there is conflict, there is no improvement, teachers are reluctant to develop and implement improvement strategies. Tshuma, Ndlovu and Bhebhe, (2016) confirms that conflict within the school makes the educational process more complicated when is not well managed. Opoku-Asare, Takyi1 and Owusu-Mensah, (2015) said that when conflict occurs there is a tendency for morale to be lowered hence it connotes a stressful, unhappy, depressing, annoying and frustrating state of affairs that may adversely affect teaching, learning, and school effectiveness. The school will perform poorly.

In underperforming districts, circuit managers, subject advisors, principals, departmental heads and teachers are not held accountable for their poor performance. Instead, they are rewarded when they performed well. Principals do not hold teachers accountable for their underperformance, those who do become enemies for teachers and unions as a result they are not supported and teachers refuse to implement intervention programmes of the school.

Furthermore, underperforming districts are characterised by a lack of monitoring and control of teachers and learners work. In underperforming districts, roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined between circuit managers and subject advisors, departmental heads and teachers (Clarke, 2011). They seldom visit schools, if they did there is no clear plan of work control. Some circuit managers and subject advisors seldom engage school management teams in discussions about their performance (Clarke, 2011) they only deal with school principals. Districts officials never give feedback to the teachers after moderations and monitoring of school work. They also have improvement plans either poorly designed or is designed for compliance sake, to be submitted to the officials when required. The district improvement plan may not be based on a detailed analysis of performance data and needs of the school (Clarke, 2011) but it is a copy taken from one district with its different modality. Therefore, it is impossible to enact such a plan.

In the following paragraph we discuss the characteristics of high a performing institution, be it a school circuit, district, college or any other institution.

Characteristics of high a performing institution

High performing institutions possess the following characteristics namely clear and shared vision, effective use of school data, effective leadership, continuous monitoring and control and effective intervention programme and a culture of discipline. High performing districts set clear goals which are understood by every district official as well as teachers in school. District teams which include circuit managers, subject advisors, principals and teachers of a high performing district work together, towards the achievements of a common goal or goals. They are committed to their work and each other. Their roles are clearly defined and each member is aware of his level of achievements expected from them.

High performing districts are characterised by effective leadership. Effective leadership focuses on purpose, goals, relationships and an unwavering commitment to results that benefit the organization and each individual. They empower, build commitment and confidence in their staff members. Leadership is highly distributed among members with each member clearly understanding their roles and responsibilities and leadership teams meet regularly and independently to plan and monitor progress.

High performing district fosters continuous monitoring and control of all their schools. It pays close attention to classroom instruction and provides guidance and oversight to improve teaching and learning (Bergeson, 2007). Monitoring of teachers, learners work and curriculum implementation and changes in practice is an ongoing process at all levels, namely, school, circuit and district level.

Furthermore, high performing districts are characterised by a culture of positive discipline. Disciplined district officials and teachers are committed and willing to go the extra mile in fulfilling their responsibilities. The district has a low rate of absenteeism, teachers and learners are punctual and attend schools regularly. High performing districts utilise data provided by schools to plan for their development and provision of resources. The academic progress of schools is also utilised to develop an effective intervention programme of the district.

Methodology

The empirical enquiry employed qualitative research methods. The study embraced an interpretive paradigm to acquire insight into secondary school principals' lived experiences as determinants of academic achievement in the district. As data gathering approaches, document analysis and telephone interviews with open-ended questions were used. The term "document study" refers to a researcher's examination of written materials such as personal and non-personal documents, such as archives, annual reports, guidelines, policy documents, diaries, and letters. (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020). Telephone interviews were preferred because it saves time and reduce the chances of spreading Covid19 pandemic. Purposive sampling was applied. The sample consists of selected principals of high performing schools in the uMkhanyakude education district. Permission to record the proceedings of the interview was sought. Ethical issues were embraced as participants' identity is kept confidential and their names will never be divulged at any given time. The collected data is only utilised for this study.

Data analysis

Recorded responses were transcribed, categorised and narratively analysed. The process involved identifying, clustering, analysing and giving meaning to important and relevant statements to the research. These processes were repeated to ensure that all relevant information was included (Morrow, Rodriguez & King 2014). Amid the analyses and interpretation of themes, findings were made and discussed.

Findings and Discussion

This section reports on the results of data obtained from the interviews of principals and circuit managers. The main purpose of the study was to investigate the strategies employed by the uMkhanyakude education district to transform the district academic performance. Participants were asked to list and describe the strategies used to achieve the excellent results illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. The following are some of the strategies that were identified and explained.

Strategy	%	Rank
Continuous Monitoring (Fast lane)	100	1
Lead teacher programmes	80	3
Monitored extra-classes	80	3
Morning and afternoon classes	90	2
Holiday class	60	5
Weekend classes	70	4
Awards	50	6
Price giving	50	6
Leadership	100	1
Monitoring curriculum coverage	100	1
Izimbizo	100	1
Adopt a school	80	3
Prepared study material	20	1
Twining of schools	20	1
Study camps	50	3
Revision	60	5
Motivation	20	8
Use exam questions for all class activities	60	1
Target for each school, circuit and CMC	100	1
Motivational Speakers	40	7
More attention on schools with +100 grade 12 learners	80	3

Table 1: Strategies to improve academic performance

Themes emerged from the interviews of school principals, table 1, were combined, categorised analysed, interpreted and the following list compiled: district leadership, continuous monitoring (fast lane), lead teacher programmes, study camps, intensified extra classes, completion of curriculum coverage by July, performance targets, give special attention to schools with more than 100 grade 12 candidates, Izimbizo, and recognition of outstanding performance.

District Leadership

Principals portrayed the district leadership as the one that is visionary and transformative. The district leadership has a clear shared vision. District leadership and schools' leadership function as collaborative team members working towards the same goals. Huguet, (2017) argues that the leadership should be trustworthy administrators who encourage

collaboration and teacher leadership, as well as employment of educators who are genuinely passionate about teaching and love children.

Continuous Curriculum Monitoring

The district has systems for monitoring progress toward the achievements goals and expectations. The district officials are divided into several teams and each team has a team leader, for instance, Team A is led by the district director and so forth. Each team is assigned a cluster of schools which it will monitor from term to term. Members of the team are subject specialists and are responsible for their subjects in all cluster schools. This enables specialists to monitor the progress and give support to their subjects. On their arrival, they collect learners writing books, check the number of activities completed and the number of activities short. The finding revealed that activities for the week are prescribed for instance a content subject has 2 classwork and 1 homework, therefore a total of 8 classwork and 4 homework in a month. It is, therefore easy to count the number of activities expected for a term. The annual teaching plan is also monitored and this ensures early completion of the curriculum or annual teaching plan. The result also shows that the team leader deals with the administrative aspects of school management.

Lead Teacher Programmes

The district trains the best teachers in each subject so that these teachers will teach the subject in clusters of schools in the district. This promotes networking within the district since schools are twinned especially schools with lower enrolments. Lead teachers can teach two or more schools simultaneously and learners get to know each other and realise how others learn.

Monitored Extra-Classes

Teaching and learning are maximised by offering extra classes (Santhi, 2011), that is, morning and afternoon, weekend and summer and winter classes in each school in the district. These classes are monitored at school, circuit and district levels. In support of teachers and learners, social partners also participate in the monitoring process. Schools are required to prepare duty rosters and submit them to circuit managers to aid the monitoring process.

Study Camp

Some schools in the district keep grade 12 learners within the school premises for the duration of the examination as part of their intervention strategies. Others take grade 12 from the third term until they complete writing their final paper into what is called study camps, learning camps or boot camps. The Study camp is an essential setting for learning and developing social and emotional learning skills (Richmond, Sibthorp & Wilson, 2019). The purpose of enacting study camps is to consolidate learning activities and keep learners focused on their studies to ensure that no time is wasted. Vigorous planned curriculum revision is exercised during study camps. They get the opportunity to use the expertise of various teachers within and outside the district. One principal commented as follows:

"The study camp helped learners master all their subject contents like Physical Sciences, Mathematics and Accounting that gave them hard time."

The principle is that the 'more time they spend on their books, the better they become day-by-day.' Parents are supportive of the intervention and in some cases, they contribute towards the programme.

Izimbizo

The district responded to the call of NDP and government calls for the implementation of izimbizo to engage citizens on issues in the education sector for instance addressing challenges and concerns such as poor academic performance of learners. Chaka (2014) perceived imbizo as the traditional gathering of community to resolve community challenges by robustly and thoroughly engaging with traditional leaders. Izimbizo are held at all levels for instance at school, the circuit, as well as district level and they, include the participation of parents, learners, teachers and local traditional leadership. At all these levels the issue of discussion is learner academic achievements. Schools hold Izimbizo quarterly where they analyse the performance of grade 12 learners and align it to the improvement strategy.

Schools with a large enrolment (100+ grade 12 learners)

Schools with high enrolments of grade 12s are targeted in the district. These schools contribute a great percentage to the pass rate of the district as a result they receive special attention in terms of learning material, funds and assistance from teaching specialists as well as lead teachers. These schools are frequently visited as part of support and are adopted by district officials.

Performance targets

At the beginning of each year, principals receive letters stating the previous academic performance of their schools, potential and academic performance targets for the current year. The letter is cascaded to the whole school community, namely, school governing bodies, teaching and non-teaching staff as well as learners. The aim is to encourage the school community to participate in school activities aimed at producing results of high standards. Circuits also receive their academic performance targets, stating the number of schools to achieve 100% and the overall target percentage. As a result, circuit managers and principals have sleepless nights planning to achieve their targets. Therefore, circuit managers set performance targets for the principals under their supervision and principals also set performance targets for each subject teacher in their schools to maximise the chances of achieving the school target.

Recognition of outstanding academic performance

At the beginning of each year, good academic performance is appreciated at district, circuit and school levels. This is an exciting season in the district amid the recognition of the outstanding performance of learners, teachers as well as schools. Recognition of outstanding academic performance is done to keep learners, teachers and principals motivated, appreciated and committed to achieving high performance and productivity (Danish & Usman, 2010; Amoatema, & Kyereme, 2016). Teachers will teach better knowing they can receive recognition or they can be awarded.

Prescription of written work

The district prescribes the minimum number of informal written tasks for each subject offered at a school, that is, a number of homework, classwork, assignments and tests per week, month and or quarter. Content related subjects such as agricultural sciences, history, physical sciences are covered by a minimum of 2 class work, 1 homework per week and 1 test per month and 1 assignment per quarter. Languages and mathematics, on the other hand, receive three classwork activities and two homework activities every week. Each of these activities has its own set of questions adapted from previous national senior certificate examination question

papers. This provides learners with extensive practice of previous question papers. These non-formal activities are carried out in addition to the formal ones that are determined by national policies. The academic achievement of schools that follow these principles is usually quite good.

Conclusion

In all these activities the district director plays an active leadership role as he is well known for leading from the front. The district takes pride in its academic performance as its top plan is to take the lead in the province. Amid current academic performance, the district stands a good chance of achieving its aspired target of leading the province. However, the district must ensure that quality teaching and learning takes place across the grades. Parental involvement is pivotal for the academic performance of learners and therefore, it is encouraged at all levels. School visits and monitoring should not be exercised as faulty finding mission but as developmental support. Lastly, two-way communication, regular support by the subject advisors and the unions are essential ingredients for achieving academic performance.

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