



**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Reasons for the Academic Decline in two Secondary Schools in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT**

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This paper reports on the findings of the study that seeks to understand the reasons for academic decline in two secondary schools in the Ugu Education District, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study sought to understand the reasons for the academic decline of schools that were previously known for excellent performance. The study was underpinned by Duke (2008)' theory on school decline. Two school principals and two deputy principals were purposively selected to participate in the study. This was a qualitative study that follows the traditions of the interpretivism paradigm. Data was generated using semi-structured interviews. The findings suggested that school decline was triggered by numerous factors that included teacher-related challenges, cultural behavior of the learners, the failure of the Department of Education in the province to support schools, and the lack of excellent school leadership. The study concluded that school leadership, school governing body, and other provincial and national stakeholders must play an integral role in arresting causes of school decline.

## INTRODUCTION

The study reports on the qualitative research findings on the causes of school decline in two selected secondary schools in Ugu Education district in KwaZulu-Natal province. Duke (2008b) argues that much is known about how schools improve than how they decline. In this study the focus is on understanding the causes of decline of those secondary schools that were previously performing well and all a suddenly they perform poorly. As a researcher, I have noticed that the participating schools were once performed well in terms of learner academic achievement. Drawing from Duke (2008)'s sentiments organizational decline refers to the condition in which a substantial decrease in organisation's resources over a specified period. However, there is no commonly agreed definition of the concept 'decline'. Duke and Hochbein (2008) view school decline as a process of continuing failure of a school to achieve its main goal which is student learning. This agrees with Dufour (2008) who argues that the goal of a school is student learning. Gorard, Taylor and Fitz (2002) bring another dimension and describe it as a situation where a school has a decreasing learner number and increase the proportion of socio-economic disadvantage in its intake.

There is widespread notion that school decline occurs in those schools that were once characterized by good performance but have begun to decline (Duke and Hochbein,2008). As a result, the schools that had been experiencing low performance cannot be said to experience a decline because it has never performed well previously. Therefore, this study focuses on the schools that had been known to perform very well and they begun to decline. Scholars (Duke, 2008a, 2008b; Hochbein & Duke, 2011) characterized school decline as an interesting phenomenon because little is known about it. Hence, the explores the causes of academic decline in tw secondary schools.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

School decline is a growing phenomenon in South African context (Mbokazi & Lebeloane, 2022). More research has been conducted on school improvement and little has been done on declining schools (Duke, 2008b). This section provides scholarly work on the causes of school decline. The literature presented has been drawn from empirical research conducted from national and international context.

### **Causes of School decline**

The reviewed literature (Duke, 2008a, 2008b; Mthiyane et al., 2014; Mthiyane & Chiororo, 2020) shows several causes of school decline. A research study conducted in secondary schools in Zimbabwe shows teacher morale to be the contributing factor towards School decline (Mthiyane & Chiororo, 2020). Teachers in Zimbabwe receive little salaries because the government has no money to pay teacher salaries. Sometimes teachers do not receive salaries, and this triggers their lack of commitment and disinterest towards schoolwork. Mthiyane and Chiororo (2020) postulate that where teachers receive high incentives in monetary form, they are motivated to work, and their performance becomes much better. Nevertheless, when teachers receive poor incentives, the academic performance of learners becomes very low because of low morale of teachers. On the same vein, argue that some teachers in South Africa do not view teaching profession as a calling (Mthiyane et al., 2014). As a result, some teachers are incompetent and absent themselves from work. In the end, the education of learners gets compromised by the teacher absenteeism. Even, if they are present at school, they bunk teaching period (Mthiyane et al., 2014).

Research revealed negative and poor attitude of students towards their schoolwork (Mthiyane & Chiororo, 2020). One of the causes of this kind of student attitude is the government's education liberal policies on the rights of learners. Consequently, students misused their right in the expense of their education. Students involved in sexual intercourse and become pregnant at a their very young age and they know that the education policy favors them (Rani & Akmam, 2023). The government's adoption of western education policies creates students who understand their right and ignore their responsibility. Thus, results in poor academic performance and ultimately school decline. When this happens, Gorard et al. (2002) opine that students leave school and join reputable schools who seem to be doing well. Research conducted in Indonesia on the factors affecting girls dropping out of schools revealed several causes (Rani & Akmam, 2023). The study was conducted in Indonesia. The findings showed that Early marriage forced girl students to leave schools. Had that not happened they would complete education. Pregnancy was also the prominent cause of students to dropout from school. Similarly, Mthiyane et al. (2014) found that in South Africa, pregnancy learners could not concentrate on their studies and this contributes towards poor performance especially National Senior Examinations (NSC).

The department of Education contributes to the school decline. The department of education through their officials are accused of politicizing the recruitment process in the detriment of education (Mthiyane et al., 2014). These officials are too unionized as a result they compromised their responsibilities. The department is also mandated to address the issue of learner ill-discipline. However, the department delays to take discussions on serious offences by learners which warrant expulsion. The provincial department of education has the responsibility to expel learners who committed serious offences in schools. However, research shows that department's turn-around when the School Governing Body lodged a complaint with the department takes too long. The department also introduced various curriculum without capacitating teachers with intensive training programmes to face with curriculum changes.

Furthermore, the research (Mthiyane & Chiororo, 2020) points to the poor leadership in causing school decline. School management exhibit autocratic leadership style as opposed to democratic approach to leadership. This leads to poor staff morale and commitment. In similar view, Mthiyane et al. (2014) emphasise the importance of school management to understand that they do not lead alone. School leadership fails to set a clear vision for the school. Consequently, they lack proper supervision of teachers and students. Hence, the incompetency of school

management results in the decline of schools. Duke (2008a) laments that the principal is the most important person from whom teachers look up to.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

The study is underpinned by Weitzel and Jonsson (1989)' theory on organizational decline. Organizational decline has five stages and all these stages are important in understanding the decline of any organization. The first stage of decline is the blind stage where the organization is unable to recognize the internal and external changes that threaten the survival of the organization. The inaction stage is the second stage of organisational decline and is characterised by inaction despite a clear sign of deterioration in the performance of the organisation. This second stage is relevant to the study because there might be indicators of a decline in school performance of the studied schools. However, school management did not take action to address the decline indicators. The third stage in organizational decline is the misdirection of capital. In this stage, the organisation deploys improper human and financial resources to alleviate the challenges brought by the decline. The crisis stage is the fourth stage of organisational decline. During this phase the organisation attempted to address its problems and its interventions have been unsuccessful. This results in chaos, crisis, and an effort to return to original company successes. The dissolution stage is the final stage of organisational decline in which the organisation is in serious crises and is forced to dissolve.

### **Research design and methodology**

This was a qualitative study guided by interpretivism paradigm. The chosen paradigm was deemed relevant we aimed to understand the reasons for the causes of school decline in schools that were previously known for academic performance. Interpretivism paradigm highlights a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through the lenses of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The participants provided subjective views on the reasons for the school decline in their schools. In this paper we gain a deeper understanding of the reasons for school decline and make recommendations for the prevention of such decline in our basic education system.

The study employed a case study design. The case study seeks to provide a detailed analysis of a particular event, situation, organisation or social unit (Schoch, 2020). Individual semi-structured interviews were utilised to generate data from participants. Semi-structured interviews allowed probing through clarity seeking questions (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021) based on a developed interview guide with predetermined questions. The predetermined questions assisted to structure the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The interview with each participants lasted approximately 30 minutes and each participant was interviewed once. After consent was obtained the interview was recorded, followed by accurately transcribing. The participants were then asked, based on the transcribed material if their comments were captured correctly and presented what they intended to share during the interview.

The study was conducted in two secondary schools in the Ugu Education district in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The schools were selected as they produced excellent academic results, especially for National Senior Examinations in the past. However, recently learner performance started to decline in these schools. This paper explores possible reasons for the deterioration of the academic performance. Four participants were purposively and conveniently selected (Campbell et al., 2020), and included the school principal and deputy principal in each secondary school. The participants showed a willingness to participate in the study. These leaders had a wealth of experience with more than ten years of experience in leading the schools and could provide insights into the reasons for the academic decline of their schools.

Research ethics were followed and permission to conduct the study was obtained from the participants. For confidentiality and protection of the identity of the schools and the participants, pseudonyms were used for both schools and participants. To ensure the robustness of the study, the data was triangulated. The findings of the study were shared with the participants. The findings of this study represent a case study and are confined to the schools and contexts where the study was conducted.

## Findings and discussions

### Reasons of academic decline

The following section presents the findings that emerged from the interviews with the participants and the findings are presented thematically.

#### Teachers related challenges

The findings revealed that teachers contribute to school decline due to various reasons. Some teachers arrive at school very late. Participants indicated poor behavior of teachers resulting from being under the influence of alcohol. Teachers had the following to say:

*“Even educators come late to school, and they absent themselves from school without reporting to the school management. Other teachers come drunk for that matter”* Mr. Nduna from School A.

The extract above indicates the bad behavior of teachers in participating schools. Teachers do not seem to honor the arrival time at school which suggests that they do not commence their schoolwork on time. One of the contributing factors to school decline is teacher absenteeism. Absenteeism negatively affects student learning. Mr. Nduna also added that teachers who happened to be absent from school do not report to school management. This shows that teachers do not respect their school managers, and they lack accountability towards their actions. Teachers also stated that some teachers showed poor understanding of the subject they teach. This is what Mrs. Zimu said:

*“It is so disappointing that some teachers have limited understanding of the content of their subjects.”*

Poor understanding of the subject matter by teachers triggers poor academic performance of learners. When teachers showed minimal understanding of the content of the subjects they teach, learners cannot perform. This is the first stage in the decline of the school (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989).

The moral of teachers have deteriorated because of the system of the South African Department of Basic Education (or is it the Provincial Department of Education?). The following is the teacher's sentiments:

*“and low teacher morale, many teachers are so much discouraged about the whole system and changes that happened in the Department. We had OBE which was disastrous, and we had NCS and now we are talking about CAPS”* Mrs. Zimu from School B

The changes in the Department of Basic Education affected the morale of teachers. This shows that when teachers are not motivated there is likelihood of poor academic performance of learners. This has a result of the multiple changes brought in by the education department. Mrs. Zimu noted that there was Outcomes Based Education (OBE) followed by National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and currently teachers must implement Curriculum and Assessment Policy statements (CAPS). The low morale of teachers has been experienced in Zimbabwe where teachers received poor salaries (Mthiyane & Chiororo, 2020). Consequently, they became demotivated to execute their daily work and ultimately impacted learner academic performance.

Teachers contribute to the decline in learner academic achievement. Teacher behavior plays a bigger role in school decline. This evident from the findings that some teachers come to school drunk and even absent themselves from school. Mthiyane et al. (2014) found that some teachers are absent and sometimes do not show up for classes when they are present at school. What was shocking is the fact that teachers lack understanding of the content of the subject they teach. Therefore the incompetence of teachers causes a decline in the academic performance of learners because teachers themselves have minimal understanding of the subject matter (Mthiyane et al., 2014).

#### The failure of the provincial Department of Education to support schools

Participants provided diverse responses about the impact of the Provincial Department of Education on academic decline. The Department does not supply textbooks on time, resulting in teachers who try to teach without the necessary resources. Mr. Nduna shared the following:

*"Office of the Superintendent and Education Department also could play a part for example by not supplying textbooks on time also by not providing necessary resources in order to enhance learning and teaching service for the teachers."*

Moreover, another participant emphasized that the department officials do not provide support for teachers in challenging subjects. She emphasised that according to her understanding DOE (give the abbreviation the first time and then only use the abbreviation onwards) officials should be visible at school so that they can help teachers as much as they can to enhance teaching and learning.

*"Lastly, I would also cite the department officials such as subject advisors do not give enough supports to educators especially in critical subjects such as Accounting, Science, and Mathematics. Department officials should be visible in schools and not just staying in offices"* Mrs. Zimu from School B.

For schools to perform well academically, subject advisors should play an integral role in ensuring that they support teachers in critical subjects (Dambuza, 2015). The above extract emphasised the lack of academic support which leads to poor academic achievement. Subjects such as Mathematics, Science, and Accounting require enough support and need resources such as textbooks to be readily available in schools. However, the DOE seems to be very slow in ensuring that learning, teaching, and support material (LTSM) get into school on time. Furthermore, department officials hardly visit schools to monitor the process of teaching and learning. This adds another burden on academic decline because teachers are left alone to deal with challenges of teaching and learning (Mthembu, 2014).

Another factor from the department of education is regarding the policies which must be implemented immediately without any training or workshop for teachers.

*"It could be the department at times when it brings the policy that must be implemented immediately without peers' understanding. Then, then that leads to poor morale among the teaching force"* Mr. Shazi from School B.

The DOE puts more pressure on schools to implement policies without proper or no training to equip teachers on those policies. The study that explored the decline of Agricultural Science teachers in South Africa points to improper training of teachers (Mbokazi & Lebeloane, 2022). This shares a similar view with the findings of the study regarding improper training of teachers to comprehend the policies of the department before implementation. Consequently, participant is of the view that teachers must be capacitated in terms of understanding policies before they are implemented. However, this does not happen in schools and then result into poor teacher morale.

### **Cultural behaviour of the learners**

Some participants indicated learner behavior as one of the causes of school decline. The finding showed external influences that affect learner behavior in schools. these factors include wrong role models and gangsterism. Mr. Manzini shared the following sentiments:

*"On the part of learners, there is general lack of motivation which could also be caused by several outside influences like for example there is gangsterism, there are wrong role models because learners are looking at wrong people as their models. Some learners absent themselves and end up performing badly academically."*

Learners contribute negatively towards academic decline in schools. The external influences such as gangsterism and bad role models have detrimental effects on learners' behavior at school. As a result, learners perform poor on academic achievement. Learner absenteeism emerged as serious factor of school decline. Mthiyane and Chiororo (2020) complains about neoliberal policies that favor learners in South Africa. Therefore, learners behave the way they wish knowing that nothing would happen to them.

Another great factor contributing to school decline is learner late coming. In this regard, Mrs Zimu said:

*“Late coming and learners who don’t do their homework as requested by the educators. Parents lack understanding of their role in supporting school. As well as assessment tasks as per the assessment programme.”*

Learners also play a major role in decreasing academic decline. They arrive late at school. Thus, they miss important subject matter which would ultimately result in poor academic performance. However, parents also play a role in poor school decline because they have little understanding of the role they should play in supporting the school regarding learner behavior. Therefore, if parents could play a significant role in supporting the school, the learner bad behavior could be minimized. The research findings highlighted poor students attitude toward their school work (Mthiyane & Chiororo, 2020). This is inline with the current study finding that learners do not complete assessment tasks. There seems to be no intervention to eradicate academic decline. Weitzel and Jonsson (1989) highlights that one of the stages of school decline is when there is no action to address the cause of school decline.

### **The lack of excellent school management**

The analysed data revealed that school management has a detrimental effect on the decline in academic performance. This happens when the school management lacks strong leadership and allow teachers to do things the way they like. Mr. Nduna emphasised:

*“In other words what can results in poor management of the school thus declining of a school would be where a person does whatever he likes and whenever he walks. It calls upon management than to be fare and firm to be strong in their beliefs and to be strong in what they are doing”*

The except emphasises the necessity for school management to refrain from laisses fare leadership approaches. Therefore, school management must provide direction. However, the data indicates that school management in declining schools lack competent in providing bold decision where everyone does what management says. This aligns with Mthiyane and Chiororo (2020) that school management contributes toward academic decline through their incompetent leadership practices.

Data also showed that the absence of policies leads towards a massive decline in academic performance. Thus, teachers and learners do not follow any policies. And they do things as they like.

*“When there are no policies in place, we are working towards school decline. When there is laisses fare. Everyone because there is no policy will do according to what he likes, then the school will go down”* Mr Shazi from school B.

Participant shares intra conflict views that some school principals exhibit autocratic leadership approach, and they cease practicing it in their schools. However, the participant is of the view that can still be implemented in schools.

*“I suspect this autocratic type of leadership must be done away with. But it cannot be done away because sometimes there are cases where the principal has to say stickily this is what must be done because at the end of the day, he is accountable”* Mrs Zimu from School B.

Another participant also indicates that academic declines because school principals do not involve other stakeholders in decision-making.

*“When people are not involved in the policy making you always telling them. Then definitely they are not going to listen you all the time when you are listening to them”* Mr. shazi from School A

Principals’ leadership approach plays a significant role in declining schools. findings point to the fact that autocratic leadership decreases teacher moral because school principals do not involve them in decision-making. In a study by Mthiyane and Chiororo (2020) autocratic leadership leads to poor staff morale and commitment. However, in some situations, principals need to make bold decisions so that school stakeholders implement the instructions. This is because the school principal is accountable for his decisions at school.

### Strategies that school management team can employ to alleviate school decline

As much as there are reasons for academic decline, data revealed some strategies school management can implement to arrest reasons for academic decline. One of the participants highlighted the importance of teamwork among School management team members (SMT)

*“One of the strategies that can be exercised to avert or stop the causes of school decline would be for the SMT to work as a team. Teamwork is of essence”*

The above excerpt indicates the need for work collaboration among SMT members. When SMT members work as a team, they are likely to eradicate academic decline. Teacher collaborative learning has received support for its contribution to enhancing teachers' and schools' learning by offering teachers opportunities for improving their classroom practice (Kempen & Steyn, 2017). Therefore, there might be improvement in academic performance of learners because school management would work collaboratively to manage the work of teachers and learners.

Participants emphasised the importance of involvement of all stakeholders in policy formulation.

*“it about bringing all the people together and form the policies together and draw up the implementation strategy together with the people that are involved”* Mr shazi from School A.

To eradicate academic decline, school management is encouraged to involve all stakeholders in the formulation of policies. This ensure that everyone abides by the decision taken collaboratively.

Moreover, the participant highlighted that school management should capacitate members of School Governing Bodies (SGBs). This is what they had to say:

*“Also is to make sure that SGBs are workshopped as to what they should be doing as part of the management school sometimes we seem to seem to neglect the component of SGB. Whereas they are part according to this new education laws they are part of the school”* Mr. Nduna from School A.

SGBs play a significant role in school governance. As a result, findings suggest the necessity for SGB members to be developed and understand their role in the life of the school. However, school management seems to neglect the imperative role that SGB plays. When SGB are involved in the affairs of the school, academic decline could be arrested. Hence new education laws make provision for parents to play party in improving the academic performance of the school.

Mr. Nduna indicated that for school management to manage effectively, they need to plan in the current year for the subsequent academic year. This will lead to proper functioning of the school because at the beginning of academic year everything will be properly organized. Mr. Nduna mentioned that planning includes putting teachers in various subjects by looking at their experience and the qualifications they have.

Data showed the importance of planning for effective functioning of the school.

*“Planning is of the essence here you plan this year so that by the start of the academic year everything is in place. Everything is in orderly in this way you find that the school function normally”* Mr. Nduna from school A.

At the end of the current year, there must be planning for the following academic year. This shows the proactiveness of school management. Consequently, the school has stability and proper functionality at the commencement of the new academic year. Planning is one of the management functions.

Data reveal that SMT members must network with other school managers.

*“Also, the SMT must consult with other SMT of other schools so that they will get the information. They must attend all the workshops that are conducted by the department to equip them to function better at their various levels”* Mr. Nduna

Networking with management of other schools plays an integral part in providing solutions in problems facing the school. The idea is that schools do things differently. Hence, getting ideas

from other schools might assist in addressing academic decline in schools that seem to be experiencing a decline.

Mrs. Zimu added that teachers need to be professionally developed.

*"I think educators have to be professionally developed to improve the quality of teaching and learning"*

It is the responsibility of school management to encourage teachers to attend workshops and all other initiatives aimed at developing teachers. This is because to maintain good academic performance, teachers need constant professional development.

Data show that school management creates conducive environments for learning to take place.

*"Management also must create climate that is conducive to learning so that everyone within the school will be part of the winning combination. And the school in most cases is what the management is. In Afrikaans they always say 'die plaas soos 'n die bas' the farm is just like the owner of the farm"*  
Mr. Manzini from School A.

Hallinger (2023) opine that school principals create a climate for teaching and learning to occur. This was evident when the participant emphasised the importance of creating a conducive environment by ensuring that everyone becomes part of the planning. Hence, findings indicate that the school reflects that type of school management.

## CONCLUSION

The study intended to understand the reasons for academic decline in secondary schools. The findings from participants provided compelling evidence that school leaders are alive and understand the reasons that trigger the academic decline in the schools they lead. There are multiple factors that contribute to academic decline in schools. As a result, the findings revealed that school management has suggested numerous strategies they can employ to arrest the reasons for academic decline.

### Value of the study

The study may help school leaders to understand the reasons for academic decline so that they can be proactive in avoiding factors that might cause academic decline. It might also inform other stakeholders such as teachers, learners and provincial Department of Education to guard against any practices that can hinder school academic achievement.

### Limitations

The study cannot be generalized as it was conducted in a few schools located in Ugu education district in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The schools chosen had excellent academic performance. However, they begun to decline in the past few years.

### Recommendations

The study recommends continuous professional development of school principals on strategies to address any signs of academic decline in their schools. The Department of Education must organize workshops to equip school management and teachers to be aware of negative factors that might trigger academic decline in schools.

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### Author bios

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