

‘Reculture, Don’t Restructure’: Propositions to Improve Learner Achievement in Underperforming Schools in Mopani West District

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Abstract: *A contemporary literature spells out reasons why underperforming schools fail. Schools labelled “underperforming” are generally characterised by the lack of a culture of performance caused by poor leadership. The panel of circuit managers who conducted accountability meetings with underperforming schools in Mopani West District made the similar observation. Thus, the panel made a significant proposition to consider “recturing” underperforming schools instead of “restructuring” them. The proposition to approach school reform from the lens of “reculturing” was appealing to the schools and was widely accepted by all the circuit managers as a panacea to underperformance in our schools. This paper focuses on the key features of the culture in underperforming schools and suggest a model with pragmatic reculturing strategies to address the weaknesses. The strategies espoused to achieve a lasting change in underperforming schools can be adopted by any school that is in the process of reculturing. The reculturing model emphasises the role and action of individual principal in initiating and guiding the process of reculturing. Therefore, effective leadership becomes an active precursor of reculturing in schools to improve learner achievement.*

Keywords: *Restructuring, moral purpose, strategic leadership, performance management, instructional leadership*

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite a historical improvement in performance registered in the 2022 Grade 12 examination, Mopani West District still has over 20% of its schools underperforming. Within South African context, a school is deemed underperforming if it has failed to achieve a pass rate of 65% in Grade 12 (Matric). These schools have been failing to deliver a good educational experience for learners for all these years. Data show that these schools have moved through various stages of decline until their ability to accomplish their primary goals of providing quality education to learners diminishes. Accordingly, Harris and Jones (2022:1) assert that “school failure tends to be a steady and often predictable downward spiral rather than a sudden plummet in performance”. There is always a pattern of these schools steadily moving through various stages of decline. Therefore, disruption of a steady decline is always perfectly possibly given the early warning signs.

In Mopani West District, one of the strategies undertaken to disrupt the steady decline of underperforming schools is team accountability sessions. The main key drivers of this strategy are the circuit managers. The central objective of these sessions is not a ruthless judgement on underperforming schools nor to exert external pressure for school to perform no matter what but is to gain a holistic view of the culture existing in underperforming schools. This informs the development of appropriate or tailor-made support programs to the schools. While we acknowledge that “there is no uniformity about underperformance and there is no silver bullet to address it” (Meyers & Darwin, 2017), this strategy is believed to be the reason behind the reduction of underperforming schools in the district in 2022. Therefore, data presented in this study are obtained from the accountability sessions conducted in five circuits in 2023.

2. RECULTURING AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Several studies have found that there is a direct relationship between school leadership and learner achievement (Smith & Hoy, 2007, Taylor, 2008, Harris & Jones, 2022). Smith and Hoy (2007:556) state that “Good schools are a function of strong principal leadership”. Similarly, Harris and Jones (2022) espouse that school leadership is the key contributor to the improvement of underperforming schools. They argue that “Schools in all circumstances improve when there is clear leadership, a focus on learning and teaching and a consensus among staff to work together to create a culture of change.” Moreover, studies that examined school improvement and effectiveness have identified culture as a significance factor that determines school improvement (Deal & Peterson, 1998, Deal, 1993, Fullan, 1991).

Therefore, failure or success of the school is determined by its leadership and culture. In line with the foregoing, Taylor’s (2008) study found that a culture of complacency is an explanation of why South African schools are underperforming. Culture is the “deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the course of a school’s history” (Deal, 1993, 83). Culture is simply the “the way schools do things (Deal & Kennedy, 1983). Unquestionably, learner achievement is mediated by the school culture. Thus, this study posits that school principals who are interested in improving learner performance should focus on changing the culture of their schools. Generally, ‘culture change’ is referred to as “reculturing”. Ong (2000) agrees that sustainable improvements in student learning require reculturing.

Reculturing is “the process of developing new values, beliefs and norms” (Fullan, 1996:421). It involves a reformulation of existing values, beliefs, and attitudes in the school. Schein (1985) asserts that culture can be re-formed in response to new organisational problems. Schools are constantly confronted by new challenges that demand principals to engage in a reculturing process where they reform and explicitly articulate new cultural values. In doing so, new conceptions about teaching and learning will be built (Fullan, 1996). The reculturing process succeeds in schools where principals first understand the existing culture of their schools, then, through dialogue alter the existing culture. Accordingly, Wonycott-Kytle and Bogotch’s (1997) propose that the role of the leader in the reculturing process is to reflect on and question past and present practice in the school.

The foregoing argument signifies that the reculturing is no easy process. Its complexity lies in the fact that it buries deep into the heart of human attitudes and relationships that hold the school together and move it forward (or fail to do so) (Miller, 1998). Therefore, effective change in school culture takes place when principals model the values and beliefs important to the school. Teachers and learners tend to consider and interpret the actions of the principal as what is important. For example, a principal who is seen promoting collegiality makes teamwork an important practice in the school. A principal who acts with compassion and demonstrates commitment to caring for others is more likely to cultivate a school culture with similar values. Likewise, an arrogant and selfish principal places an implicit stamp of approval on selfish behaviors and attitudes in the school.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

Data was collected during the accountability session with 12 underperforming schools in Mopani West District. These schools underperformed in the 2022 National Senior Examinations. Table 1 below presents the summary of the sampled schools:

Table1. *Study Participants*

Circuits	No. of schools	No. of SMT members	No. of SGB members	Pseudonym used to identify schools
Makhutswe	4	17	0	S1, S2, S3, S4
Mawa	2	4	2	S5, S6
N’wanedzi	3	9	0	S7, S8, S9
Rakwadu	1	5	0	S10
Xihoko	2	8	0	S11, S12
TOTAL	12	43	2	

Two distinct yet complementary methods were used to collect data. First, unstructured interviews were conducted with the participants following the PowerPoint presentations by the school principals.

According to Patton (2002), unstructured interviews are informal or natural conversational interviews in which respondents may not even know they are being interviewed. Thus, the panel did not rely on a list of predetermined questions. Instead, it asked unscripted questions and adopted what go with the flow conversation style to understand the SMTs’ experiences. The questions were adapted according to the responses of the SMT and were different for different schools.

Furthermore, key documents from the research context were collected and analysed. Documents serve as powerful indicators for the value system operating in the school (Hatch, 2002). These include “public records, personal papers, popular culture documents, visual documents, and physical material and artefacts”(Merriam, 2009:162). The key documents analysed in this study are given in Table 1 below:

Table2. *A sampling of Documents and Data Analysed*

Documents selected	Data analysed
1. PowerPoint Presentation	Learner performance data for Grade 12 (2022) and Grade 11 (2022), profile of 2023 Grade 12 learners, strategies that worked and those that did not work in 2022, improvement strategies for 2023.
2. Academic Performance Improvement Plan (APIP)	Strategies to improve underperforming subjects.
3. Minute Books (SMT, SGB, Staff Meetings)	Frequency of the meetings, key issues discussed, motions proposed or voted on, activities to be undertaken.
4. Curriculum Journals	Recommendations by the district curriculum advisors.
5. Researchers’ journals	The factual description of the accountability session, the questions asked, what was observed, emotions evoked by the research.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Content analysis was used in this study to “identify core consistencies and meanings” in the qualitative data contained in documents (Patton, 2002:453). The key themes, patterns and categories elucidated through content analysis were corroborated by data obtained through unstructured interviews. This was done to minimise bias and establish credibility. A rigorous analysis of data obtained through document analysis and unstructured interviews facilitated a deeper understanding of the role of school culture in learner achievement. Generally, findings point to lack of effective leadership as a cause for underperforming culture in the selected schools. Below I discuss five signs of underperforming culture in the 12 selected schools.

4.1. Lack of Strategic Leadership

The findings demonstrated the inefficacy of school principals to implement strategies developed at different levels. Literature shows that strategic leadership is one of the key drivers of effective strategy implementation (Collins, 2001, Kaplan & Norton, 2004). S1, S8, S9, S10 and S11 presented strategies which are not context-based. These schools presented a more generic strategies that do not consider the unique context (past, present and future) of the schools. A grievous issue that emerged from data was that S1, S4, S6 and S10 (Chronic underperforming schools) presented the similar strategies they presented the previous years in their Academic Performance Improvement Plan (APIP). Furthermore, there was a serious disjuncture between the strategies presented in the Academic Performance Improvement Plan (APIP) and those that the principals of S2 and S10 presented by PowerPoint. The obvious explanation for this inconsistency could be the principals’ failure to lead school analysis and respond to challenges with pragmatic strategic plans. The findings also show that the Strategic Plans for S2 and S10 were not discussed with other SMT members and School Governing Bodies. The schools’ leadership in these schools do not understand the value of strategic leadership and how it is related to learner achievement. Generally, the school principals were not able to convince the panel that they can provide the strategic direction in their schools, hence, the schools are underperforming.

4.2. Low Academic Optimism

The international studies point to academic optimism of schools as a collective property of the school culture which is directly related to learner achievement (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006, Goddard, Sweet land & Hoy, 2000, Hoy, Hoy, & Kurz, 2008). One of the key components of academic

optimism is academic emphasis. Academic emphasis is “the extent to which the school is driven by a quest for academic excellence – a press for academic achievement” (Hoy et al., 2006, p. 427). Hoy (2012) states that schools with academic emphasis (academic push) set high, but achievable goals for learners, teachers believe in the ability of their learners to achieve, and the learners respect academic goals. Generally, there was no evidence of the existence of academic optimism especially academic emphasis (internal push for excellence) in underperforming schools. This was evident in the mediocre academic goals set by S1 and S10. In his presentation, principal of S3 seemed oblivious about the curriculum implementation challenges in his school. Principal of S10 demonstrated low academic optimism in his presentation until the deputy principal was summoned to come and present strategies for the school. Similarly, the principal of S1 got emotionally charged when one of the panel members jokingly pointed out that perhaps the principal should consider prayer as his academic strategies are unconvincing and do not consider the school context.

4.3. Ineffective Performance Management

Armstrong and Baron (1998: 45) argue that an organisation that practises performance management clearly communicates its vision to all its employees; sets individual and departmental performance targets that are related to wider objectives. They further assert that the performance targets are expressed in terms of measurable outputs, accountabilities, and teacher development or training. In view of the authors’ assertions, no school in the study presented evidence that school’s targets are linked to school vision. There was also no evidence of the existence of departmental and individual teacher and learner targets in all schools. Thus, academic accountability was only based on the performance of the school, not of the departments. It was limited to principals accounting to the circuit managers for not meeting school targets. Due to unavailability of departmental targets, departmental heads were not called upon to account to the principal or deputy principal.

4.4. Broken School Accountability System

Harris and Brown (2013) describe school accountability as a process of communicating assessment results to parents and the community. Similarly, Maile (2002:326) argues that school accountability “involves reporting to other people voluntarily or compulsorily”. The interesting findings in this study is that S1, S10 and S4 failed to transparently communicate or share learners’ performance data (Matric results) with the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and other legitimate stakeholders. There was also no evidence that the strategies in the Academic Performance Improvement Plans (APIPs) were shared and discussed with parents. A critical component of accountability is answerability. Thus, Lello (1993:1) argues that accountability entails “being answerable to other stakeholders”. In practical sense, the principal was not answerable to the SGB and other stakeholders. This is indicative of schools with crumbled accountability system.

4.5. Lack of Technological Innovation

None of the schools mentioned the integration of technology as a strategy to improve learner performance. This signifies the lack of technological innovation in the schools. In S1, S2, S3 and S4, there was no budget allocation for technological resources such as laptops and projectors. There were PowerPoint design issues which point to the principals’ lack of critical digital skills. In S5 and S6, there was an overcrowding of slides in which too much content was included on one slide. The content even overflowed outside the slide borders. Furthermore, there were discrepancies regarding data presented by the school principals of S4 and S7. The two principals confirmed that they did not verify the data as they were not the ones who populated the slides. The principals’ lack of simple digital skills demonstrates the challenge that needs immediate intervention if schools are serious about culture change.

5. PROPOSITIONS FOR RECULTURING UNDERPERFORMING SCHOOLS

Taking into cognisance the findings of this study, I offer five propositions to aid underperforming schools to reculture their schools. It is postulated that the reculturing of the underperforming schools has a potential to gear the district up to achieve its 90% target as embodied in its “Tshaba re Pudhe” (Give way) campaign.

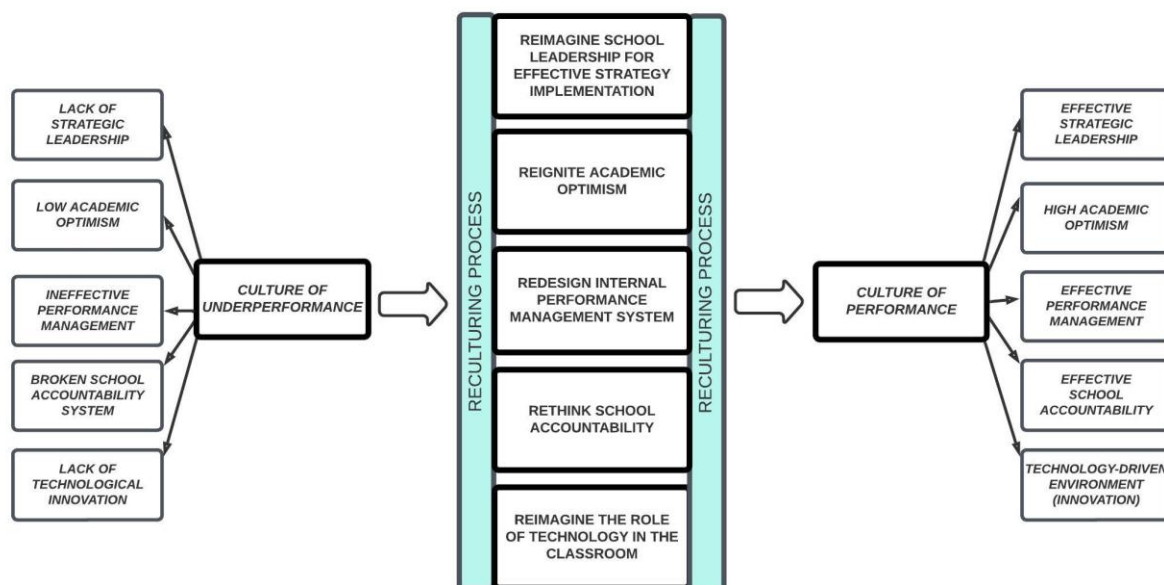


Figure1. Reculturing process for underperforming schools

5.1. Reimagine School Leadership for Effective Strategy Implementation

Lack of strategic leadership by the top management, has been identified as one of the major barriers to effective strategy implementation (Kaplan & Norton 2004:277; Hrebiniak 2005: 17). Strategic leadership relates to “the initiation, development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of strategic actions within an educational institution, taking into consideration the unique context and availability of resources, physical, financial and human (Eacott, 2006:1). Strategy is a template against which to assess current action, or a path, direction or plans crafted by school to achieve its set goals. However, a strategy shall have no effect if not effectively implemented. Therefore, empowering school principals to become strategic leaders should be a point of departure in the reculturing process. This will ensure that context-based strategies are developed and effectively implemented to improve school performance.

5.2. Reignite Academic Optimism

The secret ingredients in performing schools are a culture of high academic expectations (academic emphasis), culture of collective efficacy and culture of trust. Hoy, Tarter and Woolfolk, 2006 refer to these three cultures as three tightly interwoven components of academic optimism that reinforce each other to influence learner achievement. Schools with a culture of high academic expectations or academic emphasis have high demands for all their learners and offer strong, individualised support in ensuring that every learner achieves at a high level. Generally, there is an academic “push” or academic press for excellence in these schools. School principals are capable of translating vision statements into strategic goals that address the learning in all subjects, and teachers and learners embrace the strategic direction provided by the leaders. A culture of collective efficacy refers to the collective belief in the capacity of the school to produce excellent results in all grades. According to Goddard et al. (2000), collective efficacy is the judgment of the teachers that the school has capacity to execute actions or plans that can have a positive effect on learners. Bandura’s (1993) study found that schools with strong sense of collective efficacy flourished academically than those that had serious doubts about their collective efficacy. Finally, a culture of trust is when the school have confidence in parents that they will support its programs and trust learners that they will work hard to achieve the academic targets. Therefore, to address the challenge of performance, principals should reignite the academic optimism by cultivating the culture of high academic expectations, collective efficacy and trust.

5.3. Redesign Internal Performance Management System

One of the critical steps in reculturing underperforming is the creation of a continuous improvement plan. This plan should be aligned with high academic expectations for learners, effective instructional strategies and data analysis to monitor effectiveness. Schools with effective internal performance

management system are characterised by the existence of a focused Professional Learning Community (PLC) with clearly established expectations for teacher collaboration and a results orientation which requires that teachers monitor learner achievement results. In these schools, job embedded professional development involves participation of teachers in collaborative teams, mentoring, coaching, peer observations and sharing opportunities. These are key indicators for effective performance management system. Another important element of performance management system is reporting of academic performance. School leadership should consistently report learner performance to the SGB and schedule time for data analysis in collaborative team meetings. Therefore, the school should have a system in place to collect, analyze and report student achievement data at the classroom, grade, school, and district levels.

5.4. Rethink School Accountability

Accountability has always been viewed as a significant factor that influences some aspects of school culture and it is associated with learner achievement (Maile, 2002, Ordofa, & Asgedom, 2022). Researchers have described school accountability in different ways based on their motives and the contexts of their studies. Accountability is viewed as an educational reform that applies standards that learners must achieve and calls on schools to be accountable for the results (Kim, 2018). I advocate for a result-based accountability where schools and teachers are ranked based on learner performance. In this accountability system, schools and teachers are judged as effective or ineffective based on the number of learners who are rated above, at or below the set standard (Ebbeler, Poortman, Schildkamp & Pieters (2016).

Therefore, school accountability system that can improve learner performance begins by predetermining standards (e.g., setting targets) to hold stakeholders accountable for learning outcomes (Ordofa, & Asgedom, 2022). This system can’t only be used to evaluate school performance based on learner achievement, but it can also serve as a means of motivating stakeholders in the school. For me, school accountability is a data-driven activity aimed at improving learner achievement. To strengthen accountability, underperforming schools should establish School Accountability Committee to serve as advisory team that looks at school targets or goals and supports parent engagements to drive school improvement plan. This committee should ensure that academic performance expectations are met.

5.5. Reimagine the Role of Technology in the Classroom

Reculturing for performance challenges the SMT to rethink the role of technology in the classroom. The starting point for an integration of ICT in the classroom is the development of Technology Implementation Plan (TIP). Ramalepe’s (2021) study offers critical considerations for integrating technology which can play a significant role in the development of the TIP. The first consideration is that schools should address the problem of limited digital or technological resources. Goktas and Yildirim’s (2009) discovered that lack of software was one of the barriers to integrating ICT in teaching and learning. Therefore, schools should prioritise the purchase of practical software, smart boards, projectors and laptops. The second consideration is that schools should provide continuous professional development training for teachers. Several other studies have also recommended that teacher training ought to be prioritised to integrate ICT effectively in schools (Bitner & Bitner, 2002, Ifenthaler & Schweinbenz, 2013, Kopcha, 2012). Teachers ought to be trained on how to select and align appropriate ICT resources or tools with their pedagogy to teach prescribed content effectively (White & Geer, 2013). Deepening the teachers' understanding of ICT resources and their practical applications in the classroom is critical in ICT integration.

6. CONCLUSION

School leadership and school culture interact to improve learner achievement. Therefore, this study concludes that reculturing is a way of helping underperforming schools improve by reforming the existing values and attitudes in schools. The propositions offered in this study can be adopted by all schools which are serious about improving learner achievement.

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