

**RHODES UNIVERSITY**

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

**The role of the principal as school leader in maintaining academic standards in the schooling of at-risk learners: A case study at a school in the Northern areas of Port Elizabeth**

Submitted by

**Karen Ann Draai**

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Masters in Education  
(Education Leadership and Management)

January 2011

## **Abstract**

Many disadvantaged schools in South Africa are characterised by poor performance, which is often linked to the legacy of the apartheid regime. Yet, some disadvantaged schools are surviving and even producing excellent results. Many successful businessmen, politicians and academics can attest to the success of these schools, being a product of such schools.

Leadership, which has received a lot of attention in recent years, are often the cause of schools failing to produce the expected results. Previous studies have shown that leadership is the key to academic excellence and that to lead disadvantaged schools to success requires strong leaders with moral purpose, who possess qualities of transformational leaders, but also leaders who can focus on instructional leadership practices.

This study focuses on the role of leadership in maintaining academic standards at a school in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth. The school has a proud tradition of good academic performances and has even been labelled as a 'model C school in the northern areas'. It has been found that teachers are committed and hardworking and the principal is perceived as having expecting high expectations for the children of the area. He believes as an educator one should never give up on the children.

The study found that the principal is a strong leader who shows characteristics of a transformational leader and has the drive of an instructional leader to lead the school and to maintain academic standards. He is a well-respected leader who leads with moral purpose and who has the desire to uplift the community. The study has the potential to provide guidance and encouragement to school principals, and to inform the Department of Education's leadership training programmes.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank and acknowledge the following people:

- ❖ God Almighty for granting me the strength and wisdom to complete this study and who carried me through the difficult times.
- ❖ My supervisor, Prof Hennie van der Mescht for his patience, support and professional advice. Thank you for not giving up on me.
- ❖ My husband Benjamin for supporting me and for encouraging me to keep going and to complete my study. Thank you for believing in me.
- ❖ My children, Kevin, Jonathan and Alexander. Thank you for the sacrifices you made while I was busy with the study.
- ❖ My parents Lena and George Booysen for always praying for me. Your prayers accompanied me throughout my study. Thank you for your support and love.
- ❖ The participants of this study for sharing your experiences with me.
- ❖ Thank you to my fellow students for the encouragement and comradeship.

## DECLARATION

I, Karen Ann Draai, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own work, and that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Contents

Chapter 1 .....	1
Overview .....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Context .....	2
1.3 Goals of the study.....	3
1.4 Research approach.....	3
1.5 Outline of the thesis.....	4
Chapter 2 .....	6
Literature Review .....	6
2.1 Introduction.....	6
2.1.1 Defining at-risk learners .....	7
2.1.2 The effects on education .....	8
2.2 Leadership Theories .....	11
2.2.1 Traditional approaches.....	11
2.2.2 Contemporary leadership theories.....	12
2.3 Organisational Culture.....	18
2.4 Leadership Styles .....	19
2.5 Leadership is the key element in school effectiveness.....	20
2.6 Characteristics of resilient schools.....	22
2.7 Conclusion.....	24
Chapter 3 .....	26
Methodology.....	26
3.1 Introduction.....	26
3.2 Research Paradigm .....	26
3.3 Research Methods .....	27
3.4 Qualitative Research.....	28

3.5 Phenomenology.....	29
3.6 Sampling Techniques .....	29
3.7 Data Gathering Tools .....	30
3.7.1 Interviews.....	31
3.7.2 Observations.....	32
3.8 Analysis of Data.....	32
3.9 Ethical considerations.....	34
3.10 Limitations .....	34
3.11 Conclusion .....	35
Chapter 4 .....	37
Data Presentation .....	37
4.1 Introduction.....	37
4.2 The Respondents .....	37
4.2 The Respondents' profile.....	38
4.2.1 Jp: The grade 12 learner.....	38
4.2.2 Hp: The Head Prefect .....	39
4.2.3 Miss One: The post level I teacher .....	39
4.2.4 Ms H: Head of Department.....	39
4.2.5 Mr X: The deputy principal .....	40
4.2.6 Mr P: The Principal .....	40
4.3 The School.....	40
4.3.1 Success stories.....	41
4.3.2 A clean environment.....	41
4.3.3 A Safe environment.....	42
4.3.5 Opportunities.....	44
4.3.6 Academic work .....	44
4.4 The community .....	46

4.5 Teachers.....	47
4.6 The learners.....	48
4.7 The principal .....	49
4.8 Summary.....	53
Chapter 5 .....	54
Discussion of Findings.....	54
5.1 Introduction.....	54
5.2 The principal shows characteristics of a transformational leader.....	54
5.3 The principal shows characteristics of an instructional leader.....	57
5.4 The principal shows characteristics of distributed leadership.....	58
5.5 The principal is a strong leader who is autocratic.....	60
5.6 The principal is a motivator, inspires high work ethics and lead by example.....	62
5.7 The principal cares about the community and is well-respected.....	65
5.8 Creating a positive organisational culture .....	66
5.9 Conclusion .....	68
Chapter 6 .....	71
Conclusion.....	71
6.1 Introduction.....	71
6.2 Summary of the main findings.....	71
6.3 The potential value of my research .....	74
6.3.1 Recommendations for practice.....	75
6.3.2 Recommendations for further research.....	76
6.4 Limitations of my study.....	76
References .....	78
Annexures.....	84

# Chapter 1

## Overview

### 1.1 Introduction

Many historically disadvantaged schools in South Africa are characterised by poor academic performance. This phenomenon has become such a common picture that some people *expect* learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, also known as ‘at-risk’ learners, to fail academically. Christie (2001) relates the conditions in disadvantaged schools to poverty, material deprivation and disruption of communities characteristic of apartheid, and the two decades of almost continuous protest in rejection of Bantu Education.

Brown and Pollitt (1996) found that tests of vocabulary, reading comprehension, arithmetic and general knowledge reveal much lower scores among children lacking proper nutrition, and lower nutritional levels are directly related to level of poverty. According to Hawkins (2001), poverty is a prevailing risk factor that multiplies the likelihood those children will be exposed to several other risk factors, which impacts negatively on early brain development, ability to learn and quality of later life. Yet, despite this legacy of disadvantage and neglect some high poverty schools continue to survive, some better than others. Furthermore, schools are under enormous pressure to increase academic performance. One of the key factors in schools that seem to do better than merely survive seems to be leadership and this is the focus of my study.

According to Ruff (1993) students are referred to as at-risk when certain factors are present, for example, low socioeconomic status, language and cultural differences, dysfunctional family situations, and residence in disadvantaged communities. Where students are experiencing one or more of these factors, the probability is higher that they will drop out of school and/or fail academically. A large part of the northern areas of Port Elizabeth, which are home to what is previously known as the “coloured” people, can be seen as disadvantaged because of the high level of poverty and unemployment. I am particularly interested in the schools of the northern areas because I grew up there and I have been teaching there for most

of my teaching career. Many schools in this area experience high drop-out rates and absenteeism, as well as low academic achievement.

Yet, it seems a common phenomenon world-wide that some schools are able to function effectively in spite of these and other problems. This phenomenon has been a popular subject of research in recent years (National Commission on Education, UK, 1996, Christie 2001) In the findings of a national research project carried out in 1997 to investigate schools that were surviving against the odds, Christie and Potterton with others found that, generally, among other findings, the principals of the schools in the study were strong managers and leaders and this seemed to be a determining factor. Another study done in the USA by Reeves in 2003 focused on schools that were overwhelmingly poor and learners who come to school with academic skills that are below grade level. The consensus is that effective teaching and leadership made the difference in the performance of these schools.

It is with this in mind that I have opted to investigate the role of the principal as school leader in a purposively selected disadvantaged school.

## **1.2 Context**

The focus of my study is on one such school in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth. I looked specifically at the final matric results of the schools in the northern areas for the past 5 years. This particular school has been obtaining final matric pass rates of 75% and more; some years even above 80%. I do realize that matric results is not the only measure by which the success of a school can be determined, but it has been generally accepted as a measure for academic success, albeit with its limitations. Another striking feature is the fact that the school is able to provide a safe, clean and orderly space for teachers and learners to work in. When entering the school campus one gets a feeling of 'work in progress', i.e., very few learners wandering around, all teachers in their classrooms busy teaching, minimal noise and professional service from the secretaries. How does this happen? And what is the role of the leadership in bringing about these conditions? These are the questions that gave rise to my study.

School leaders play a major role in determining how effectively schools are responding to challenges. Not only must they attend to issues of survival, but also of academic excellence. The essence of leadership is achieving results through people. If a leader is to accomplish results through others, he or she must adopt leadership styles and practices that capitalize on the talents and skills and create organizational conditions under which people are motivated to do their best (Smith & Piele, 1989). With my study I wanted to verify whether this is what is happening at Excel high school.

The potential value of this research is that it may contribute to the research that has already been done on the teaching and learning of at-risk learners. It may inspire other school leaders who are in similar situations to apply some of the strategies to improve teaching and learning at their schools. It will also provide a platform for further investigation.

### **1.3 Goals of the study**

The aim of this research was to understand the role of leadership in maintaining academic standards in a school for at-risk learners. To achieve this goal, I looked for answers to the following questions:

- What are the perceptions of the teachers and learners regarding the role of leadership in academic achievement?
- What other factors – apart from leadership – are identified as playing a role in the success of the school?

### **1.4 Research approach**

This case study was conducted in the interpretive paradigm. I probed into the perceptions of the teachers and the learners of Excel high school with the intention of understanding the subjective world of their human experience. The main theme of interpretivism is to derive meaning from the reality of multiple sources in a specific context. I employed multiple strategies to interact with sources, so as to derive meaning from the realities of the participants. I did not just look for opinions, but also how teachers and learners experience the leadership at the school and how, through the leadership, they are motivated to perform their tasks effectively.

To achieve my research goal I did a qualitative case study. Yin (2003) describes a case study as an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

Since this method is about focusing on small groups in their natural setting, I interviewed the principal, a deputy principal, a Head of Department (HOD), a post level 1 teacher and two learners. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. I purposefully selected this school, because it is situated in a low socioeconomic area accommodating many of the learners in the area and is known for producing good academic results. I relied on multiple sources of evidence, using triangulation for convergence in the data, in order to address the validity of the data. Semi-structured interviews and observations were primarily used in data collection, while document analysis was a secondary instrument in generating data. The use of three instruments to collect data helped in confirming the data.

### **1.5 Outline of the thesis**

The thesis is set out in the following way:

In *Chapter one* I present a general overview of the research. The overview gives an outline of the research goal, research site, the research approach, sampling and my motivation for doing this study. The chapter captures the essence of my research.

*Chapter two* looks at the theoretical framework underpinning my study, looking at how leadership theories have evolved, as well as how leadership has an impact on school effectiveness. I reflect on the challenges faced by leaders in disadvantaged schools and the challenges faced by disadvantaged children in their social environments. Since leadership practices play an important role in establishing the working culture at schools I also discuss this topic. The main purpose of the literature is to provide a background in understanding the role of the leadership in maintaining academic standards at Excel high school.

In *Chapter three* I give an outline of the research methodology used in finding answers to my research questions. I discuss the research method, paradigm and the data gathering methods used. The study is a qualitative case study in the interpretive paradigm, which requires the use of certain research methods. Thus, I explain and justify the use of these methods. I discuss how data was gathered and analyzed, as well as the ethical implications. I address the limitations of the study and how I was guided to make my findings reliable and valid.

In *Chapter four* I present the data collected from interviews, observations and document analysis. I introduce the respondents and try to, as far as possible, make their voices heard. The data is presented in categories according to the importance of the issues in the data.

In *Chapter five* the main findings are discussed extensively, making use of the relevant literature to interpret my findings. I focus on the key threads which was uncovered in chapter four. In this chapter I try to make sense of the data in terms of my research goal and questions, which was to determine, from the data, the role of the leadership in maintaining academic standards at Excel high school.

In *Chapter six* I provide a summary of the main features of the study, referring to the context, literature, data analysis and discussions of the findings. I also highlight the implications and limitations of my study and make recommendations for further practice and research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### 2.1 Introduction

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the aim of my research is to investigate the role of the principal as school leader in maintaining academic standards in Excel High School which accommodates at-risk learners. The rationale behind this study is to investigate which strategies are employed by the leadership in bringing about and maintaining academic achievement in a school where most learners are disadvantaged by different factors.

The Task Team Report [TTR] (South Africa. Department of Education [DoE], 1996) found that the crisis in many South African schools, which can be attributed to the legitimacy of the education system as a whole, is characterised by poor management and the collapse of teaching and learning. Apart from the factors which contribute to the fact that disadvantaged learners generally do not perform well academically, there is also the issue with ineffective leadership. Many studies have shown that in schools where the leadership is effective, the learners will perform better. Effective leadership bring about a culture conducive to better teaching and learning. The seminal study called Fifteen Thousand Hours (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979) suggests that academics and policy-makers become more interested in the variables that influence school performance and be less concerned with social conditions.

In this chapter I set up a theoretical framework exploring all the different aspects which make up my research.

I thus begin by looking at what constitutes the term 'at-risk' learners, after which I look at leadership theory. Then I discuss leadership as the key element to effective schools. For disadvantaged learners to do well takes more than just keeping the school going. It also requires extra effort on the part of the teachers and the leader of the school and an understanding that they are dealing with children with social problems. They must have

sympathy with the problems these learners are dealing with, but at the same time motivate them to do well academically. To make schools more responsive to at-risk students they must have appropriate academic and non-academic programs and services for learners in order for them to achieve academically and respond to a higher calling to uplift the learners.

It thus takes an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning to get learners focused on doing well academically as well as a supportive environment which would recognise their social problems and sympathise with it. In my overview of leadership theory I refer to traditional leadership approaches, instructional leadership, transformational leadership, leadership styles and organizational culture. These aspects will assist me to understand why this school is performing well in spite of the fact that they are accommodating 'at-risk' learners. These theories help me to understand and explain the perceptions of the teachers and learners at Excel high school. In the next section I look at the term 'at-risk' learners.

### **2.1.1 Defining at-risk learners**

Schools are under tremendous pressure to produce good results, irrespective of the context in which they find themselves. It is not always possible to refer to the present and the future without referring to the past. What happened in the past influence the way we do and see things in the present and how things will be done in the future. I therefore refer to a statement by Christie (2001) that many historically disadvantaged schools in South Africa are characterized by poor performance, which can be related to poverty, material deprivation and disruption of communities, characteristics of the apartheid era, and two decades of almost continuous protest in rejection of Bantu Education. Learners in such schools are often referred to as "at-risk" learners.

Ruff (1993) describes students as being at-risk when certain factors are present, for example, low socioeconomic status, language and cultural differences, dysfunctional family situations, and residence in disadvantaged communities. Where students are experiencing one or more of these factors, the probability is higher that they will drop out of school and/or fail academically. Brown and Pollitt (1996) found that tests of vocabulary, reading comprehension, arithmetic and general knowledge reveal much lower scores among children

lacking proper nutrition, and lower nutritional levels are directly related to level of poverty. According to Hawkins (2001), poverty is a prevailing risk factor that multiplies the likelihood that child will be exposed to several other risk factors, which impacts negatively on early brain development, ability to learn and quality of later life. It is common knowledge that children who are affected by one or more of these factors often have difficulty gaining access to basic education and experience coping academically.

From the description and categories given by the Namibian Ministry of Basic Education, Sport, and Culture [MBESC] (2000) of 'educationally marginalised' children I have compiled a list of possible conditions that may qualify children in South Africa and specifically at Excel high school as at-risk:

- children who have to learn in a language that is not their mother-tongue
- children who grow up with foster parents (including orphans)
- children who live in poverty where one or both parents are unemployed
- children who live in a community characterised by crime, neglect and poverty
- children affected by HIV / AIDS
- children living in child-headed families

In the next section I look at the effects on their education.

### **2.1.2 The effects on education**

According to the British National Commission on Education [NCE] (1996, p.3) educational disadvantage means the denial of equal access to educational opportunities, the tendency to leave education at the first opportunity, and the hindrance of achievement by social and environmental factors. By the age of five, children are already very differently placed in terms of the extent to which they are able to benefit from primary education. Socio-economic and family background factors have been shown to be important influences upon pupils' educational achievements at all stages of their school careers (NCE, p.3). Disadvantage both limits access to educational opportunities and reduces the ability of children to benefit from the schooling that they do get. Yet, some schools are getting it right to lead these disadvantaged learners to academic success.

Poverty is the main factor listed by the NCE as contributing to lower attainment, because it affects the income and the amount of money being spent by families on learning resources such as books, or learning opportunities such as outings and holidays. Poverty can also be the result of unemployment or low income. Furthermore, the NCE argues that the schoolwork of impoverished children is affected in different ways.

Firstly, their homes are often overcrowded and lack quiet space for homework and reading. Coupled to that is the fact that parents often have lower levels of education and parenting skills, which means that they are often not in a position to help their children with their school work. It would also imply that children are less likely to have a secure mastery and understanding of language, due to reduced reading opportunities at home and lack of stimulation.

Secondly, the environment is conducive to health problems, causing frequent absenteeism from school, thus resulting in learners losing out on valuable learning time and creating gaps in their intellectual development.

There are more factors related to poverty which could have an effect on the schooling of at-risk learners, but I have focused on those which would be more relevant to the learners at Excel high school.

According to the NCE these disadvantages accumulate and reinforce one another, so that their collective impact is even greater than the sum of the individual effects. It is thus obvious that the odds are stacked against schools in poorer areas and that they have to deal with more than just delivering the curriculum.

Disadvantaged children are often found to suffer from malnutrition. Poor children may also have specific micronutrient deficiencies, particularly iron deficiency anaemia, which is known to affect cognitive functioning, which reduces their ability to pay attention, concentrate, learn and remember and therefore diminishes the benefit of their school attendance (Pollit, Gorman, Engle, Matorell & Riviera, 1993). Furthermore, the NCE (1996,

p.1) found that “the gap in educational performance between schools in advantaged and disadvantaged areas is wide and increasing and that these children could be as much as two years behind their peers in a middle-class area in terms of their experiences and skills”.

Dealing with children who are disadvantaged is a worldwide problem and therefore there are similarities in the effect on their education. In 1995, almost a full quarter of American children under age three lived in poverty—and this in the most prosperous nation in the world. This fact combined with its implications for early brain development supports recent research that concludes that substantial achievement gaps exist between affluent and poor children even *before* they start school. These achievement gaps persist after entry to our educational systems, and quite often are exacerbated during the educational process (Hawkins, 2001).

It is thus clear that teaching disadvantaged children poses a set of challenges for teachers and leaders in schools. In addition to the challenges that exist even before a child enters school, there are additional challenges they are faced with while they are in the process of learning. Some of the additional challenges are:

- Peer pressure, often resulting in drug and alcohol abuse and gangsterism.
- Teenage pregnancies, which can result in dropping out of school and further financial hardship.

These factors contribute to the reasons why children drop out of school and/or fail academically. Coupled with these is the inability of schools to cope with failing students as well as with their social problems.

It is thus important for schools to be able to cope with surviving, educating learners who have social problems and see to academic excellence. This implies that the leadership in these schools need to understand and respond to the challenges they are facing. Some school leaders are able to face up to these challenges and bring about academic success in their schools.

The next question would be what kind of leadership is required to bring about academic success and what would be the strategies to employ to make schools places where especially

disadvantaged learners can succeed. Firstly I refer to leadership theories and how leadership has evolved over the years to the kind of leadership which is required today.

## 2.2 Leadership Theories

This section highlights how times have changed and what would have worked for leadership in the previous century would not be working for this century. Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999, p. 3) argue that productive leadership depends heavily on its fit with the social and organizational context in which it is exercised. I want to emphasise the point they make by saying that as the times change, what works for leadership changes also.

The evolution of leadership thinking from the 1920's to the early 2000's can serve as a lens in which to think about school leadership in the modern context. For the purpose of this study I focus on leadership as it is referred to traditionally and then contemporary perspectives of leadership. Traditionally, leadership focused on the person and the characteristics which defined a 'good' leader. Later on the emphasis moved to the situation in which the leader finds him- or herself, and finally the focus moved to the relationship between the person and the situation. I firstly refer to 'trait theories'.

### 2.2.1 Traditional approaches

'*Trait theories*' - also referred to as the 'great man' theories - were popular in the 1920's and were concerned with the attributes and the characteristics of successful leaders. Certain traits such as intelligence, self-confidence, high energy levels and dominance were characteristics which were regarded as qualities needed to make them into good leaders and set them apart from other people in general. There was, however, little consistency in this thinking, as, by the late 1940's no conclusion could be reached regarding the connection between a particular trait and leadership effectiveness (Wu, n.d.).

After the search by previous approaches for universal characteristics of leaders was inconclusive, the *contingency* approach around the 1970s recognized dependency of leadership effectiveness on organizational situations. This approach emphasizes contextual factors influencing leadership processes, such as characteristics of environment, subordinates

and tasks (House, 1971 cited in Sing Tng, 2009). Contingency theories are a class of behavioural theory that contend that there is no one best way of leading and that a leadership style that is effective in some situations may not be successful in others.

This may be particularly relevant to South African schools where the contexts are so different; some schools are so impoverished that it is a daily struggle to keep natural elements at bay, while others teach with the best resources at their disposal. The majority of schools in South Africa are still battling to make ends meet because of lack of resources, such as, funds, learning materials and teachers. In many cases these schools are faced with learners who have to cope with social problems, such as unemployment, violence in their community and many more factors which put them at a disadvantage. It has been shown, however, that some of these schools are performing well in spite of their adversities. One may argue that it would be difficult or impossible to 'prescribe' an ideal leadership approach in these circumstances, so the notion of contingency theory makes sense.

The next question would be: in the light of how leadership was viewed in the past, how is it viewed today and what are the answers to leading a school to academic excellence? I firstly look at contemporary leadership theories.

### **2.2.2 Contemporary leadership theories**

Senge cited in Leithwood et al. (1999, p. 3) observed approaches to leadership which respond productively to the complexity of the challenges faced today by many organisations, the radically altered expectations that employees bring to their work and the considerably greater respect that has developed for the capacities of people throughout organisations to think productively about their missions and how these can be addressed. The writers admit that there is no final word on what good leadership is about, but argue that transformational leadership is a sensible point of departure for better understanding changing leadership for changing times. Leithwood and Duke (in press) also argue that most contemporary approaches to leadership are evident, in one form or another, in the leadership approaches of up to 50 years ago.

The implication is that leaders, in their quest for organisational success, should not be regarded as individuals in charge of followers, but as members of a group or community who have to exert their influence in such a way that members work towards a common goal and

take responsibility for the outcomes that they want to achieve. Leaders have to make the most of the abilities of the people in the organisation and deal with the challenges of an ever changing society. According to the TTR (South Africa. DoE, 1996) new education policy in South Africa requires managers who are able to work in democratic and participative ways to build relationships and to ensure efficient and effective delivery, which is different from the autocratic leadership which was promoted in the past. There is a lot of emphasis on transformation in educational leadership, which is discussed in the next section.

### *2.2.2.1 Transformational Leadership*

Much effective school research over the past two decades has concentrated on examining the relationship between the leadership behaviour of school principals and the enhancement of organisational performance (Shum & Cheng, 1997). Johnson, Livingston, Schwartz and Slate (2000) suggest that principals have the ability to indirectly effect student achievement by improving the tone or learning environment of a school. Previous studies have shown that many successful schools have leaders who show characteristics of transformational leadership.

A model by Hallinger and Heck (1998) illustrates that the variable of the principal's role is assumed to be both a dependent and an independent factor. As a dependent variable, the principal is subject to the influence of external antecedent factors such as socioeconomic status, or prevailing external environment conditions such as technological change. As an independent variable, the principal is considered to be the agent of change, influencing directly the actions of teachers, the learning conditions within the school, and the attainment of outcomes such as teacher job satisfaction and indirectly, student learning outcomes. From the above it can be said that the leadership of Excel high school where I did my study is influenced by the low socioeconomic status of the community, but also acts as a change agent which influences the teaching and learning conditions within the school in order to maintain academic standards.

Furthermore, transformational leadership is hypothesised to occur when leaders and followers unite in pursuit of higher order common goals, when "one or more persons engage with

others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (Burns, 1978, p. 20). The leader motivates followers to "work for transcendental goals instead of immediate self-interest, for achievement and self-actualisation rather than safety and security" (Murray & Feitler, 1989, p. 3), and creates within followers a capacity to develop higher levels of commitment to organisational goals (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

The students are the people who would ultimately benefit from transformational practices. A transformational leader wants to create a comfortable and accepting environment, which would be beneficial to disadvantaged learners who often are neglected. Studies have shown that students who participate in sports and extra-mural activities perform better in school socially and academically. It increases their self-esteem and helps them identify with education. This could be one of the reasons why the learners at Excel high school are performing well, as there are many sporting and cultural activities which they can partake in.

Raising followers to a higher level of morality in order to achieve organisational goals also implies that the leader leads with a moral purpose, which is discussed in the next section.

#### *2.2.2.2 Leading with moral purpose*

Kanungo and Mendonca (1998) describe moral and ethical leadership as behaviour that influences followers' values, beliefs, and behaviours so organizational objectives can be achieved through the followers. Fullan (2001) explains that moral purpose means working with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of people in the society. This implies that if a leader wants to make a difference in the community which he or she serves, then he or she has the intention of leading with moral purpose.

This would mean bringing about improvements in the school to make schooling more effective. The NCE (1996) has found in their study that principals of successful schools want to keep on improving their schools.

A qualitative study done by Maldonado and Lacey (2001) regarding moral leadership, defined moral leadership as leading by example, taking a stand, speaking out, calling forth the best in others, and/or following one's own and/or prescribed definitions of right and wrong. The qualities identified by participants as constituting moral and ethical characteristics include humility, listening, and personal truthfulness as well as actions related to justice. In the educational set up leaders in disadvantaged settings are often the voices of those they serve. By setting high expectations and by inspiring moral values in schools they are fulfilling their moral obligation to the community as a whole.

Taking into consideration the history of South Africa, and the legacy of disadvantage and neglect left behind, especially in schools, it is important that school leaders strive to uplift the communities which they serve, in other words, lead with moral purpose. Kanungo and Mendonca (1998) claim it is a leader's ethical conduct guided by moral principles and integrity that gives legitimacy and credibility to the vision of the organization.

Leaders do more than just influence people's actions; they inspire trust and commitment in order to create a positive environment in which organisational goals are achieved. Since leaders also provide direction I discuss instructional leadership in the next section, as instructional leadership is regarded in many studies as one of the key features of effective schools.

### *2.2.2.3 Instructional Leadership*

Research has shown that the main focus in high-performing schools is on instructional practices. At high performing schools it is clear that academic excellence is highly prized. One cannot walk in the halls without noticing evidence of academic achievement, like trophies, certificates and photo's of top achievers, as is the case at Excel high school where I did my study. The instructional leader gears all activities at the school towards high academic achievement.

In current research, instructional leadership integrates behaviours which define and communicate shared goals, monitor and provide feedback on the teaching and learning process, and promote school-wide professional development. Defining and communicating

shared goals include activities that focus attention to the technical core of schools. These goals increase the effort exerted by school members, increase persistence, and increase the development of strategies (Locke & Latham, 1990). Instructional leaders consistently make decisions with these goals in mind. The shared goals of a school promote group unity and help provide for a climate characterized by academic pressure to perform, trust and commitment.

Monitoring and providing feedback on the teaching and learning process include behaviours that develop around the academic curriculum. Principal activities may include being visible throughout the school, providing praise and feedback to teachers about classroom and professional growth activities, providing praise and feedback to students about classroom performance or behaviours, and ensuring uninterrupted instructional time. Instructional leaders that monitor the teaching and learning process do so for the purpose of professional growth for the teacher and administrator, not evaluation (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2001). Instructional leaders focus on ways of improvement to obtain the shared goals of the school, with the main aim on creating a culture in which teaching and learning can flourish. The success of any organisation depends on the structures which are in place and the people who have to interact in these structures. Leaders thus need to distribute leadership in different areas, which is discussed in the next section.

#### *2.2.2.4 Distributed Leadership*

According to Spillane (2005) distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice, rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines and structures. He argues that leadership practice is viewed as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers and their situation, with the emphasis on interactions.

Spillane (2005) acknowledges that leadership practice involves multiple leaders, thus implying the necessity to distribute leadership across the school. It has become clear that no single leader can solve all the problems or answer all the questions in an organisation, but a team of people, all exercising leadership, can achieve so much more.

MacBeath (2005) argues that distributing leadership is premised on trust, and headteachers, trusting others to deliver, feel the pressure of accountability from external sources, thus taking a risk for which they personally pay the price. According to MacBeath (2005) this also implies teachers' mutual acceptance by staff of one another's leadership potential. He argues that distribution implies an ability to relinquish one's role as the ultimate decision maker, trusting others to make the right decisions.

It is not always evident that distributed leadership is being practised if we do not know about the different levels at which it can take place. MacBeath (2005) describes distributed leadership as a developing process, in which leaders understand all the forms of 'distribution' and have the ability to operate at each level according to the task at hand. According to MacBeath some of the ways in which work can be distributed are through designated job descriptions, on an ad hoc basis, through planned appointment of individuals and the basis of teachers being willing and capable to take leadership roles.

Whatever the basis on which leadership is distributed in a school, leaders do not have answers to all the problems and have to involve people in getting the work done, which implies encouraging teamwork and relinquishing power to others even in small ways.

Once the leadership responsibilities have been delegated, the principal attempts to build a culture of performance by controlling and monitoring the progress of tasks, up to a point where they can perform without the supervision of the principal. In some schools leadership functions go ahead even if the principal is not around.

Distributing leadership in a school goes together with mutual trust, risk taking and accountability. It also takes an enormous amount of character for the principal to 'let go' of some of the power and not to take credit for all the successes at the school. Ultimately, the school and the learners will be the benefactors of a climate where people are more confident and valued as members of the organisation. This will affect the culture of the organisation, which is discussed in the next section.

## 2.3 Organisational Culture

To understand the role of the leadership in the school where I did my study, it is important to understand the culture which exists at the school. Each school has its own distinctive culture, which depends on the values, beliefs and norms of the members of the organisation. Schein (1968) describes organizational culture as a set of rules that evolves over time, related to the norms of a particular group. Individuals within an organizational culture act consistently within their culture, thus having an impact on the work of the people within the organization.

Reeves (2006) makes the link between organizational culture and leadership by stating that it would be difficult for organizational cultures to be successful in education without competent, positive and creative leadership. Schein (1992, p. 1) makes the correlation between leadership and culture by stating:

When one brings culture to the level of the organization, one can see more clearly how it is created, embedded, developed, and ultimately manipulated, managed and changed. The dynamic process of culture creation and management are the essence of leadership and make one realize that leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin.

It is thus clear that if there is a culture of success at a school, then the leadership of the school has a direct influence on it. That the principal is a key player in the failure or success of a school to establish an effective organisational culture is acknowledged by the following:

In many ways the school principal is the most important and influential in any school...It is his leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for learning, the level of professionalism and morale of teachers and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become (United States Senate, Select Committee on Equal Education Opportunity, 1972, pp. 305-307).

The challenge for principals is to ensure that their schools have a vision that teachers, students, and community members can make a part of their daily lives. Positive school culture is required for a school to be successful. Administrators, teachers, and students must have common values that hold them together as a unit or body. In order for a visionary leader to understand where their school and their school culture fit into this model, they must also be able to assess the negative or toxic cultures that may exist at their school (Deal & Peterson, 2001, p.87).

## 2.4 Leadership Styles

When leadership is being studied in a certain context, it is important to look at leadership styles. Leadership styles refer to methods used by various leaders to provide direction, make decisions and implement plans, in other words, it refers to the way he/she leads the organisation.

In the past, the way leadership was defined has evolved from the very classical autocratic approach to the very creative, participative approach. It was determined that not every style is particularly good or bad, but that different styles were needed for different situations. In 1939 Lewin, Lippit and White identified 3 types of leadership styles: i.e. autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire. Another basic leadership style that can be distinguished is the bureaucratic. The following is a brief outline of the 3 leadership styles identified by Lewin and his colleagues which are relevant to this study.

The autocratic leader holds on to as much power and decision-making as possible. Subordinates are expected to obey orders and decisions without any input. The leader makes all the decisions and there is a definite structure for rewards and punishment. This type of leadership style is believed to cause the most unhappiness among members, but was regarded in the past as being the most productive leadership style. Some believe that this style can be used in certain situations, especially when quick decisions have to be made.

The democratic leader encourages his/her subordinates to participate in decision-making. Members of the organisation are kept informed about things which affect them as workers and their share in problem-solving and decision-making. The leader still has the final say, but members are consulted before a final decision is made. This style is believed to be effective in boosting morale among members and promotes cooperation in the organisation. There is a high level of trust and team spirit among the members of the organisation.

The bureaucratic leader believes in doing everything according to procedure or policy. The leader is seen as someone who is there to enforce rules and regulations. People do what is

expected of them and no more. There are rigid structures which dictate the responsibility of each position in the organisation.

There are diverse, complex situations in schools that demand diverse leadership skills (Oyetunyi, 2006, p. 39). It is required of the leader to assess the situation and choose the leadership style appropriate that will be effective for the situation. Hurley (2001, p. 26) argues that head teachers are the answer to a school's general development and improvement in the academic standard in that an effective head teacher creates an environment that stimulates enthusiasm for learning. This implies that if the principal is effective and uses an appropriate leadership style, he/she will create a positive learning atmosphere and inspire the staff and learners to do their best.

In the next section I look at leadership as the key element for school effectiveness.

### **2.5 Leadership is the key element in school effectiveness**

There is great interest in educational leadership in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is because of the widespread belief that the quality of leadership makes a significant difference to school and student outcomes. In many parts of the world, including South Africa, there is recognition that schools require effective leaders and managers if they are to provide the best possible education for their learners. As the global economy gathers pace, more governments are realising that their main assets are their people and that remaining, or becoming competitive depends increasingly on the development of a highly skilled workforce. This requires trained and committed teachers but they, in turn, need the leadership of highly effective principals and the support of other senior and middle managers (Bush, in press).

In understanding what effective leadership is about, it is important to understand what school leadership is about. Bush and Glover (2003) propose that leadership is a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired outcomes. They suggest furthermore that successful leaders develop a vision for their schools based on their personal and professional values and that this vision is articulated at every opportunity, influencing their staff and other stakeholders to share the vision. According to them, the philosophy, structures and activities at the school are geared towards the achievement of this shared vision. Although the term 'leadership' is generally understood as the intentional influence of a person over a group of people to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organisation, it does not

explain what goals or actions should be sought through this process. The 'what' and 'how' is what determines whether the leadership is effective in an organisation.

Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006) sum up by saying:

Effective head teachers provide a clear vision and sense of direction for the school. They prioritise. They focus the attention of staff on what is important and do not let them get diverted and sidetracked with initiatives that will have little impact on the work of the pupils. They know what is going on in their classrooms. They have a clear view of the strengths and weaknesses of their staff and know how to build on the strengths and reduce the weaknesses. They can focus their programme of staff development on the real needs of their staff and school. They gain this view through a systematic programme of monitoring and evaluation. Their clarity of thought, sense of purpose and knowledge of what is going on mean that effective head teachers can get the best out of their staff, which is the key to influencing work in the classroom and to raising the standards achieved by pupils.

Sergiovanni (2001, pp. 130 – 133) believes that the role of leadership is to maintain the school community's energy and nurture the core purpose of increasing the ability of all children and preparing students for the future. He has developed 8 principles as a guide to developing leaders who are able to create school communities that thrive in complex times of change, namely, focusing on instructional excellence, valuing connections, developing an awareness of what is going on inside and outside the community of the school, considering problematic issues from many angles and addressing it at all levels, be resilient, encouraging leadership at the school, enjoying the challenge of leadership and continue to learn. He believes that leaders make the difference in establishing and maintaining successful schools.

It is thus clear that being the head of a school takes more than just having a vision. It is important to gain the commitment of others to that vision and then to ensure that it shapes the policies, plans and day-to-day activities in the organisation. While many school heads are more concerned with managing and implementing government policies and focusing less on improving teaching and learning, previous research has shown that principals of successful schools often takes on the role of instructional leader, purposefully improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Since this study focuses on a school which achieves against the odds, it is appropriate to consider other factors which are common to schools regarded as 'resilient' schools. In the next section some of these factors are mentioned.

## **2.6 Characteristics of resilient schools**

A study done by the NCE about 11 schools in the UK regarded as disadvantaged and other researchers such as Pam Christie found similarities in disadvantaged schools where teaching and learning were found to be effective, which are referred to in this section.

It is evident that most schools which operate in impoverished environments are still not performing well, in spite of the fact that we are 15 years into a democracy in South Africa. Most of them have buckled under difficult conditions, such as, lack of resources, minimum funding from the DoE, lack of support from parents and DoE, social problems in the communities, etc. There are, however, those schools that have been able to provide quality teaching and learning in spite of operating under similar conditions. These schools are regarded by Pam Christie (2001) as having survived against the odds and have been labelled as 'resilient' schools. Excel High school has a good track record of academic excellence in spite of accommodating learners mostly from the low socio-economic area of Harpville.

Some of the characteristics of these 'resilient' schools include:

- Being able to provide a safe and orderly environment for the teachers and learners in spite of the fact that the schools are situated in unsafe neighbourhoods.
- Making teaching and learning the main focus of the organization.
- Having high expectations for all learners irrespective of their backgrounds.
- Well-organised programmes of teaching and learning.
- Maximum teaching time.
- Taking responsibility for themselves
- Strong managers and leaders who are actively involved in activities at the school.
- Principals who care about the school as well as the community.
- Commitment of staff and learners.
- A positive organizational culture.

- Good discipline structures in place to deal with offenders as well as follow-up procedures.
- Principals who are transparent, responsible and accountable

It is thus clear, from the previous sections that apart from the normal challenges principals are faced with, these challenges intensify when a school accommodates students who can be classified as at-risk. It has also been shown in previous studies that “schools are able to address successfully some of the problems that they face, particularly if they are able to harness energies within the school and draw what resources they can from their immediate communities” (Christie, 2001, p. 62).

What sets Excel High School apart from other disadvantaged schools in previous studies is that the school also provide additional opportunities for learners to participate in that are normally only found in former model C schools, like, public speaking, international exchange programs, national competitions, etc. There is a concerted effort to put the school on the map and to provide opportunities for these disadvantaged learners to excel in activities which were previously regarded as exclusive to privileged learners. This speaks clearly of high level of leadership and of high standards being maintained.

Previous researchers have found that schools in these conditions are not problem free, in fact, they have to battle with problems just like other schools, like, lack of funding, shortage of teachers, violence threatening to spill over to the schools, etc. What is important is that these schools are applying strategies that make them successful. At the heart of it all is effective, strong leadership who is instrumental in establishing a positive learning and teaching environment in which learners can be successful in whichever path they choose and committed and hard working teachers who care about the learners and the community they serve.

I hereby provide a summary of the chapter before I proceed with a discussion of my methodology in chapter 3.

## 2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have identified who the at-risk learners are, i.e., some of the factors which put learners in the category of disadvantaged learners. I have also discussed the effects of these factors on their learning. Disadvantaged learners are a worldwide phenomenon which has prompted many research studies. Some countries have special programmes to deal with this problem, such as Australia and Canada who provides special funding to help alleviate the plight of disadvantaged learners.

The next topic focuses on leadership theories which underpin my study. As contemporary leadership refers to the need for a less traditional leadership approach to schooling, I have started out by referring to traditional approaches and moved on to how leadership is viewed currently. I have pointed out how theories have evolved and how school leadership is understood today.

A current theory is transformational leadership. The transformational leader influences his/her followers with the aim of higher order goals of morality and commitment. The emphasis is on the process rather than on the direction of influence. This type of leadership is based on the premise of trust, which is also the core ingredient for distributed leadership, which was discussed in the next section. I have discussed the different ways in which leadership is distributed. Distributed leadership is practised in all organisations, as the leader cannot be regarded as a person with all the answers and need to rely on others to help with the smooth running of the school. This requires an element of trust, because, although the leader is held accountable for everything that takes place at the school, he has to trust others in carrying out the different tasks. I have also discussed how leaders leading with moral purpose are fulfilling their moral obligation to the communities they serve.

It is important to focus on the instructional leader, as my study can be understood in terms of the instructional leader, who focuses all activities towards high academic achievement. The instructional leader is always looking for ways to improve the organisation by monitoring the progress of teachers and learners.

The organizational culture of the school depends on the structures that exist at the school and the way things are done. The leader is the key player in establishing a positive culture so that effective learning and teaching can take place. He/she is instrumental in directing activities at the school so that organizational goals are achieved.

Leading a school in a specific direction will also depend on the personal style of the leader. Different situations require different leadership styles. Research has found that a combination of different styles is needed to tend to the different situations as they arise. I have discussed the autocratic, bureaucratic and the democratic styles of leadership.

In the next section I discuss leadership as the key element in school effectiveness. My discussions in this section confirm the findings of Christie (2001) in her study of 32 black disadvantaged schools from seven provinces in South Africa. She found that these schools have succeeded against the odds because of certain leadership behaviour.

The final section deals with characteristics of resilient schools and a brief overview of research findings. The important aspect is that the schools that formed part of previous studies do have challenges like any other schools in similar situations, but that they deal with issues effectively and that the leadership of the schools go the extra mile in establishing a positive culture for teaching and learning to take place. They recognise the fact that disadvantaged learners need an environment where their needs are met and where they can be successful. These schools have strong leaders and committed teachers and learners whose main focus is academic achievement and improving on their practices.

In the next chapter I will be discussing the methodology that is appropriate in achieving my research goals.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### 3.1 Introduction

As mentioned in previous chapters, my aim with this study is to investigate the role of the principal as school leader in maintaining academic standards in a school for at-risk learners in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth. In chapter 2 I discussed the literature relevant to my study. In chapter 3 I discuss how the data was gathered, analysed and interpreted. Later in this chapter I discuss the ethical considerations and the limitations to the study. A qualitative research methodology was used for the study in order to gain the perceptions of the participants in the role of leadership at Excel High School.

#### 3.2 Research Paradigm

Paradigm is a Greek word which refers to the way in which we understand and interpret our world (Covey, 1989, p. 11). According to Morrison (cited in Coleman & Briggs, 2003, p. 18) all educational research should be grounded in people's experiences not as facts but as a construct in which people can understand reality in different ways and this is why I chose the interpretive paradigm.

Interpretists base their views on the Hegelian perspective that 'humans can only understand the world as it appears to them – not as it really is' (Janse van Rensburg, 2001, p. 16). According to Cohen and Manion (1994, p. 36) the interpretive paradigm identifies and understands the subjective world of human experience where efforts are made to get inside the person and to understand from within, which makes it appropriate for my study to be done in the interpretive paradigm, as I explored the participants' subjective experiences and understanding of the leadership of Excel High School. The epistemological understanding, according to Cantrell (1993, p. 83), is that the events are understood through the individuals' mental process of interpretation, which is influenced by and interacts with social context.

This implies that the researcher has to engage with the parties involved to find out how they perceive and experience the researched area, which in this case refer to the role of leadership at the school in making learning and teaching effective so that high academic standards are achieved. It is with this in mind that I interviewed teachers and learners at the school.

### **3.3 Research Methods**

I have opted to do a case study conducted at a high school which accommodates learners who are referred to as 'at-risk' learners. In chapter 2 I gave an extensive definition of those learners who can be regarded as at-risk learners. My aim was to probe the experiences of the participants in order to understand the role of the leadership in maintaining academic standards at the school.

Bassey (in Coleman & Briggs, 2002, p. 109) defines an educational case study as an empirical enquiry which is:

- Conducted within a localized boundary of space and time
- Into interesting aspects of an educational activity, or programme
- In order to inform the judgements and the decisions of practitioners or policy-makers
- Sufficient data must be collected for the researcher to be able to explore and interpret the data, present a worthwhile argument which is trustworthy and enables other researchers to add or challenge it.

According to Anderson (1998, p. 152) a case study can be described as an approach that deals with contemporary events in their natural setting. By doing my study at the school I had the opportunity to study events as they occurred, i.e., in their natural setting. I have selected this school, because of its high academic achievements, in spite of being situated in one of the most impoverished areas in Port Elizabeth. Pam Christie refers to these schools as "having survived against all odds". My main focus is on the leadership of the school.

Another feature of a case study is described by Robson (cited in Winegardner n.d.) as a relevant method in seeking answers to the research questions concerned with the 'why' and 'how'. With this study my aim is to investigate how the leadership brings about effective learning and teaching at the school and what the motivating factors are.

With this case study I do not aim to find rules which should be generalized as defined by Anderson (1998, p. 152), but rather to probe the experiences of the learners, teachers and the

principal in this specific context so as to understand how academic standards are maintained, which can be used for further studies in schools with similar conditions.

### 3.4 Qualitative Research

A qualitative research design was found to be appropriate for the study that I conducted, as I wanted to study the experiences and perceptions of the participants in their natural setting.

Neuman (2003, p.139) states that a qualitative researcher conducts detailed examinations of the cases that arise in the natural flow of the social life of the participants. The focus of the study was to investigate the experiences, perceptions and challenges of the participants in order to determine the role of the leadership in maintaining academic standards in a school accommodating at-risk learners. To answer the research questions, qualitative research methods were employed, such as semi-structured interviews, observations and journal notes.

Struwig and Stead (2001, pp. 12-17) maintain that qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the issues from the perspective of the participants and that the researcher and participant are both involved in the qualitative research process, whereby the researcher tries to understand and interpret the perspective of the participant. Henning (2004, p. 3) states that in a qualitative study the “variables” are usually not controlled because it is exactly this freedom and natural development of action and representation that we wish to capture.

According to Babbie (2007, p. 270) the key features of qualitative research are the following:

- The main aim is an in-depth understanding of the participants and events.
- The study is done in the natural setting.
- The focus is on the process rather than the outcome.
- The researcher is seen as the main instrument in the process.
- The participant’s perspective is emphasised.

With this study the researcher has attempted to report on the findings as truthfully and objectively as possible in order to preserve the value and the importance of the information gathered from the participants.

### **3.5 Phenomenology**

Phenomenology refers to a person's perception of the meaning of an event, thus attempting to understand people's perceptions, perspectives and understandings of a particular situation and then make some generalizations of what something is like from an insider's perspective (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 139).

The researcher spent time at Harpville High School, doing observations and making journal notes as well as interviewing the participants in their natural setting. My aim was to explore the meaning they gave to their everyday lives by spending as much time as possible in their world. I spent a week at the school intensely observing, taking notes and interviewing the participants in order to understand the role of the principal as leader in maintaining academic standards at the school as seen through the eyes of the participants.

### **3.6 Sampling Techniques**

Qualitative researchers draw their data from a variety of sources. The particular entities they select comprise their sample, and the process of selecting them is called sampling (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 144). Leedy and Ormrod (2005, p. 145) state that if you want to draw inferences about an entire population or body of objects, then you must choose a sample that can be presumed to represent that population or body. Furthermore, Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 370) argue that qualitative researchers seek out individuals groups and settings where the specific processes being studied are most likely to occur.

The school where the study was done was chosen because it is situated in one of the most impoverished areas of Port Elizabeth and is well known for high academic achievements, specifically its high matric pass rate. The researcher is interested in finding out why some schools are performing well in spite of certain risk factors like socioeconomic status, language and cultural differences, dysfunctional families and residence in a disadvantaged community. The researcher informed the school of the purpose of the study by presenting the research proposal to the principal and by explaining why this particular school was chosen.

Another factor is that the school is easy accessible to the researcher, being situated in Port Elizabeth.

More often, qualitative researchers are intentionally non-random in their selection of data sources. Instead, their sampling is purposeful (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 145). The researcher purposefully selected this school, because the majority of the learners at the school reside in the community of Harpville. Furthermore, the school is known to be performing well in spite of the fact that most of the learners can be classified as 'at-risk' learners. The school is known as having delivered well known professional people and has a tradition of academic excellence.

Five people were interviewed. The principal was interviewed and the questions were based on how the school is managed and lead, as well as what strategies are used to ensure that effective teaching and learning takes place. The other 5 respondents were an HOD, a post level 1 teacher, one of the deputy principals and two grade 12 learners. The HOD is a female teacher who was a learner at the school and has been teaching at the school for 25 years. The deputy principal has been in his position at the school for 16 years and could give a rich account of how things are being done at the school. One of the learners is the head prefect, who resides in a more affluent part of the northern areas, but could give the perspective from someone who is an excellent learner who excels in all aspects of the school. The other learner comes from the community of Harpville and could give an account from the perspective of someone who resides in the area, but is also performing well in spite of his hardships. By selecting people who represent different aspects of the school, the researcher has ensured that the perspectives of the various role players are gained. These respondents were purposefully selected in order to provide rich data and to ensure reliability of the results.

### **3.7 Data Gathering Tools**

The tools which were used in the gathering of data were mainly observations, semi-structured interviews and journal entries during visits at the school. Documents which were looked at were a yearbook, planning documents and the mission and vision statement of the school. These tools were used in developing the understanding of the strategies employed by the leadership in bringing about effective teaching and learning at the school, which in turn leads

to high academic achievement. With these tools it was possible to explore the challenges experienced in leading the school to academic achievement as well as the challenges in dealing with a community riddled with social problems. Before the data gathering permission was obtained from the Department of Education, the principal, who is the gatekeeper and the participants (see Annexure A). The nature and objective of the study was explained to the participants in advanced. Observations were done at each visit and journal notes were kept. Semi-constructed interviews were conducted with the participants, which were recorded.

### 3.7.1 Interviews

I decided on semi-structured interviews because “interviews can yield a great deal of useful information related to facts, people’s beliefs and perspectives about the facts, feelings, motives, present and past behaviours, standards for behaviours and conscious reasons for actions or feelings” (Silverman, 1993). The interviews helped the researcher to understand how the respondents experience leadership at Excel high school and how they interpret the actions taken by the leadership to establish an environment conducive for academic success. My aim was to “attempt to understand the world from the participants’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences and to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanation” (Sewell in De Vos, 2002, p. 292).

The interviews were conducted in a quiet place where discussions could take place without interruptions. An effort was made by the secretary to provide a comfortable and private venue. Great care was taken by the researcher to avoid pitfalls like presenting his/her own perspectives, teaching and preaching and avoiding awkward questions. Field and Morse (1994) as cited in De Vos (2002, p. 295) warn against these pitfalls during interviewing. The researcher was aware about the verbal as well as the non-verbal communication during the interview process. The researcher established “a secure and friendly relationship with the respondents so that confidential information could be obtained which the individual may be reluctant to put in writing and also stimulated insight into their own world in such a way that insights are gained that were not initially anticipated” (Best & Kahn, 2003, p. 232).

The recordings of the interviews were translated, where necessary, and transcribed directly after each session and transcriptions were presented to the interviewees for verification and corrections.

### **3.7.2 Observations**

Observations were done during school visits to determine the overall performance of the school. This involved observing the physical appearance of the school, reception, attitudes of staff and learners, behaviour of learners and interpersonal relationships, as well as happenings outside the school gates. Great care was taken not to disturb the participants as they went about their everyday life, because, "Observation in qualitative research occur in naturalistic contexts" (Struwig & Stead, 2001, p. 100), and observation represents a holistic approach to the observation of everyday events and the description and construction of meaning" (Moyles, 2002, p. 172).

I made sure that I was at the school during different school times, i.e., at the beginning of the school day, during first break and during second break on different days. I moved around the school at the end of periods to observe teachers and learners. I also spent time in the staff room and in the reception area in front of the principal's office, as well as during an assembly. I wanted to make sure that the data gathered through observation enabled me to "enter and understand the situation that is being described" (Patton (1990), cited in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 305). I used observations, together with interviewing to make the information reliable, as "studies that rely on interviewing as a method to collect data, can use methods to observe body language and other gestures that give meaning to the words of the person that is being interviewed" (Angrosino in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 229). Journal notes were kept during observations.

### **3.8 Analysis of Data**

According to Mouton (2005, p. 108) data analysis involves the breaking up of data into manageable themes, patterns, trends and relationships, which aims to understand the key

elements in the data. This was achieved by looking at the relationships between various concepts in order to determine possible trends and patterns.

Henn, Weinstein, and Foard (2006, p. 199) argue that analysis starts as soon as data have been collected, which starts with coding after having read the data and common themes have been identified. According to Mc Millan and Schumacher (1993, p. 479) qualitative data analysis is primarily an inductive process, which means that categories and patterns emerge from the data rather than being imposed on data prior to data collection. The main data collection tool was the semi-structured interviews, which were analysed using inductive analysis strategies.

The following steps were followed to analyse the data:

- The researcher listened to the recordings and transcribed the interviews verbatim (in some cases translation had to be done first).
- The researcher read through the transcripts repeatedly and identified topics.
- The researcher identified themes and grouped them into categories.
- Codes were assigned to assist with the coding of data in the transcripts.
- After reading and assembling the information belonging to the same category, the researcher began writing up the report.

The method of analysing the data by using data from the interviews as well as information from the observations and journal notes to form categories is referred to Walsh (2001, p. 69) as 'triangulation'. He refers to triangulation as using multiple methods of data collection to eliminate the weaknesses that exist in different methods. The methods thus complement each other as researchers are able to look at their study from different angles. This is supported by Maxwell (1996, p. 76) who states that the combination of interviews and participant observation enables the researcher to draw inferences about respondents' meanings and perspectives which could not have been possible if interviews were the only instrument of investigation. Observations thus validate the issues raised during the interviews.

### 3.9 Ethical considerations

When human beings are the focus of a study, researchers should be guided by the professional codes of ethics (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 101). I tried to adhere to the guidelines for researchers as described by Leedy and Ormrod (2005, p. 101).

- The interviews were conducted in a private, comfortable venue to provide psychological comfort and avoid embarrassment.
- Participants were informed of the nature of the study before the interviews and were made aware of their rights to withdraw from the study at any stage, as well as the fact that they are under no obligation to participate. Each participant signed a form to give permission to the study. Before the commencement of the study, the necessary permission was obtained from the DOE as well as the principal of the school.
- Participants were assured of complete confidentiality. We agreed that pseudonyms will be used to protect their privacy and anonymity.
- I recorded the interviews by means of a tape recorder, with the permission of the participants, in order to ensure that the findings are truthful.

The researcher took great care to respect individual differences and to conduct the study in a respectful manner. The data was safeguarded and transcriptions were presented to the participants for feedback.

### 3.10 Limitations

The research was done in the form of a case study at a particular school. As the researcher used observations as one of the tools of data gathering, the role of the researcher may gradually change from 'outsider' to 'insider', thus becoming so emotionally involved as to lose the ability to assess the situation accurately (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 137). I endeavoured to always keep in mind my research aim and to familiarize myself with the data after each session.

As a case study may be especially suitable for learning more about a poorly understood situation, its major weakness is that we can't be sure that the findings are generalizable to other situations (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 135). Anderson (1998, p. 134, 152) argues that generalization is not a fundamental component of qualitative research, therefore qualitative researchers should not be bothered by this limitation.

Another limitation to the study is that participants may have found it difficult to speak openly about problem areas at the school. I assured them of the confidentiality of the study and we

agreed that pseudonyms will be used at all times. The researcher established a comfortable relationship with the participants, by showing compassion and interest in the views of the participants and encouraging open discussion, but maintaining neutrality.

Some of the interviews were conducted in Afrikaans and had to be translated into English before being transcribed. The researcher carefully and repeatedly checked the transcriptions against the recordings to make sure of their accuracy and not to lose the essence of the responses of the participants.

Anderson (1998, p. 155) contends that by using multiple sources of data, such as documentation, file data, direct observation, participant observation, site visit and physical artefacts, researchers can present a more comprehensive picture. However, being limited by the fact that the study is a half thesis, I had to limit my data sources to mainly interviews and observations. I have planned to do document analysis, but certain documents which were requested were not made available to me. I focused on those which were readily available, such as a yearbook and displays of planning documents which were pasted on the walls of the office of the deputy principal and principal and the mission and vision statements on the walls of the foyer.

I feel that the data which was gathered and interpreted was done in a meaningful way and can inform other disadvantaged schools battling with similar problems to apply the strategies that will enable them to achieve high academic standards. Being aware of these limitations, and having acted on it, can guide the researcher to more accurate findings.

### **3.11 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have given a description of the research paradigm, i.e., the interpretive paradigm, in which the study was conducted and I justified my reason for choosing this orientation. I have explained on which basis the participants were selected as well as the tools which were used to gather the data and how the data was analysed. I looked at the ethical implications and how these issues were dealt with. I addressed the limitations of the study and how I was guided to make my findings reliable and valid.

In the next chapter I present the data by looking at the perceptions of the participants on the role of the principal as school leader at Excel High School in maintaining academic standards.

## Chapter 4

### Data Presentation

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter is a representation of the data I obtained from the interviews which I conducted and the observations I made during my study. I conducted interviews with the principal, one of the deputy principals, an HOD, the head prefect of the school who is currently in grade 12, another grade 12 learner, who resides in the area, and a post level 1 teacher. With the study my aim was to understand the role of leadership in maintaining academic standards in a school accommodating at-risk learners. The purpose of the interviews was to gain the perceptions of the respondents of the role of the leadership, with the main focus on the principal, in maintaining academic standards at the school. In probing the experiences of the respondents, it was important to look at the culture which exists at the school and which contributes to the academic achievements of the school.

According to Donaldson (2008, p. 1) leadership is about performance. He argues that learning to lead is all about learning to perform among our colleagues so that we collectively are moved to think and act in ways that improve how students learn. This implies that there is a definite link between how the students learn, how the teachers teach, how schools function and how a leader leads the school.

I firstly give a description of each respondent, and then I present the data under headings (or in categories) which I have developed.

#### 4.2 The Respondents

To guarantee confidentiality and anonymity I have used pseudonyms for the 6 respondents. The six people have been purposefully selected to represent the different aspects of the school, namely, the learners, post level 1 teachers, HOD's, deputy principal and the leader of the institution, the principal. In this way I have gained perspectives from various role players at the school, which can help me understand the role of the leadership in maintaining academic standards at the school. The following

pseudonyms, which resemble the roles they play at the school, were given to the different respondents:

1. Grade 12 learner : Jp
2. Head Prefect: Hp
3. Post Level 1 Teacher: Ms One
4. Head of Department: Ms H
5. Deputy Principal: Mr X
6. Principal: The principal

In the case of the school, I will name it Excel High School and the suburb will be called Harpville.

Data gathered by means of my other data collection strategy, observation, are coded by means of reference to entries in my research journal, for example, (Journal entry: 5 May 2010'). My observation was shaped by the following interests:

- What is happening at the school each day?
- How do learners, teachers, the principal and other staff members engage in their activities?
- What is happening around the school?
- The physical appearance of the school.

## 4.2 The Respondents' profile

### 4.2.1 Jp: The grade 12 learner

Jp is in grade 12 at the school and is also a prefect. He is 18 years old and very driven to succeed in life because his aim is to get out of the area, which is riddled by crime and violence. He believes that the only way out is to get a good education. He thinks the school is the best school in the area and thinks very highly of the teachers and the principal. Staying with his mother, stepfather and two brothers, he has firsthand experience of unemployment and the financial difficulties which go with it. Through the difficulties his mother is the person at home who motivates him to study for a better life for himself. He feels that the teachers and the principal at the school do a lot to motivate the children

of the area to work towards a better future. He seems to be a humble boy who shows great appreciation for the role that the school has played in his life.

#### **4.2.2 Hp: The Head Prefect**

Hp is currently doing grade 12 and is the head prefect of the school. He is academically a strong learner and very glad that his parents opted to send him to this school. He is a confident boy who has set out to inspire and uplift his fellow learners. He distinguishes between the Afrikaans learners, who reside in the Harpville area and learners like himself, who reside in the better part of the northern areas of Port Elizabeth. He believes that the school has a good track record in academics and that the school provides many opportunities for the learners. He is proud of the achievements of the school, especially the extra mural achievements, such as winning the poetry competition which he was part of, the overseas student exchange programme and winning the First National Bank (FNB) soccer challenge a few times. He has been selected to attend a leadership programme in America in July 2010.

#### **4.2.3 Miss One: The post level 1 teacher**

Miss One is a post level 1 teacher at the school and has been teaching at the school for 7 years. She is responsible for teaching Life Orientation. She is completely aware of (in tune with) the social problems of the community and of the learners, as she teaches mainly the Afrikaans learners, who come from the area. She tries to keep up to date with how to deal with the social problems by attending workshops, some of them with the principal of the school. She has faith in the teachers of the school and feels that the principal has a good support staff. She comes across as a person who has sympathy with the problems of the learners. She believes that good discipline is the main contributor to the success of the school.

#### **4.2.4 Ms H: Head of Department**

Ms H is the HOD of Life Orientation and Consumer studies, among other subjects. She has been teaching at the school for 25 years and is also an ex- pupil of the school. She feels that the school has good teachers and that the structures which are in place help to maintain the standards. She is the head of the Senior Management Team (SMT) and arranges the meetings. She feels that the principal is too autocratic and has to learn to let go. Ms H feels that post level 1 teachers should be empowered by

working closely with the higher post level teachers in order to learn new skills. Although she is fully aware of the problems in the community, she feels that teachers should not get too involved in the problems of the learners, as their most important task is to educate the learners and to motivate them to stay positive rather than dwell on the negative aspects of their lives.

#### **4.2.5 Mr X: The deputy principal**

Mr X is one of the deputy principals at the school. He has been teaching for 32 years, 16 years as deputy principal at the school, and is retiring at the end of the year. The teachers whom I have interviewed feel that he is an invaluable member of the school and that they would be sorry to see him go. They describe him as someone who 'does a lot for the school'. He is in charge of school administration, for example, drawing up the time tables for invigilation, examinations and day-to-day time tables. He sacrifices part of his holidays to see that the time tables are ready in time for the school to run smoothly. He has sympathy for the learners and tries to motivate them regularly in different ways to work hard for a better future. He has high expectations for them especially where his subject is concerned. He believes that the teachers are very dedicated and hardworking.

#### **4.2.6 Mr P: The Principal**

Mr P has been the principal of the school since 1996 and has been at the school for 36 years. He taught Technical Drawings at the school before he became the principal. He did many courses to qualify him for the position of principal after taking up the position, because of his inexperience. He believes in setting the example, transparency and hard work. People regard him as a strict principal who has high expectations for all the learners. He understands and sympathises with the problems of the community and wants to keep on improving the school for the benefit of the community. Although he is fully aware of the problems of the community and the effects these have on the learners, he believes that he has to keep them focused on the bigger picture, which is working hard for a better future. He is respected for his position in the community and has made an impact on the lives of his past learners.

### **4.3 The School**

Excel High School is situated in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth. The northern area is home to what was previously known as the 'coloured' people. There are a few up-market parts of the northern areas, but this particular area is known for its status as a low socioeconomic area. There are about

1300 learners enrolled at the school, with a little more than half learning in Afrikaans as a first language and the rest in English as a first language. The staff consists of 40 post level 1 teachers, 6 HOD's, 2 deputy principals and the principal. Apart from the normal academic subjects like Biology, Mathematics, Accounting and Geography, the school also offers technical subjects like Technical Drawings, Mechanical Technology and Civil Technology. Computer Applications Technology is also offered as a subject which can be taken up to matric level, thus catering for the learners who want to pursue a career in computers. Consumer studies are also offered at the school as a subject up to matric level.

Jp remarked:

“There are lots of opportunities at the school; each person can practise his or her skills”.

To present a more complete picture of the school I now present the data.

#### **4.3.1 Success stories**

The school has produced many success stories over the years, like doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc. The current vice-chancellor of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), as well as Ms H are both ex-pupils of Excel High School.

Hp described the school as having “a good track record”. This is evident from the number of merit certificates awarded to the school from the DoE for attaining over 70% matric pass rate, gracing the walls in the foyer of the school. I have compared the final matric results of the 14 schools in the northern areas over the last 5 years, and found that this school had the third highest average pass rate. The school which had the highest average is situated and accommodates learners from the more affluent part of the northern areas.

#### **4.3.2 A clean environment**

A striking feature of the school is the cleanliness and orderliness of the school premises, which is in stark contrast to the surrounding area. In my observations in my journal notes I frequently mentioned the cleanliness of the school grounds and buildings (Journal entries: 11 May, 12 May, 4 May). Very few, if any, papers can be seen lying around, even after breaks. A few times that I have visited the school unannounced the cleaners were busy polishing the floors and one cleaner was busy painting the

pots at the entrance of the school. It is clear that a lot of effort goes into keeping the premises neat and clean.

#### **4.3.3 A Safe environment**

Although there are many people walking past the school, very few of them can be seen entering the school premises. I have observed security guards patrolling the grounds and guarding the entrances (12 May). A concerted effort is being made to provide a safe environment for the learners and teachers. Jp had the following to say: “The school is improving every day since the sector patrol started here; they keep the gangsters out.”

Ms One had the following to say about gangsters threatening to come into the school: “There were a few incidents, but not very often.” Ms H remarked: “I’ve been teaching here for 25 years and I was also a pupil here, and so far I can’t say that we had drastic problems. I never feel threatened.”

From what the respondents were saying, there were occasions in the past where the violence, which is prevalent in the community, threatened to spill over, but overall they regard the school as a safe place to teach and learn.

#### **4.3.4 The teaching and learning environment**

Part of the *orderliness* that could be observed is that there was no excessive noise in the school and no learners and teachers were wandering around aimlessly (12 May). The school buildings seem to be in a good condition, contributing to the clean and orderly space (5 May). There are a few notices in the foyer stating that no noise is to be made in the area. There is a sense of ‘work-in-progress’. Each person is task-orientated (11 May). The secretaries deal with the visitors in a friendly and professional manner. They deal with as many of the problems that they can handle in order to avoid calling the teachers out of the classroom. I have observed how they deal with problems of the learners, workers, visitors to the school and making announcements on the intercoms (11 May). Visitors have to make an appointment to see the principal and are not allowed to wander around in the school without the permission of the office. The orderliness of the office of the secretaries speaks volumes of a high level of organisation and effective management.

Maintaining *discipline* is very important at the school. There are certain structures in place to deal with disciplinary problems. It is the portfolio of the other deputy principal to deal with issues regarding discipline. There are detention classes for learners who disobey the rules of the school. There is a guardian system in place, which works like a supervision system for when teachers are absent from school. Each learner has a guardian teacher assigned to him/her, who they have to report to when their teacher is absent. With this system in place learners are never/rarely left unsupervised in classrooms. Miss One summed it up by saying the following:

We try very hard to maintain discipline. My compliments to our deputy principal who handles discipline. He always says that we have to take the school back from the learners. He is always speaking about discipline. Discipline is his passion. Discipline contributes a lot to the success of the school.

There are grade 12 learners who serve as prefects. They do certain duties, like patrol on the grounds and the corridors during breaks and before school to help maintain discipline. The prefects are selected by the teachers on grounds of their academic achievement and behaviour. They are regarded as an extension of the authority of the teachers. It is important to note that there are definite consequences for the learners who disobey the code of conduct, for example, late comers have to stay outside the gates of the school until after the first period (observation, 11 May). They then have to report to the office, where the secretaries deal with them. The guards who patrol the grounds also have to deal with learners who are not in classes. This alleviates the problem of learners loitering around when they have to be in the class.

It is evident that there are certain structures in place to ensure the *smooth running* of the teaching and learning at the school. There is an SMT, which consists of the HOD's, the two deputy principals, two post level 1 teachers and the principal. Certain duties are assigned to the members of the SMT. The deputy principal have their portfolios, one of them dealing mainly with discipline and the other dealing with the administration involved in the planning of the school year, such as the time tables, examinations, etc. The HOD's mainly deal with their subjects and the teachers in their department. The two post level 1 teachers, who are replaced yearly with two others, are on the SMT to learn about management issues. Post level 1 teachers volunteer to be part of working committees at the school, for example, the health advisory committee, the feeding scheme, the safety and security committee, the detention committee, etc.

The principal occasionally patrols the corridors and deals with problems created by excessive noise. He sometimes pops into the classrooms to see how teachers are doing. Although some of the teachers feel that the principal is not doing enough patrolling, they admit that he does it occasionally and that it helps when he is *visible*.

#### 4.3.5 Opportunities

The school provides many opportunities for learners to participate in various activities and boasts many non-academic achievements. According to Hp there is a balance between academics and extra-mural activities. He proudly said:

We won a poetry competition on the PEBCO 3 last year. We've won the FNB soccer challenge this year and last year. Our school wins a lot of stuff. That motivates children to do good and make them eager to get involved. Things like that we do not normally associate with public schools and can do good in it.

Hp mentioned a long list of special achievements, e.g., a boy and a girl who went to the Africa games and Cairo for weightlifting respectively, the school quiz team being runners up in the Herald quiz competition for 2007 and 2008, the debating team coming third in a district competition, student exchanges with other countries, etc.

He also mentioned that the school is the only school in the northern areas to be entered into the tennis league. Apart from these activities, there are sports like rugby, cricket, volleyball and chess.

It seems that the school is abuzz with activities which learners can participate in.

#### 4.3.6 Academic work

The *planning* of the academic year is done on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November in the previous year. Everything is planned on this day for the following year, i.e. academics, sport, extra-mural activities, functions, etc. The principal regards planning as crucial for the smooth running of the school. I have observed the evidence of the planning for the year (journal note: 25 November 2010). All activities and committees are worked out before the school closes for the following year.

The HOD's are in charge of the *quality control* of their respective subjects, but have to report to the principal once a term. According to the principal, question papers have to be handed in to him for checking, after which they will be handed to the relevant HOD. The principal keeps check of

happenings in each department by meeting with the HOD's regularly to discuss issues in each subject. It is also expected of them to hand in mark sheets for all grades and subjects to the principal at the end of each term.

Mr X responded in the following manner on the question of the quality of the subject content that is taught:

The HOD's have regular subject meetings to monitor the work. In certain subjects the HOD sets the tests to keep up the standard. They give a quarterly report to the principal and highlight problems so that it can be addressed. He wants it (the report) in the beginning of each term. He is very adamant about it. At the end of each term the HOD's have to submit a breakdown of the results of the learners.

It is evident from the data gathered from the interviews that follow-up programs are in place for learners who do not perform well. Jp responded: "Extra classes are compulsory for those who did not do well. There will be discussion with parents."

The principal said: "A few years ago I had a situation where all the matrics that failed the June exam had to stay in every Friday till 4 o' clock."

To get a good matric pass rate, *extra programmes* are in place to help them improve their performance. The school implemented Saturday classes for all the matric learners at the beginning of the year. They will also be attending the winter programme organised by the DoE during the school holidays. When the DoE do not have holiday classes for the matric learners, the school organises its own holiday classes. In addition to this, teaching normally starts on the second day of the first term to maximise teaching time.

Another strategy employed by the school to motivate the children to do well academically is the *annual prize giving event*. I received the following responses on the question on how learners are motivated to do well:

Mr X:

We have prize giving ceremonies. It is an achievement for the learners to receive a trophy and to have a photo taken; it gets into our yearbook as well. Learners in the lower grades each get a booklet with their name in it and their achievements in the subjects. It is important for them.

Jp:

They are excited by it (awards event). They want to do good because it will help them in the future.

#### 4.4 The community

The school is situated in the suburb of Harpville (a pseudonym), accommodating mostly learners from this area. It is known for its overcrowding and high levels of unemployment. The houses consist of eight rooms which are divided into four two-roomed apartments which serve as a home for one family. These two-roomed homes house families of up to 10 people or more. In addition there are shacks in the yards of the houses which are home to about the same number of people who stay in the main house. There are always people and children roaming the streets day and night and/or sitting around, although very few enter the school grounds, except for people on school-related business (14 May). Another feature of this area is the high level of gangster activities, giving rise to a high level of crime and violence.

Jp commented: "It is a challenge staying in this area. It is like a war zone. There is a lot of violence. People shoot at each other daily and a lot of people die because of gangsterism".

Unemployment is rife, and many of those people who are employed work as domestic servants, casual labourers and factory workers. Many of the parents of the children are teenagers who dropped out of school when they were pregnant and are thus uneducated. This can be problematic if children need help with their schoolwork. Coupled with these problems, are the high incidences of alcohol and drug abuse. Children from the area are often seen hanging around in the streets (Journal entry: 5 May 2010) and at the nearby supermarket begging for money and food, sometimes accompanied by their parents. The main battle of the majority of the residents of this area is one of survival, mostly of hunger and poverty.

To many people in this area the school is a beacon of hope; a way out of their circumstances and a light in a dark tunnel. Jp responded in the following way when asked whether he thought that this is a good school: "It is the best school. It brought something out in me that I never thought existed. There's so many opportunities".

In spite of all the social problems of the community, there is a sense of respect for the school. The principal described an encounter he had with an ex- learner, who created a lot of problems when he attended school, while walking in the community one day. He said: "I was pleasantly surprised by the

remark he made. Even though we had a couple of run-ins when he was at school, he still showed me respect”.

The fact that he can safely walk in the community shows that there is a lot of respect for the principal and the school in the community. Another factor that shows that the parents support the school is the fact that parents attend meetings, the majority pay the school fees and parents come to the school to discuss problems.

#### **4.5 Teachers**

One of the common themes that emerged in the discussions is that the teachers work hard and are committed to the task of teaching these learners. The principal mentioned that the teachers should get the honours for the success of the school. Hp responded to the question about why people would send their children to this school: “People are hearing of good educators; my grade 8 teacher was my mother’s grade 8 teacher. She is a good teacher.”

Jp commented: “They work hard. They don’t give you a chance to breathe.”

All the interviewees commented on the dedication and commitment of the teachers and how hard they work. Ms H commented: “The staff is a good staff. When the principal is not here, then the school will still go on. You need not stand behind them in order for them to do their work.”

It is also apparent that the teachers understand the problems of the learners and that they sympathise with their circumstances. While working hard and doing their part to make things easier for the learners, they are also motivating them to work hard for a better future. Some of the teachers even bring lunch for the needy children and organise school uniforms for the needy ones by encouraging ex-pupils to donate uniforms to the school. There is a general feeling of wanting to help the learners but also driving them hard to succeed for a better life for themselves.

In between working hard and trying to help the needy children there is also the willingness of the teachers to offer their time for sport and extra-mural activities, as well as entering them for competitions and programs. There is a special effort to organise career expos at the school for matriculants every year.

Miss One and Mr X verbalised their admiration for the dedication and commitment of the teachers at the school. Miss One had the following to say about the factors that contribute to the success of the school:

The teachers are very motivated. I have a lot of confidence in the teachers who are teaching grade 12's. They work very hard. If my own child needed to be taught Accounting, for example, I would take him/her to the accounting teacher at this school. The teachers do their part; the children must realise this.

#### 4.6 The learners

A small percentage of the learners at the school come from more affluent areas in the northern areas (Miss H mentioned about 30%). About 10% resides in the black township and has to learn in English, which is not their mother tongue. More than half of the learners reside in the Helenvale and Gelvandale area.

It is evident from the response of the learners that they have a high regard for the teachers. They respect the teachers and the principal, and appreciate the role they play in their education. One of them mentioned that the principal is a strict principal and that it is necessary for him to be strict because he is the leader of the school.

According to the principal, learners are motivated by their circumstances to do well. He commented:

You will be surprised by the determination you see in the children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. To me they are more determined than the more advantaged learners.

The principal refers to the learners who give problems at school as 'delinquents'. Some of them make it up to matric level and many of them drop out of school.

The learners are faced with many problems in the area. There is peer pressure, drug abuse, teenage pregnancies, alcohol abuse and the unemployment of their parents and guardians, which pose a different set of problems on its own.

In spite of the problems, there are those learners who are ambitious and want to do well. The general feeling is that they realise that a good education is the only way out if they want a better future.

#### 4.7 The principal

The principal is a *strong leader* who believes in following protocol. In my first contact with him he expressed his wish for the correct procedures to be followed before the study is done. Before I even discussed the nature of my study, he insisted that I get permission from the DoE and make an appointment to see him. Learners regard him as a strict principal who would not hesitate to punish learners who disobey the rules of the school. Although some teachers feel that the principal should be more visible, it is clear that teachers are doing what is expected of them and that they are careful not to land up in the principal's office for the wrong reasons.

He has been at the school for 36 years and took over as principal from 1996. He admits that he did not have any experience as a principal, but did all the courses that were offered by the DoE to qualify himself. He does not regard himself as a perfect leader, but is confident that he is qualified to be the principal of the school.

The principal feels that as the leader of the school it is important to *lead by example and be transparent*. He models this, for example, by having regular meetings with the parents to discuss school fees and how the money is spent. He maintains that it is not important for the school to accumulate a big bank balance, but that the money which is collected should be put to good use and spent on what is needed at the school. He feels that the school is reasonably successful in getting the parents to fulfil their financial obligations to the school. The principal arrives at school at 7am every morning, giving him time to do his admin work and planning, thus setting the example of someone who is always on time and prepared for his task.

The principal is regarded as an *autocratic leader*. Miss H expressed her concern over the fact that the principal does not want to endorse decisions if he was not part of it. She said: "I spoke to him and told him that he has to let go."

He feels that he has to be involved with all aspects of the school and decisions taken. He seems to have a tight control of everything that is happening at the school, albeit through the established structures. He insists on regular reports from the HOD's regarding their subjects, teachers and the results of the learners and also has regular meetings with the deputy principals and the SMT regarding activities at the school. It also emerged from the data that teachers feel intimidated by the presence of the principal, especially in staff meetings. A few of the respondents admitted that teachers do not feel free to speak in staff meetings. They mostly voice their opinions via their respective HOD's. The principal said that

he wants people to open up but that they “may feel that if they say something against the principal that the principal will get back at them”.

Coupled to that is the fact that the principal is *actively involved* in most aspects of the school. He monitors the progress of grade 12 learners and is their grade head. In the case of learners who do not perform well, he would arrange supervision for them to stay after school and even stays with them himself. He liaises personally with the principals of the schools who enrol pupils for grade 8 and follow up on the procedures to make sure deadlines are met when it comes to admission of grade 8 learners. In spite of the fact that some teachers feel that he is too autocratic, he feels that whatever happens at the school is his responsibility and that he is accountable.

The principal is *not afraid to tackle problems*. He spoke freely about the problems he had faced in the past with ‘delinquents’ and their parents. He also deals with the problems caused by teachers and is not afraid to call teachers to the office to discuss problems. He attended a workshop on drugs and showed me the drug testing kit which was given at the workshop to test learners for drug abuse. This helps them to deal with the drug abuse problems at the school. The principal shows assertiveness which can also be described as aggression, especially when it comes to collecting school fees. He maintains:

” We correspond with them (the parents) until September, then we call a defaulters meeting where all those who did not settle the school fees attend the meeting. We give them 14 days notice, after which they will be handed over to the debt collectors. People normally pay up when they are handed over.”

The principal believes that one should *never give up*, especially when teaching disadvantaged learners. He said:

My philosophy is that you must never stop trying and I told the teachers the same. In education you can’t give up, otherwise you don’t belong here. You must never give up; never get despondent, because tomorrow another one comes. The one or two you have success with make up for the 5 or 10 you do not succeed with.

This is also evident in the way he keeps on motivating learners to do well and the follow-up action on his part when learners do not perform well. He works out strategies with them, especially matric learners, to improve pass rates. He makes notes on the strategies decided upon and then has follow

up meetings with the matrices to remind them of the decisions which were taken on previous meetings. Apart from the meetings he has with them regularly to motivate them and to check on their progress, he arranges for leaders from outside the school to come and address the learners, sometimes spiritual leaders.

The principal models *distributed leadership*. He does not regard himself to be the only leader at the school; he maintains that every teacher is a leader at the school. HOD's and deputy principals are given opportunities to take the lead in certain aspects. Mr X is responsible for setting up time tables for examinations, supervision and teaching periods. He is also responsible for registration of the matric learners and organising the matric examinations. The other deputy principal is responsible for all aspects concerning discipline at the school. He addresses learners and their parents and deals with the control measures of the code of conduct at the school. The HOD's are in charge of the subjects assigned to them. They have to see to the quality control in their different departments. Some of the HOD's have other duties in addition to taking charge of their departments, like duplicating duties, being in charge of the libraries and enrolments. Post level 1 teachers are given an opportunity to serve on the SMT for a year. According to the principal it is compulsory and each teacher gets an opportunity to do so.

Although the principal spoke about the problems he experiences with the learners at the school, like the high dropout rate in grade 10 and the poor pass rate of the lower grades, he has *high expectations* of the matric learners. All the interviewees confirmed that the principal expects a 100% pass rate of the matrices. He expects everybody at the school to work towards that goal. He believes that all the teachers should teach all the grades, as they are part of the building process. The fact that the school is also successful in other aspects like sports and cultural activities, suggests that the principal expects the learners to participate in these activities and grants them the opportunities to do so, irrespective of their backgrounds and where they come from, thus illustrating that the principal has high expectations of the learners. By motivating them on a regular basis he believes that they can work towards a better future.

It is evident that *planning* is very important to the leader of the school. A date is set aside every year to do the planning for the following year. At this planning meeting all activities are planned, from examinations to extra-mural activities. It is important for him that things run smoothly and that teaching time is maximised. According to the principal, teaching starts right at the beginning of the

school year because detailed planning has been done the previous year. Time tables are ready and are set in motion from the second day onwards. No enrolments are done in the beginning of the year and school fees are handled the previous year, with parents paying deposits for the new year before the end of the previous year.

The principal is always striving to establish a *more effective learning and teaching environment*. He welcomed the initiative of the community to establish a sector patrol at the school to help to keep out unwanted elements and to see that the learners are always in a classroom. According to him, he has worked on increasing the number of teachers at the school to ease the workload of the teachers, thus increasing productivity. He was instrumental in employing a bursar at the school so that the teachers have less admin work to do and can spend more time teaching.

Another aspect which confirms that the principal drives the school towards academic achievement is the display of the vision and mission statements in the foyer of the school. Each learner receives a booklet at the beginning of the year, called the 'school organiser', which contains, among other things, the vision and the mission statements. The vision statement read as follows:

We strive to be a highly respected self-supporting, productive school in a safe, secure, disciplined and attractive environment which is conducive to a culture of teaching and learning. The school will develop individuals that are well-balanced and can function positively and effectively in our society.

The mission statement gives an outline of the values which would guide them to achieve the vision of the school.

This completes the first step of the data analysis process. The first step in data analysis is to present the data in line with the context. In quoting from the transcriptions of the interviews, I have tried to, as far as possible, not lose the essence of the context from which it was extracted. The main aim is to gain the respondents' view on the performance of the school and how academic performance is maintained, focusing on the role of leadership of the school. From the data I have identified categories which will be discussed in the next chapter. The categories I have identified are:

- The principal shows characteristics of a transformational leader
- The principal is a strong leader who is autocratic
- The principal shows characteristics of distributed leadership

- The principal is a motivator, inspires high work ethics and lead by example.
- The principal is shows characteristics of an instructional leader.
- The principal cares about the community and is well-respected.
- Creating a positive organisational culture

#### **4.8 Summary**

Leadership is an important aspect of a school. Oyetuni (2006) argues that the importance of leadership is reflected in every aspect of the school, like instructional practices, academic achievement, discipline, school climate, etc. It is with this in mind that I have opted to make a study of the role of the school leader in maintaining academic achievement in this particular school. In this chapter I have presented the data as it has been gathered, referring mainly to interviews, journal entries and observations during my study. In the next chapter I will discuss the findings of my data and give meaning to the perceptions of the interviewees with the aim to answer my research question.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion of Findings

#### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I present the findings in terms of themes developed from the data presented in chapter four. These themes reflect the role of the principal as educational leader and as such provide an answer to the main research question – *What role do the principal as school leader play in maintaining the academic standards in a school accommodating at-risk learners?* The themes I have identified are:

- The principal shows characteristics of a transformational leader
- The principal shows characteristics of an instructional leader
- The principal shows characteristics of distributed leadership
- The principal is a strong leader who is autocratic
- The principal is a motivator, inspires high work ethics and leads by example
- The principal cares about the community and is well respected
- Creating a positive organisational culture

Where appropriate I refer to relevant literature through which to view and make sense of my findings. These themes are drawn from data obtained from the data sources: interviews and observations, and also to a lesser extent document analysis.

#### 5.2 The principal shows characteristics of a transformational leader

As mentioned in chapter 2 and according to Burns (1978, p. 20), transformational leadership occurs when leaders and followers unite in pursuit of 'higher order' common goals, leading towards higher level of commitment towards the organisational goals. Furthermore, Dantley (2001), in his research, links transformational leadership to leaders as moral agents, in which the leader appeals to the moral values of the followers to raise their consciousness on ethical issues.

From the comments of the principal and the teachers, it is clear that their concern is to uplift the children of the community entrusted into their care. I could sense the sympathy they have

with the problems of the learners, but also their desire to see them succeed and rise above their problems. This is evident in how they motivate the learners to strive for a better future as well as the support structures at the school. Miss One commented on the posters in her class of disadvantaged learners who succeeded, which she uses to make children aware that they can succeed in life. There is a health advisory committee, which see to, among other things, the distribution of school uniform and the feeding scheme, who distribute food to the needy learners. In participating in these activities teachers are motivated to look beyond their own interests toward those that will be of benefit to the learners and ultimately to the school as a whole.

The principal, as a change agent, influences the actions of the teachers, which brings about a positive teaching and learning environment, which, in turn, leads to higher academic learning (from chapter 2). The principal believes in leading by example and has high ethical values. He believes in transparency, especially in dealing with the financial aspect of the school. Annual meetings are held with the parents to discuss the budget of the school and to get their approval. He maintains that, with the minimal funding from the DoE, they learn to cope with their resources and that they supplement their funding with fundraising. He argues that parents support the school because of the transparent way in which the school is run.

The principal motivates his followers to perform beyond expectations. Each of the interviewees reiterated the vision of the principal to obtain a 100% matric pass rate. He expects the teachers and learners to work towards this goal. Most of the respondents felt that the teachers are hard working and committed and put in extra effort to help the learners to succeed. When called upon, teachers sacrifice their time and efforts to give extra classes to the matriculants to help them perform better. Saturday classes and holiday classes are arranged every year, especially for subjects that need extra time. The principal stated that even when the DoE do not have special programmes for matriculants, they arrange their own sessions. Apart from extra academic programmes, there are also many sporting and cultural activities that the learners can participate in. There is a definite effort to provide the learners with opportunities which are not found at other schools in the area. There are activities such as a poetry society, debating teams, international student exchange programs and public speaking. This is an indication that the principal has high expectations for the learners and that there is an attempt 'to put the school on the map' as expressed by Hp.

The principal encourages teachers to attend workshops to broaden their knowledge on different subjects and even attended a few personally, such as the workshop on drug testing and the leadership and management courses which he attended to enable him to be more informed when it comes to school leadership. Ongoing learning is thus encouraged for the improvement of the school as an organisation.

Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999) contend that transformational leadership focuses on the commitments and capacities of organisation members. This is evident at Excel high school in the way the committees are structured which see to different aspects of the school. Teachers work in teams to facilitate the different aspects of the school, thus focusing on the capacities of the members. Teachers choose on which committees they want to serve and then share their expertise to achieve organisational goals.

Avolio and Bass (2004) summarise the dimensions of transformational leadership into four I's, namely, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. The principal of Excel high school is seen as a person who can be trusted and is well respected by his followers and the community. He is a good role model, thus he can be described as a leader with idealized influence. He can also be described as a leader with inspirational motivation, because he encourages the members of the organisation to work in teams and to commit to the vision of the school. By working in committees teachers are encouraged to be creative and to solve problems, thus stimulating them intellectually. The principal acts as a coach and advisor to his followers to lead them to obtain organisational goals, thus leading them with individual consideration.

The principal of Excel high school can be seen as a leader who, through his beliefs and values, influences his followers to be part of a learning community who build on the vision of the school, but also focusing on the task of establishing a climate in which effective teaching and learning can take place so that the learners of Harpville can work towards a better future.

In the next section I will discuss how the principal gears teachers and learners towards academic achievement as an instructional leader.

### 5.3 The principal shows characteristics of an instructional leader.

An instructional leader gears all activities towards teaching and learning and high academic achievement at the school. Christie (2001) found that teaching and learning is the core business in the resilient schools in her study. It is clear at Excel high school that academic achievement is highly prized and that teaching and learning is indeed the core business of the school. In the halls there are framed certificates of academic achievements and photo's of top achievers. In the principal's office trophies are proudly displayed.

Mendez (cited in Flath, 1989) argues that there are three major forces that serve to shape and describe a school – the public, the staff and the students – and that these forces interact through the curriculum. He believes that the role of instructional leader is to manipulate these three forces in order to maximise the quality of instruction.

The principal of Excel High School interacts with the forces mentioned in order to lead the school to academic excellence. It is evident in the way he motivates the learners and the follow-up programmes which are arranged for the learners so that they can do well academically. Holiday and afternoon classes are compulsory for the matric learners in addition to their regular periods. He monitors their progress and meet regularly with the HOD's in order to stay up to date with the progress in each subject. He meets with the parents in cases where students are not doing well to discuss problems. In some cases the tasks of meeting with the parents are delegated to the deputies.

He also mentioned that in order to maximise productivity he always try to find ways to ease the workload of the teachers. Teaching time is very sacred, therefore the time table is finalised before the school year commences so that teaching can start right from the beginning of the year. The learners as well as the principal and deputy principal commented on the dedication and commitment of the teachers. I believe that the principal is the driving force behind their commitment because of his high expectations of the teachers as well as of the learners. All the teacher and the learners know that the principal expects *all* the matric learners to pass and they have to work towards achieving that goal. Kroeze (cited in Flath, 1989) found that instructional activities include setting instructional goals, high expectations and focusing on student achievement.

Another instructional activity mentioned by Kroeze is *coordination and organisation*, i.e., working for effectiveness and efficiency. This is evident in the way the school is managed and lead. Planning

is a very important aspect at the school. A special day is put aside each year to plan all activities for the following year. When the school year commences, each teacher knows what is expected of him/her for the year and all the learners know in which classes they will be. Disruptions are minimal because everything is planned in detail. No person can walk into the school without making an appointment to see the principal or a teacher, except in cases of emergencies. Teachers and learners are not disturbed in class because teaching takes precedence over everything else.

The effectiveness and efficiency can also be seen in the committees which are active at the school. There are working teams for every aspect of the school. A few examples are, catering, textbooks, stationery, timetable, exams, late coming, etc. Every teacher is involved in most aspects of the school. All committees, activities, time tables, classes, as well as the code of conduct is printed in a booklet and given to each learner at the beginning of the school year. When entering the school one gets the feeling of a highly organised and orderly environment where discipline is at the order of the day.

Another aspect that shows that the principal shows characteristics of an instructional leader is the fact that he attended several leadership courses to advance his skills in leadership. He also attends workshops regularly, together with other teachers, in order to improve his knowledge on different subjects. He regards himself not as a perfect leader, but as a person who has to learn continuously to lead the organisation more effectively for the benefit of the learners. He feels that he wants to make a difference in the community by improving the school and by promoting growth. He feels that because of the social problems in the community, he has to be prepared to deal with the problems of the learners, but also to guide them to achieve academically in spite of their problems. He also stated that the teachers have to receive all the honour for the achievements of the school, because of their support and commitment.

In the next section I discuss some aspects of how the principal exercises distributed leadership in order to make the school more effective.

#### **5.4 The principal shows characteristics of distributed leadership**

The work by Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001; 2004) provides a recent empirical study of distributed leadership practice. This work suggests that distributed leadership is best understood as “practice distributed over leaders, followers and their situation and incorporates the activities of

multiple groups of individuals” (2001, p. 20). It implies a social distribution of leadership where the leadership function is “stretched over the work of a number of individuals and the task is accomplished through the interaction of multiple leaders” (p. 20). Gold and Evans (2002), in their study of ten “outstanding” school leaders, refer to the development of leadership capacity within the school as a key lever of success. They do not use the term distributed leadership, but there are indications that they are describing distributed leadership.

With reference to my study, the way the work is structured at the school suggests a form of distributed leadership. There are different committees which see to different aspects at the school. Some of the committees are welfare, sport, health advisory, feeding scheme, detention and discipline. Teachers are free to choose a committee on which to serve. There is a culture of leadership at the school, a culture of trust and shared responsibility, so that teachers feel they can make choices about what to be involved in, and what leadership to provide. The leaders of the committees report to the principal. Also, certain duties are assigned to people, for example, one of the deputy principals is responsible for discipline at the school. He handles most of the cases (parents, learners) involving discipline. Miss One mentioned that “discipline is his passion”. The other deputy principal is responsible for the time tables. He handles all the administration that goes with it and is regarded by Miss H as being a “good administrator”. Miss H is the convenor of the SMT and has to arrange and facilitate SMT meetings. Another HOD is in charge of the enrolment of new learners and handles all the procedures. She reports to the principal.

In terms of building professional learning communities in schools it would appear that distributed leadership plays an important part. Research by Morrisey (2000) concludes that extending leadership responsibility beyond the principal is an important lever for developing effective professional learning communities in schools. Other studies (Blase & Blase, 1999; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000; Portin, 1998) also emphasize a positive relationship between organizational change and distributed leadership practice. Leithwood et al. (2006, p. 51) argue that distributed leadership is assumed to enhance opportunities for the organization to benefit from the capacities of more of its members, to permit members to capitalize on the range of their individual strengths, and to develop among organizational members a fuller appreciation of interdependence and how one’s behaviour effects the organization as a whole. This is mirrored in the commitment of the teachers commented on by Ms H. She states that even if the principal is not at school, teachers continue to do what is expected

of them. This implies that there is a high work ethics and effective control measures, which is discussed in the next section.

### 5.5 The principal is a strong leader who is autocratic

I have chosen to highlight this aspect because it is evident from the data that teachers regard the principal as an autocratic leader because of the way in which he runs and controls activities at the school. His presence is strongly felt in all aspects of the school. I will look at how the respondents express their views and their understanding of the leader in this regard. First of all I will look at literature on autocratic leadership.

Harris and Lambert (2003, p. 26) state that in schools where the leadership is autocratic, the flow of information is in a one-way direction from the head to the educators, and there is a large amount of blaming by both parties. This implies that all decisions are made by the leader, in the school situation it would be the principal and the teachers are expected to carry out instructions. Bass (1990, p. 481) complements this description by referring to autocratic leadership as looking at how power relations are distributed within the organisation; the way in which needs are met and the understanding of the manner in which those needs are distributed. This would imply that there is an unequal distribution of power, as the leader is the person with the most power because he takes all the decisions. The followers do not have the power to change actions and make decisions on their own. It is said that the leader is always the one who would benefit the most out of such a relationship.

However, there are others who would argue that autocratic leadership do have a positive side to it. Evetts (in Udjombala, 2002, p. 9) argues that leaders have to be tough, aggressive, competitive, directive and autocratic if they want to deal with and manage change. This means that the leader has to exercise some authority in order for his/her subjects to implement decisions taken. Shaw (in Bass, 1990) supports the positives by finding that speed and accuracy of group's performance was sufficiently higher than would be the case with the democratic leader. Nongauza (2004) found that the success of the school in his study has depended to some extent on the authoritarian behaviour of the principal. Similarly, Christie (2001) has found that the resilient schools in her study have principals who are strong leaders and managers.

Two of the teachers interviewed at Excel High School thought that the principal is too *autocratic and authoritarian* and has to learn "to let go". The deputy principal commented that he does speak to

the principal about the matter, but that he (principal) feels that things have to be done in this manner as he is accountable for everything that happens at the school. One of the learners felt that the principal is strict and that it has to be that way because he is the leader of the school. Miss H mentioned that when the principal is not at school, others prefer not make decisions as he would not endorse decisions made if he was not present. She also mentioned that during staff meetings only certain individuals speak, mainly the HOD's and that post level 1 teachers rarely get the opportunity to participate in decision making. Others just sit and listen. This is an example of what was mentioned earlier about the 'flow of information in a one-way direction from top to bottom'.

Another way in which the autocratic leadership style manifests itself is in the *control measures* of the subject departments. Before the exams, teachers have to hand in their question papers to the principal personally, after which he will hand it to the HOD's. He checks the standards of the question papers and whether it is handed in on time. HOD's have to report to the principal once a term about their subjects and the results obtained by the learners in the tests and exams. Mr X reports that the principal insists on these quarterly meetings so that problems can be addressed early. The 'no-nonsense' attitude of the principal allows him to address teachers who steps out of line and does not hesitate to have a 'talk' with them to rectify matters.

It is interesting to note that while teachers claim that the principal is autocratic, there are democratic practices, or rather, practices which seem to be democratic in nature. Staff meetings are held regularly, at least once a term and every morning the staff gets together before school. This shows that there is some attempt to consult staff members on certain issues. According to the principal there is a system in which post level 1 teachers serve on the SMT for a year. In this way they get exposure to management and get to be part of decision-making. All post level 1 teachers get an opportunity to serve on the SMT. Another democratic feature is the system of committees that is responsible for different aspects of the school. Some of these committees are the Staff Development Team, The Matric Yearbook committee, etc. People work in these committees and thus have opportunities to practice leadership.

The principal believes in *order and protocol*. In my first contact with the school, I discovered that in order to see the principal you have to make an appointment. With regards to my study, he insisted that I follow the correct procedures and to first get permission from the DOE. The orderliness and neatness of his office shows that it is an aspect which is very important to him.

The data suggests that there are elements of bureaucratic practices which are followed at the school. The “clear-cut rules” (Dalin, 1998, p. 33) which govern the decisions and actions at the school suggests elements of the classical organisational approach, which is regarded as a formal model.

It is quite surprising to find levels of what is regarded as an outdated (and even harmful) leadership style by both policy and contemporary theory. Christie (2001) raises the interesting question whether it is perhaps appropriate for SOUTH AFRICA at this time that successful leadership is quite autocratic. She argues further that while it is important to understand general social patterns, it is also important to recognise that some schools in her study were able to retain or develop power to act for themselves, thus taking responsibility for themselves by drawing on resources from within. She maintains that conditions in disadvantage communities are not likely to change in the near future and that the influence and importance of structure cannot be overlooked in understanding possibilities for changing schools. This suggests leadership who is not afraid to show authority when necessary and who shows the necessary responsibility and accountability to improve schools.

While Holmes & Wynne (1989, p. 63) argue that all schools are bureaucracies where rules govern the behaviour of members and survival become ends in themselves, Bush (2003, p. 59) argues that despite the limitations of formal approaches, it would be inappropriate to dismiss them as irrelevant as they have much to contribute to our understanding of schools. Penner, Malone, Coughlin and Herz (in Bass, 1990, pp. 422 – 423) strengthen this by arguing that leaders with a high level of discipline are likely to be rated much higher in their overall performance by their superiors. In the following section I highlight the principal as a person who sees the importance of motivating the learners regularly, establishing a climate of high work ethics and leading by example.

#### **5.6 The principal is a motivator, inspires high work ethics and lead by example.**

One of the themes that emerged strongly from the data is how the learners are motivated on a regular basis. Motivational actions are driven by three life-world conditions of pedagogy, namely, loving care for the child, hope for the child’s future and responsibility for the child (Van Maanen as cited in Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 36). Regular meetings are held with the grade 12 learners by the principal, who serves as their grade head, to *motivate* them to do well. Occasionally motivational speakers from outside the school are asked to come and address the learners. By motivating the learners on a regular basis the principal shows that he cares about them and their future and that he wants them to

perform well. Hp mentioned that the deputy principal also plays a great part in motivating the learners to do well for a good future. It is evident from the data that a lot of effort goes into motivating the learners to perform well. With many of the learners coming from environments where there is a lack of support and motivation, it is important that they do receive the moral support and motivation from the school to succeed academically. According to Thomas (1973) motivation is a key factor in the learning process and is especially significant for disadvantaged students with low educational and occupational aspirations. Although the principal mentioned that for these learners to pass matric is equivalent to obtaining a PHD given their circumstances, he motivates them to do well and have procedures in place which help them to work hard and to perform well. An example of this is the follow-up meetings with the matric pupils. As grade head of the grade 12 learners he monitors their progress personally and follows up on those who do not perform well. In some cases he arranged for afternoon and weekend classes for the weak learners, which he supervised himself. Holiday classes are arranged for the matric pupils to help them in different subjects. He expects them to do well and would go the extra mile to ensure that they work hard and do their part. Mc Partland and Braddock II (1993) argue that even with the benefit of early prevention programs, disadvantaged students lack home environments that can provide strong support in advanced coursework, and thus will continue to struggle with some classroom learning tasks, but that these learners can continue to be successful if they receive extra help and encouragement.

There are other factors which serve as motivation for the learners, such as the annual prize giving event and the annual yearbook. Learners who do well during the year receive diplomas and trophies at this event. One of the interviewees commented that learners look forward to this event and it motivates them to work hard. Mr X mentioned that the learners feel very proud when they see their faces in the annual yearbook of the school. The yearbook features the photos and activities of the matric pupils for the year and special messages from the principal and other role-players. Jp mentioned that teachers motivate the learners all the time. It seems that teachers at the school are instrumental in establishing a comfortable, supportive and accepting environment in which the learners can perform to the best of their ability.

Although the community is riddled with problems such as poverty and violence, which is part of the daily lives of the learners, they are constantly reminded that they have to work hard for a better future. The principal inspires *high work ethics* by focusing on and emphasising the academic part of their schooling. He features strongly in the exam and assessment committees. He has a strong hold on whatever is happening in the different subjects by having regular meetings with the HOD's and

subject heads. He inspects the examination statistics every term and expects the HOD's to take action where the results are not satisfactory. He prides himself in the fact that the school time table is up and running by the second day of the new year. It is important for him that all planning is done the previous year so that there can be no interruptions during teaching time. All committees and activities are planned before the school closes and all enrolments are finalised, so that teaching can start at the earliest possible time in the new year, which is in the first week of school.

Part of establishing a high work ethics is freeing teachers from tasks such as dealing with parents during school time which is mostly seen to by the secretaries and the deputies principal, disciplinary tasks such as monitoring learners during periods and break, which is done by the sector patrol, and school fees, which is handled by the bursar of the school. The principal maintains that he always tries to ease the workload of the teachers to get a more productive staff because they are the people who are doing the work and he needs their support. To get learners to work hard and to keep them focused certain structures are in place to ensure that they toe the line, like detention classes. There are definite consequences for learners who transgress, such as late coming and bunking classes. Discipline is a strong feature at the school. These factors contribute to the culture of teaching and learning which exist at the school and which contribute to the high work ethics.

In the interview with the principal, he mentioned that it is important to him to *lead by example* and that teachers are also role models and leaders. He expects teachers to do their part and try to lead by example by, for example, being at school an hour before school starts. He expects teachers and learners to be on time for school and most of them adhere to the rule. He believes in order and planning and expects the teachers to plan ahead. This is evident in the planning session which is held at the end of each year, in which the activities for the next year are planned. He maintains that he rarely start a day before planning for the day and the week ahead, which he normally does in the hour which he has to his disposal before school starts. Another way in which he leads by example is by being involved as grade head for the grade 12 learners. He monitors their performance closely and do not hesitate to intervene if learners do not perform well. The principal also believes in being informed. According to him he has done a few courses on management and leadership to qualify himself as a principal. He attends workshops on various aspects such as the one offered by the DOE on drugs. He maintains that he wants to lead the school from a position of strength and that he feels comfortable doing so. The quiet confidence he exudes inspires trust, serves as an example to others and speaks of someone who is not afraid to tackle problems and who has a firm grip on all aspects of

the school. Whittaker (1993, p. 76) argues that leadership is example and that it is not only what leaders do that affects others in the organisation, but also how they do it.

In his interview the principal emphasised *transparency*. He believes that parents and teachers support him because he is open about what is happening at the school and what he wants to achieve. The finances of the school are handled in an open and transparent way and therefore there are no major problems collecting school fees. They have to make do with minimum funding which is provided by the DOE and partly by school fees, but they try to help themselves by doing extra fund raising and manage the money they receive to the best of their ability. Whatever problems the principal has to contend with seem to take second place to the main activities at the school, which is to bring about effective teaching and learning.

By leading the school in a transparent way and being a person who cares about the children of the community and their future, he has earned the respect of the teachers, learners and the community, which is discussed in the next section.

### **5.7 The principal cares about the community and is well-respected.**

The principal's comments about the community show that he cares about the children of the area and about their future. He said that he wants to leave a legacy behind in which he wants to be remembered for what he has accomplished for the benefit of the community. The fact that he takes time to take a walk in the community and to talk to people shows that he cares about what happens in the community. People have respect for him and for the school, which can be seen in the way they respond to him when they approach him. Judging from the attendance of parent meetings as described by the principal, I could sense the support for the principal and the school. He stated that not all parents attend meetings, but all lot of them do and most of them pay the school fees. He spoke openly about the problems they have with learners who display unacceptable behaviour and the way such learners are dealt with. Despite the problems with the 'delinquents' as he names them, his motto is to never give up and to keep on trying. He maintains that the learners who are successful make up for the ones who do not succeed. He also inspires the teachers never to give up on the learners.

Two of the many committees at the school are the health advisory and the feeding scheme committee. These committees see to, among other duties, feeding the needy children as well as distributing

school uniform among them. On the occasions which I have spent at the school, I have noticed that all learners were dressed appropriately. All learners wear the proper school uniform, which contribute to the feeling of orderliness and discipline. This gave me the feeling that the principal cares about the learners and that he wants the best for them. Also, the fact that there are so many sporting and cultural activities at the school suggest that he has high expectations for them and that he wants to uplift the community by exposing them to these activities. Hp commented that the school has a good track record in terms of academics and opportunities, while Jp commented that it is the best school because there are so many opportunities for learners to practice their skills. I could sense a genuine appreciation for what the school is doing for the children of the community and for the role of the principal and teachers in motivating the learners to reach their potential. Since learners need a positive culture in which to reach their potential and since leadership is key to maintaining and shaping organisational culture, I discuss this aspect in the next section.

### **5.8 Creating a positive organisational culture**

*... the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture and ... the unique talent of leaders is their ability to work with culture. (Schein, 1985, p. 5).*

This quote by Schein implies that leadership practices directly influence organisational culture. Leithwood et al. (1999) strengthens this argument by suggesting that culture-producing experiences are framed indirectly by many aspects of the school that are touched directly by those in formal school leadership roles. Leadership practices have a direct influence on the culture of a school, which, in turn, has an effect on the organisational effectiveness. Reeves (2006) posits that it would be difficult for organizational cultures to be successful in education or business without competent, positive, and creative leadership.

The culture at Excel High School has many similarities to the characteristics of a positive school environment described by Deal and Peterson (1999). First of all it has a physical environment that symbolises joy and pride. The clean and orderly environment, as well as the many certificates and trophies displayed at the school shows pride in the achievements of the school. The mission and vision statements are proudly displayed in the foyer of the school, as well as photos of activities and top achievers. From my observations I have noted that a lot of effort goes into establishing an environment that is clean, orderly and quiet. The rituals and

ceremonies which are part of the yearly activities of the school, such as the annual prize-giving, the matric farewell, cultural competitions and the drama displays all serve to reinforce their cultural values. The yearbooks contain stories which celebrate and recognize the successes of people who were pupils at the school, as well as those who were connected to the school in some way. These also suggest a rich sense of history and purpose. Miss H and Hp commented on the good track record of the school that delivered good learners who became doctors, professors, etc.

Another aspect which is seen as important for a positive school culture by Deal and Peterson (1999) is a mission focused on student and teacher learning. In the mission statement of the school the words 'quality learning', 'effective teaching and learning', form part of the wording of the mission statement. The structures that exist at the school and the academic successes suggest that a lot of effort goes into establishing an effective teaching and learning environment. There is a culture of hard work and commitment. One of the themes that stood out from the data is that the teachers are hard working and committed and that learners are motivated to give their best. Teachers are taking responsibility for the outcomes of student learning by giving extra lessons where needed and by being task-orientated. Teachers are not found loitering around outside classrooms during teaching time. They are in their classrooms focusing on their teaching tasks. The principal places a lot of emphasis on being productive by trying to ease the workload of the teachers so that teaching time can be maximised. He takes an active role by being involved as a grade head for the grade 12 learners. He keeps track of their progress by following up on bad results, consulting with parents when there are problems and by arranging for extra classes. He expects the HOD's to be up to date with their subjects and to report to him regularly, at least once per term on the progress in their subjects. He expects them to identify problems and to inform him early in the year so that he can help them address these problems. I believe that through the discipline structures, i.e., the detention classes, the guardian/supervision system and the parent consultations helps to establish an orderly, disciplined environment in which effective teaching and learning can take place.

## 5.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the findings from the data analysis, referring to the relevant literature in an attempt to understand the role of the leadership at Excel high school in maintaining academic standards. The discussion flowed from the perceptions of the teachers, learners and from the principal that emerged from the interviews, observations and document analysis. The findings were discussed using different themes.

The first theme refers to the principal as a transformational leader in which he is described as a leader who has gained the trust of his followers which motivates them to look beyond their own interest and act for the good of the learners and the school. All members share the vision of the school and strive towards educating the children of the community in pursuit of a better future.

Certain qualities have been associated with the principal, such as, being a good role model, believing in transparency, inspiring high work ethics, being a strong leader and an orderly person. It has been shown that because of these qualities he enjoys a high level of respect among teachers, learners and the community. He also has been portrayed as showing characteristics of an instructional leader who focuses and directs the school towards teaching and learning. In spite of the social problems of the learners, or maybe because of it, he is motivated to do his best to provide them with the best educational opportunities. This school has been described by some people as a 'model C school in the northern areas' because of the diverse nature of the activities being offered at the school and because of the way the school is run. There is an interest in the school from outside companies, such as Volkswagen South Africa (VWSA), General Motors (GM) and the international learner exchange programmes.

I have shown that the success of Excel high school can also be ascribed to the organisational culture which exists at the school and which is greatly influenced by leadership practices. The strong working culture is demonstrated by the commitment and hard work of the teachers and the learners and the time-on-task approach which is encouraged by the principal.

It is interesting that the principal displays leadership behaviour that is paradoxical in nature. On the one hand he is a strong and autocratic leader who has been described as a person who 'can't let go'. On the other hand he follows democratic procedures by allowing teachers to play leadership roles in different aspects of the school. This phenomenon is regarded as

'normal' by leadership theorists and also referred to as 'balanced' leadership. Bass (1990, p. 420) argues that the overlap of characteristics is a normal phenomenon which helps to balance the leader.

In some instances the data from the themes overlap and appears in more than one category. Although there is interconnectedness between the categories, which is demonstrated with the overlapping of the data, care was taken to retain the context in each case.

Excel High School shows characteristics of what is described as other researchers as a good school. I have referred to a study done by Pam Christie the findings that I have discussed in this chapter is similar to some of the findings in her research, namely, strong leadership, high expectations, a safe and orderly learning environment, caring and supportive environments, a sense of responsibility for themselves and the centrality of teaching and learning. The data has shown that the principal, although not a perfect leader as described by himself, manages to maintain academic standards at the school by establishing an effective teaching and learning environment through his leadership practices and styles.

There are some challenges which I have detected from the data, which I should mention. Some teachers feel that the principal can do more by being more visible at the school, but there are others who feel that he *is* visible and that he visits the teachers occasionally to see how they are doing. Other problems highlighted by the teachers, were the worsening of the discipline of the learners and problems such as pregnancies and drug abuse. Mr X mentioned that the parents are showing less interest in their children and Ms H commented that some of the parents only visit the school when they enrol their children, but do not bother to come to school to discuss their progress. The principal mentioned that the DOE do not always give the necessary support, especially when it comes to funding, therefore they have to make do with the little that they receive and supplement their income from school fees collection and fundraising. He also mentioned the high dropout rate in grade 10, partly due to pregnancies. He says that there are no special programmes for grades 8 to 10 but that they are working on a system whereby all teachers are teaching from grade 8 to 12 to help with the building process. Mr X mentioned that the pupil-teacher ratio is very high, especially in grades 8 and 9, and that they had a high teacher absentee rate at one stage because teachers were feeling

burnt out. The principal maintains that over the years they have tried to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio and employ more teachers to counteract the problem.

In spite of these challenges Excel high school is seen as academically successful because of the high matric pass rate over the years, their proud academic history, as well as their successes in their sporting and cultural activities. This school can serve as an example for schools which accommodate at-risk or disadvantaged learners.

In the next chapter I give a summary of my main findings, recommendations for further research and practice and I discuss the limitations of my study.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

#### 6.1 Introduction

The focus of my study was to investigate the role of the principal as school leader in maintaining academic standards in a school accommodating at-risk learners in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth. The school is seen as an academically successful school because of its proud tradition of producing top learners and academics, as well as its good matric pass rates through the years, in spite of being situated in a low socioeconomic area.

In this chapter I present a summary of the main findings developed from the data in chapter 4 and discussed in chapter 5. Since this study raised questions about areas for further research related to my study, I make suggestions for further research later in this chapter. I highlight the potential value of this study, as well as the limitations.

#### 6.2 Summary of the main findings

The core purpose for all schools should be to provide quality teaching and learning in order to produce academically sound results and to provide opportunities for learners to reach their potential. Yet, looking at the South African picture and the matric results which are being produced, especially in historically disadvantaged schools, it is clear that schools are still not performing up to expected levels, even though we are 16 years into a new democratic government .

School leaders are expected to lead schools in a responsible, accountable and transparent way and to produce good academic results. Some schools are achieving this goal, in spite of accommodating disadvantaged learners and being situated in impoverished areas. Researchers have found that having effective leaders at schools make a big difference in the quality of teaching and learning that will take place at the school.

Excel high school is an example of a school where things are happening because they take *responsibility* for themselves. The school buildings and grounds are in a good and neat condition. The fencing around the school provides the school with a safe demarcated area. The community sector patrol helps with the discipline at the school. Members of the community volunteer their time to keep learners from wandering around during periods and to keep unwanted elements out of the school. A bursar was appointed to handle the school fees collection and other financial matters of the school. There is a definite willingness to take initiative and to make things happen at the school. This feature of taking responsibility for themselves is regarded by researchers as a characteristic of resilient schools who has managed to succeed in spite of adverse conditions.

However, my main findings relate to the leadership of the principal. The principal believes in *order and discipline*, insisting on planning ahead, so that teaching time can be maximised and disruptions can be minimised. There is an emphasis on time-on task and creating an orderly and disciplined working space through certain structures, such as the guardian system where learners go to their guardian teacher when a teacher is absent and detention classes for learners who transgress. Each learner is given a booklet at the beginning of the year, which contains, among other things, the code of conduct. These aspects contribute to the strong working culture among teachers and learners and are complemented by the control measures on the different aspects of the school. Different committees see to aspects such as enrolment, detention, examinations, textbooks, etc., which are coordinated by the principal. The teams form part of a system, where everyone is involved in working towards achieving organisational goals. HOD's are expected to report to the principal regularly with regards to their subjects. The SMT meet regularly to discuss management issues. Evaluating and control are an important part of the school.

The data suggests that teachers are regarded as *hard working and committed* to their teaching tasks. This commitment by the teachers appears to be an important element of the success of the school. Teachers give up their time for extra classes for matric learners and are always motivating learners to work hard for a better future. They go the extra mile to provide sporting and cultural opportunities for the learners, which are not always found at other disadvantaged schools. This commitment of the teachers can be linked to the transformational qualities of the leader. A transformational leader motivates his/her followers to act in the

interests of the learners, thus appealing to higher ideals and moral values. I have found that this is the case in the teachers of Excel high school.

One of the respondents commented that the teachers continue with their tasks even if the principal is not around and that the principal has a good support structure. This points to *transformational leadership*, in which the leader influence his followers to look beyond their own interests and act for the good of the school and its learners. Being actively involved as a grade head, attending workshops where possible and being punctual are some of the ways in which the principal serves as a role model, which also contributes to his transformational leadership qualities. The principal acknowledges that he has a strong support base and that the school would not be successful without the contribution of the teachers. The acknowledgement of the human factor shows some element of a leader who is people-orientated. The fact that so many changes have been brought about, as pointed out earlier, shows that the principal has a vision to transform the school into a place where students can learn more effectively and teachers can be more productive with the aim to produce academic excellence and maintain the proud tradition.

The principal engages in *instructional* activities by setting instructional goals, high expectations and focusing on student achievement. Examples of setting instructional goals are the regular meetings he has with HOD's and deputy principals to discuss their subjects. Deadlines are important to him and question papers have to be handed to him personally for control purposes. He expects all matric learners to pass and expects teachers and learners to work towards this goal, thereby having high expectations for the learners. One of the ways he focuses on student achievement is by displaying achievements in the school, having a yearly prize giving ceremony, by publishing success stories in the yearbook and displaying trophies, awards and photo's in the foyer of the school. The progress of the matriculants is monitored by him personally and problems are addressed by having extra classes and/or consulting with parents.

Another important feature is that the teachers and the principal *care* about the learners and their future. The data showed how the principal motivates teacher not to give up on the learners. He recognises the fact that it is very difficult for the learners from the area to be successful because of their social problems and the impact it has on their academic lives. Yet,

he expects and motivates them to succeed, by establishing opportunities for them to reach their potential, academically as well as extra murally. There are structures in place which see to the needs of the needy children, such as the feeding scheme and the health advisory committee which see to, among other duties, the distributing school of school uniforms to the learners in need. The way in which the principal interacts with the community also shows that he cares about them. I could sense the respect he has for the parents, even though the majority are poor and educated. He arranges parent meetings to discuss problems, school budgets, academic progress and even take a walk into the community occasionally just to chat to them. He believes that transparency is important as a leader, therefore he keeps them informed, especially about the finances of the school.

It is interesting that while the principal is regarded as *a strict and authoritarian leader*, he also practices democratic leadership by allowing teachers to occupy leadership positions on different levels. In South Africa there is a strong emphasis on participatory and democratic leadership practice, which is a total departure from traditional autocratic leadership approaches and how it was practiced in the past. Yet, researchers have found that it is normal to have leadership practices which encourage strict control where policies and rules are strictly adhered to on the one hand and team work and collaboration are encouraged on the other hand. Some researchers refer to this type of leadership as balanced leadership.

Many theories have been developed over the years on how leaders should lead, but no one theory has been proved to be perfect. Many researchers realise that although theory is essential to students and researchers of leadership, reality is usually far less neat and tidy. Theory helps researchers to continue asking questions and finding answers to questions such as, Who and what is the perfect leader?

### **6.3 The potential value of my research**

Teaching in a disadvantaged setting and coming from a disadvantaged background has prompted me to seek answers to why some schools that accommodate at-risk learners are succeeding while other are failing. This experience has been enriching and has allowed me to grow personally as well as professionally. I now have a better understanding about the role school leaders can play in making schools more productive, effective places in which learners,

specifically disadvantaged learners who often have no support base at home, can achieve academic success.

A more important question would be whether school leaders and government authorities realise the nature of the task of a school principal and the role he/she should play in order to lead the learners, especially disadvantaged learners, and teachers entrusted into his/her care to academic excellence. The study should be of value particularly to school leaders and to those having to deal with disadvantaged learners, as well as government authorities and those who want to do further research on school leadership.

I have formulated some recommendations based on the findings of my study headed as recommendations for practice and recommendations for future research.

### **6.3.1 Recommendations for practice**

I would like to make the following suggestions to school leaders and the Department of Education:

- Schools need principals who are strong and competent leaders and who display qualities such as a sense of responsibility, accountability, transparency, discipline, moral purpose and care. The selection process for principals needs to make this part of the requirements for appointment.
- Principals leading schools accommodating at-risk learners should be made aware of the challenges of leading such a school and should be trained in dealing with such challenges. Principals should have the energy and vision and be prepared to put in extra effort to uplift the community which they serve. They should be trained on how to balance the task/person issue.
- The DoE should provide more support to such schools, especially in the form of funding and training, so that leaders could focus on their main task, which is bringing about effective teaching and learning.
- The importance of school (organizational) policies cannot be overemphasized. Schools should be encouraged to develop strong policy to guide their practice and to apply these strictly.
- The DoE should make studies on disadvantaged schools available to principals so that they can consult these studies regularly. These studies should be used to develop materials to conduct workshops for school leaders.
- Teachers, principals and other stakeholders should be made aware of the importance of time management so that teaching time can be maximised. All activities at schools should be geared towards teaching and learning.
- The importance of a positive organisational culture should be known to all principals and teachers. They should align the culture of their schools in order to bring about academic success.

### **6.3.2 Recommendations for further research**

This study was mainly focused on the role of the principal as the leadership of the school in maintaining academic standards in a disadvantaged school. The scope of the study, being a half thesis, only allowed for investigation into the role of the principal. In order to understand what makes certain disadvantaged schools more effective it would be beneficial to conduct further studies into the role of other stakeholders, such as parents, teachers and learners. It would also be of value to investigate how other leadership roles, such as HOD's and deputies principal can be developed that would lead schools to academic excellence. Furthermore, the practices of strong, autocratic leadership demands further attention, as previous studies have highlighted these qualities as one of the key elements in effective schools.

In this study it was found that a positive organisational culture is influenced by leadership practices, which impacts directly on organisational effectiveness. Further studies into factors contributing to a positive working culture would be valuable.

To get a better picture of what is happening in South Africa regarding the academic performance of disadvantaged learners, I would recommend large scale survey research, combining quantitative and qualitative data, in order to establish how many disadvantaged children are succeeding academically as well as how schools can be assisted by the government to make the schooling of disadvantaged learners more successful.

### **6.4 Limitations of my study**

This investigation was done in the form of a small-scale case study which has a number of limitations.

Firstly, this study is a half-thesis, therefore I mainly focused on the role of the leadership (principal) in maintaining academic standards. If other stakeholders were included, I could have highlighted more factors which contribute to the success of the school and a broader picture could have emerged. I interviewed the principal, a deputy principal, an HOD and two learners. I feel that the sample size was adequate in my investigation into the role of the principal in maintaining academic standards, but I make no claims to generalise my findings

beyond the participants in my study, as the sample cannot be accepted as being represented of the whole population.

Secondly, due to the subjective nature of interpretive research it is possible that this study has not remained as objective in its findings as may be desirable. However, by using observations, semi-structured interviews and document analysis I used triangulation to strengthen the validity of the data. In general I would assert that no claim made in this study is not supported by valid data.

## References

- Anderson, G.** (1998). *Fundamentals of educational research*. (2nd ed). Taylor & Francis Group. London: Falmer Press.
- Avolio, B. J., & Bass, B. M.** (2004). *Multifactor leadership questionnaire: Third edition manual and sampler set*. Redwood City, CA: Mind Garden.
- Babbie, E.** (2007). *The practice of Social Research*.(p.270) Belmont, CA. Wadsworth.
- Bass, B. M.** (1990). *Bass and Stogdill's handbook of leadership: Theory, research and managerial applications* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: The Free Press.
- Best, J., & Kahn, J.** (2003). *Research in Education*. USA: Pearson Education Company.
- Blasé, J., & Blasé J.** (1999a). Principals' instructional leadership and teacher development: Teachers' perspectives. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 35 (3), 349- 378.
- Blasé, J., & Blasé J.** (1999b). Effective instructional leadership through the teachers' eyes. *High School Magazine*, 7 (1), 16-20.
- Brown, E., & Pollitt, L.** (1996). *Malnutrition, Poverty and Intellectual Development*. Scientific American, 274(2), pp. 38-43.
- Burns, J. M.** (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Bush, T.** (in press). *Leadership and Management Development in Education*. London: Sage.
- Bush, T., & Glover, D.** (2003). *School Leadership: Concepts and Evidence*. Nottingham: NCSL.
- Bush, T.** (2003). *Theories of educational leadership and management*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). (p. 59). London: Sage Publications.
- Cantrell, D.C.** (1993). Alternative paradigms in environmental education research. In R. Mrazek (Ed): *Alternative paradigms in environmental education research: The interpretive perspective* (p. 83). Lethbridge: NAAEE.
- Christie, P.** (2001). Improving school quality in South Africa: a study of schools that have succeeded against the odds. *Journal of Education*. University of Natal. 26: 2001.
- Christie, P., & Potterton, M. with French, A., Cress, K., Lanzerotti, L., & Butler, D.** (1997). *School development in South Africa: A research project to investigate strategic interventions for quality improvement in South African schools*. Johannesburg: Education Department, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Cohen, L., & Manion, L.** (1994). *Research methods in education* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). London: Routledge.

**Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K.** (2000). *Research methods in education* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). (p. 305). London: Routledge Falmer.

**Coleman, M., & Briggs, A.R.J.** (2002). *Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management*. (p. 109). London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

**Coleman, M., & Briggs, A.R.J.** (2003). *Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management*. (p. 18). London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

**Covey, S.R.** (1989) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Free Press.

**Dalin, P.** (1998) *School development. Theories and strategies*. London:

**Dantley, M.** (2001), *Transforming school leadership through Cornel West's notions of African American prophetic spirituality*, Oct.

**Deal, T., & Peterson, K.** (1999). *Shaping school culture*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

**Deal, T., & Peterson, K.** (2001). *Shaping school culture – Fieldbook*. San Francisco: Jossey – Bass.

**Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y.S.** (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). (p 379) Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.

**Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y.S.** (2005). *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

**De Vos, A.S.** (2002). *Research at grass roots: For the social sciences and human services professions* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Pretoria: Van Schaik.

**Department of Education (South Africa)** (1996). *Changing management to manage change in education: Report of the task team on education management development*. Pretoria: Government Printers.

**Donaldson, G. A.** (2008). *How Leaders learn: Cultivating capacities for School Improvement*. Teachers College Press, USA.

**Flath, B.** (1989). The principal as instructional leader. *ATA Magazines*, 69(3), 19-22, 47-49.

**Fullan, M.** (2001). *Leading in the culture of change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

**Glickman, C., Gordon, S., & Ross-Gordon, J.** (2001). *SuperVision and instructional leadership: A developmental approach*. (5th Ed.). Boston: MA: Allyn and Bacon.

**Gold, A., & Evans, J.** (2002). *Piggy in the middle. Middle managers, emergent leaders or prospective senior leaders?* Paper presented at British Educational Leadership, Management and Administrative Society, Annual Conference, Birmingham, 20 – 22 September.

- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R.H.** (1998). *Exploring the principal's contribution school effectiveness: 1980-1995. School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, (p.9, 2, 157-191).
- Hallinger, P., & Kantamara, P.** (2000). Educational Change in Thailand: opening a window onto leadership as a cultural process. *School Leadership & Management* 20 (2), pp. 189 – 205.
- Harris, A., & Lambert, L.** 2003. *Building Leadership Capacity for School Improvement*. Philadelphia: Open University Press. (p. 26)
- Hawkins, H.** (2001). *Understanding "Poor" Performance: Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT) Scores and Poverty*. Clemson University.
- Henn, M., Weinstein, M. and Foard, N.** (2006). *A short introduction to social research*. London: Sage Publications. (p.199).
- Henning, E.** (2004). *Finding your way in qualitative research*. (p. 3). Van Schaik, Pretoria.
- Holmes, M., & Wynne E.A.** (1989) *Making the school an effective community. Belief, practice and theory in school administration* (p. 63). Sussex: Farmer Press
- Hurley, J. C.** 2001. *The Principalship: Less May Be More*. (p. 26). <http://www.google.com>. Accessed in November 2010.
- Janse van Rensburg, E.** (2001). *An orientation to research: Rhodes environmental education unit research methods*. Course handout. Rhodes University, Grahamstown. Janse van Rensburg, (p.16).
- Johnson, J.P., Livingston, M., Schwartz, R.A., & Slate, J.R.** (2000). What makes a good elementary school? A critical examination. *The Journal of Educational Research* (pp. 93,6, 339 – 353).
- Kanungo, R.N., & Mendonca, M.** (1998). Ethics of leadership. *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics, 1*, 49- 58.
- Leedy, P.D., & Ormrod, J.E.** 2005. *Practical research: Planning and design*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson. (pp. 101, 135, 137, 139, 144, 145)
- Leithwood, K., & Duke, D.** (in press). A century's quest to understand school leadership. In J. Murphy & K. Louis (Eds.), *Handbook of research on educational administration*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R.** (1999). *Changing Leadership for Changing Times* (p.3). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Leithwood, K.A., & Jantzi, D.** (2000). The effects of transformational leadership on organisational conditions and student engagement with schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, (p.38, 2, 112-125).

**Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D.** (2006). *Successful School Leadership: What It Is and How It Influences Pupil Learning*. Research Report RR800, Nottingham, DfES, NCSL, p.4

**Lewin, K., Lippit, R., & White, R.K.** (1939). Patterns of aggressive behaviour in experimentally created social climates. *Journal of Social Psychology* ( pp. 10, 27 – 301).

**Locke, E. & Latham, G.** (1990). *A theory of goal setting and task performance*. Englewood Cliffs: NJ: Prentice Hall.

**Maldonado, N.L. & Lacey, C.H.** (2001). *Defining Moral Leadership: Perspectives of 12 Leaders*. Florida Journal of Educational Research, Fall 2001, Vol 41, No 1, 79-101

**MacBeath, J.** (2005). *Leadership as distributed: A matter of practice*. *School Leadership and Management*. September Vol. 25, pp.349-366.

**Maxwell, JA.** (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. (p. 76) Thousand Oaks, CA:Sage.

**Ministry of Basic Education, Sport, and Culture [MBESC]** (2000). *National policy options for educationally marginalised children*. Windhoek: Government Printer.

**McPartland, J M., & Braddock, J. H.** (1993). *A Conceptual Framework on Learning Environments and Student Motivation for Language Minority and Other Underserved Populations*. Pp. 1-4 in Proceedings of the Third National Research Symposium on Limited English Proficient Students' Issues. Washington DC: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, George Washington University.

**McMillan, J., & Schumacher, S.** (1993). *Research in Education: A Conceptual Introduction*. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers. (p.479).

**Morrissey, M. S.** (2000). Comprehensive school improvement: Addressing the challenges. *Issues about Change*, 9 (1). SEDL.

**Mouton, J.** (2005). *How to succeed in your Masters and Doctoral Studies. A South African Guide and Source Book*. Pretoria: Van Schaik. (p.108).

**Moyles, J.** 2002. Observation as a tool. In M. Coleman, and R. J. Briggs, (Eds.), *Research methods in educational leadership and management*. Paul Chapman: University of Leicester. (p.172).

**Murray, F., & Feitler, F.C.** (1989). *An Investigation of Transformational Leadership And Organizational Effectiveness In Small College Settings*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, California. March 27-31. (p.3).

**National Commission on Education** (1996). *Success against the odds: Effective schools in disadvantaged areas*. London: Routledge.

- Neuman, W. L.** (2003). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. (5th Ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon. (p.139).
- Nongauza, A.D.M.** (2004). *The role of the principal in an academically successful farm school: A case study*. Unpublished master's thesis, Grahamstown, Rhodes University.
- Oyetunyi.C.O.** 2006. *The relationship between leadership style and school climate* .Botswana Secondary schools. University of South Africa perspective Analysis of the Case of Hong Kong. *International Review of Education*. (p.39).
- Pollit, E., Gorman, K., Engle, P., Matorell, R., & Riviera, J.** (1993). Early Supplemental Feeding and Cognition. *Monographs of the society for Research in Child Development*, vol. 235. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Portin, B.** (1998). International Challenges and Transitions in School Leadership. *International Journal of Educational Research* 29 (4), pp. 293-391.
- Reeves, D. B.** (2003). *High Performance in High Poverty Schools: 90/90/90 and Beyond*. Center for Performance Assessment: Harvard Graduate School.
- Reeves, T.L.** (2006). *Principal Leadership and the development of Organizational culture in a new school*. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro.
- Ruff, T.P.** (1993). Middle School Students at risk: What do we do with the most vulnerable children in American Education? *Middle School Journal*, 24, 10-12.
- Rutter, M., Maughan, B., Mortimore, P., & Ouston, J.** (1979). *Fifteen thousand hours: Secondary schools and their effect on children*. London: Open Books.
- Schein, E.** (1968). Organizational socialization and the profession of management. *Industrial Management Review*, 10, 8-18.
- Schein, E.** (1985). *Organizational culture and leadership*. (p. 5) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schein, E.** (1992). *Organizational culture and leadership*. (p. 1) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sergiovanni, T. J.** (2000). *The life of leadership: Creating culture, community and personal meaning in our schools*. (p. 36). San Francisco: Jossy-Bass.
- Sergiovanni, T. J.** (2001). *Leadership*. RoutledgeFalmer. New York. (pp. 130 – 133).
- Shum, L.C., & Cheng, Y.C.** (1997). *Perceptions of women principals' leadership and teachers' work attitudes*. *Journal of educational administration*, 35(2), 165 – 184
- Silins, H. C., & Murray-Harvey, R.** (1999). What makes a good senior secondary school? *Journal of Educational Administration*, 37, 4, 329-344.
- Silverman, D.** (1993). *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Sage Publications: London.
- Sing Tng, C.** (2009). *An Educational Leadership Framework Based*

on *Traditional and Contemporary Leadership Theories*. E-Leader. Kuala Lumpur.

**Spillane, J., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J.** (2001). Investigating School Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 30 (3), pp. 23-28.

**Spillane, J., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J.** (2004). Towards a Theory of School Leadership: A Distributed Practice. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* .

**Spillane, J.** (2005). Distributed Leadership. *The Educational Forum*, Vol 69, Winter 2005, p. 144.

**Smith, S. C., & Piele, P. K.** (1989). *School leadership: Handbook for excellence* (2nd Edition). Oregon: ERIC Clearinghouse for Educational Management.

**Struwig, F.W. ,& Stead, G.B.** (2001). *Planning, designing and reporting research*. Cape Town: Pearson Education. (2001: 12-17, 100)

**Thomas, H.B. Jr.** (1973). *Motivating disadvantaged students to learn*. Ohio State University, Columbus. Center for Vocational and Technical Education.

**Udjombala, M.** (2002). *An investigation of the management and leadership experiences female school principals in the Ondangwa education regions*. (p. 9). Unpublished master's thesis, Grahamstown, Rhodes University.

**United States Senate, Select Committee on Equal Education Opportunity.** (1972.) Revitalizing the Role of the School Principal, in *Toward Equal Educational Opportunity* (pp. 305-307). Senate Report No. 92-0000. Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, 1990.

**Walsh, M.** (2001). *Research made real: a guide for students*. (p. 69). Nelson Thornes Ltd: United Kingdom.

**Whittaker, P.** (1993). *Managing change in schools*. (p. 76) London: Open University Press.

**Winegardner, K. E.** (n.d.). *The case study method of scholarly research*. Retrieved November 2010 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.tgsa.edu/online/eybrary/casel.html>

**Wu, S.** (nd). *Leadership theories: early trait approach*. Retrieved October 2010, from the World Wide Web: <http://psychology.About.com/library/weekly/aa040102d.htm>.

**Yin, R.** (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. London: Sage.

## Annexures

### Annexure A

#### RESEARCH AGREEMENT

I Karen Draai hereby certify that I am conducting research into the role of leadership in your school. I will be collecting some of the data I need by means of interviews. You, \_\_\_\_\_ have been identified as someone I would like to interview.

. The following ethical guidelines will be adhered to:

- I undertake to treat information you provide with complete confidentiality.
- I also undertake to guarantee your anonymity.
- You have the right to withdraw from the process at any time.
- I undertake to let you read the typed transcript of the interview to check its accuracy.

If you are a learner at the school I will need your parents/guardians' permission as well as yours.

By signing this agreement you agree to participate on a voluntary basis.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ (K. Draai)

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ (respondent)

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ (parent)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Interview Questions

To the learners:

1. What do you consider as being challenges to your academic achievement in school?
2. How do you deal with these challenges?
3. How do the teachers help you deal with the challenges?
4. How do your parents help you in dealing with the pressure of school?
5. What are your views on the role of the principal in helping the learners achieve good results?

To the teachers and HOD:

1. What are your views on the academic achievement of the learners at the school?
2. What are your comments on the social problems of the learners at the school?
3. How do the teachers deal with these problems?
4. How do the problems impact on the academic achievement of the learners?
5. Are there any structures in place to help learners achieve good results?
6. Do you think there's a relationship between discipline and academic achievement and what is the role of discipline in achieving good results at your school?
7. What are your views on the role of the principal and leadership of the school in motivating learners to achieve good results?
8. What do you as leaders/teachers do to motivate learners to achieve good results?

To the deputy principal and principal:

1. What are the factors that play a role in the success of the school?
2. What is your vision for the school?
3. What are your views on disadvantaged learners and their academic achievement?
4. Do you think that special programmes are necessary to ensure the academic performance of disadvantaged learners and why?
5. How important is your role (as leaders) in the quality of teaching and learning in the school?
6. How do you see your role in the maintenance of quality teaching and learning?
7. Have you established specific procedures/programmes to promote teaching and learning? What are they?
8. What are the challenges in leading academic achievement?
9. Are you happy with the school's achievement? If not, what would you like to see?
10. The school has a good reputation for its academic achievements. What role have you played in bringing this about?