

Art. #2071, 8 pages, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v42n2a2071>

The perspective of school leadership and management: The role of the school principal in academic learner performance

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In this article we explore the perspectives of school leadership and management on the principal's role in learners' academic performance. School leadership and learner performance continue to be of great concern in the South African education system. We explore the relationship between school leadership and learner performance from a school leadership and management perspective. Since the attainment of democracy, the South African education landscape has been plagued by poor learner performance. While the reasons are as diverse as the nation itself, the adverse effects of poor learner performance on the school system or the quality of education cannot be overemphasised. As a result, we explored school leadership and learner performance as it relates to the leadership of secondary school principals. Principals' lived stories provided the empirical evidence for this article. The findings reveal that a principal's leadership plays an important role in school management and learner performance.

Keywords: leadership; learner performance; management; school leadership

Introduction

According to Kellerman (2015), school leadership has become a high-wire act that only the most skilled can perform successfully. The school principal's day is usually filled with diverse activities of administration and management – scheduling, procuring resources, reporting, managing learner discipline, handling relations and resolving conflict with parents and the broader community, dealing with multiple unexpected learner and teacher crises, and extraordinary situations (Bottery, 2016; Early, 2013; Oumer, 2014; Ramathan, 2017; Tucker & Coddling, 2002). Ramathan (2017) further asserts that many school principals lack the time for an understanding of their instructional leadership functions. Most of them spend relatively little time in classrooms and even less time analysing curriculum delivery with teachers. While they may arrange time for teachers' meetings and professional development programmes, they rarely provide intellectual leadership for growth on instructional issues. Therefore, one of the primary tasks of principals is increasing learner achievement and maintaining teacher satisfaction in order to effectively manage the school (Rigby, 2014).

Educationists strongly believe that school leaders can improve the teaching and learning environment by creating conditions conducive to improved curriculum management (Early, 2013; Kiat, Heng & Ratnam-Lim, 2017; Yu, 2009). They are responsible for creating positive school climates, motivating teachers and learners, and effectively managing resources to enhance best instructional practices. Thus, principals play a key role in the development and maintenance of academic standards which include the knowledge and skills that learners are expected to acquire in a subject and grade (Shelton, 2011). They cannot achieve this without a clear and deep understanding of teaching, learning, and assessment. They should also actively promote positive behaviour and interaction among teachers and learners (Woolfolk Hoy & Hoy, 2009). Bush and Glover (2006) further state that principals are required to undertake the following activities: oversee the curriculum across the school, evaluate learner performance through analysing internal continuous assessment and examination results, monitor the work of departmental heads through scrutiny of their work schedules and portfolios, ensure that departmental heads monitor the work of teachers employed in their subjects/learning areas; and arrange a programme of class visits followed by meaningful feedback to teachers; and ensure the availability of appropriate learning and teaching support materials.

It has been argued that school principals as school managers are challenged with new demands, more complex decisions and additional responsibilities than ever before. Hallinger (2003) and Woolfolk Hoy and Hoy (2009) assert that many school principals experience great difficulty in balancing their administrative duties with their curriculum leadership functions. The question is whether one person can perform all the tasks required of a principal; distributive leadership is suggested as a possible solution. This would undoubtedly alleviate the burden of principals and enable them to focus on instructional matters (Bush, 2011; Hallinger, 2003; Van Deventer, 2016; Van Deventer & Kruger, 2003). However, this often results in low academic learner performance and sometimes poor management of the school (Spaull, 2013).

Literature Review

Definitions of leadership

Ramathan (2017) defines school leadership as the practices that lead to positive influence, growth, and development of both the individuals and groups for a collective purposes. The definition implies that a leader should not be self-centred but please most of his constituents, if not all. Again, the leader's way of life should influence his followers in a positive way to achieve the collective goals of the group. Furthermore, Fomunyam

(2017) defines leadership as mobilising others to get extraordinary things done. The above-mentioned authors emphasise that leadership skills are practices to transform values into action and vision into realities, obstacles into innovation, separation into solidarity and risks into rewards. Leadership also creates the atmosphere that transforms challenging opportunities into great success (Ntombela, 2011).

Effective leadership and management in schools

School leadership is a broader concept than management. Management is a special kind of leadership in which achievement of organisational goals is paramount. Leadership occurs whenever one person attempts to influence the behaviour of an individual or a group regardless of the reason. It may be for one's own goals or the goal of others and these goals may not be congruent with organisational goals (Ntombela, 2011). Ramrathan (2017) believes that leadership is a summation of those qualities of originality, people centredness, inspiration, willingness to take on the challenge in striving to do the right thing at all times. Leadership requires people of a particular talent and ability and not people who occupy positions of authority because of associated benefits or favours (Spaull, 2013).

Principals as agents of change in schools

School leadership is the process of enlisting and guiding the talents and energies of teachers, learners and parents towards achieving common educational aims (Ramrathan, 2017). A school principal is a leader of an entire school community and is responsible for managing administrative tasks and supervising all learners and members of staff. According to Meador (2019), the principal has different roles to ensure the smooth running of the school, and this involves learner discipline, teachers evaluation, new policy creation and restructuring of old ones, maintaining secure funding for the school, handling the school budget and many others. However, the principal's major role is leadership. A school principal is the primary leader in a school and should perform this role effectively with the full knowledge that the leadership provided will affect the teachers, the parents of learners, the learners themselves and their eventual performance in their studies. It is worthy to note that the importance of leadership from the school principal in South Africa was acknowledged by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in a document developed in 2015, called the *South African Standard for Principalship (SASP)*. The SASP describes "leading, teaching and learning in school" as the first purpose of any South African principal in ensuring an improved effective education system (DBE, Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2015). According to the SASP, there are eight key interdependent components which constitute the core purpose of a principal in any South African context, namely:

- 1) Leading, teaching and learning in school;
- 2) Shaping the direction and development of the school;
- 3) Managing quality and securing accountability;
- 4) Developing and empowering self and others;
- 5) Managing the school as an organisation;
- 6) Working with and for the community;
- 7) Managing human resources (staff) in the school; and
- 8) Managing and advocating extra-mural activities.

During the apartheid era, South African principals were mere collaborators, but since the shift of South African school management to democracy, the school principal is now the appointed head whose leadership position plays a key role in the performance of learners and the school in general. Learner performance is greatly influenced by the leadership style adopted by the principal and how he/she orients the school towards the delivery of the curriculum and expected learning outcomes (Lunenburg, 2010).

School culture

Taole (2013) explains that effective school leadership is the cornerstone of any education system. It can ensure the effective implementation and management of curriculum changes. Ramrathan (2017) attests that leadership is essential for accomplishing sustainable change in a school setting. To Taole (2013), therefore, the leadership capabilities of principals play an important role in motivating educators to create a culture of learning in the school. Once the culture of learning is stable and concrete, the performance of learners in the school will improve. Bush and Odoro (2006) write about the importance of culture in schools in determining leadership. While studying the impact of the Advanced Certificate in Education – School Management and Leadership (ACE-SML), they found that culture was among the determinants of effective and ineffective schools. The two most important concepts in organisational behaviour are *culture* and *climate*. In schools, these determine the morale of teachers, the interest of parents and community and most importantly, the impact on learners' achievement. These terms, however, can be misunderstood. Gruenert (2008) points out that those school leaders who want to address morale in their organisations must know the distinction between culture and climate. Furthermore, he emphasises that teachers need to know the difference between culture and climate if they want to be more precise in their diagnoses and treatment of the two. This implies that it would be difficult to improve schools without understanding the differences and similarities between these terms. Gruenert (2008) posits that climate is the main leverage point for any culture, which means that if school leaders want to shape a new culture, they should start with an assessment of the climate.

Effective innovation in schools is guided by a shared vision which is ensured by an effective school leader who encourages the teachers to

improve the shared goals of the school (Reich, 2016). Our schools as educational institutions need teachers who reflect and imbibe this responsibility and equanimity. Few schools will have a strong culture when teachers do not show any responsibility and freedom. Culture influences people's social behaviour and interests and the way they interact with others (Zhu, Devos & Li, 2011). The majority of schools do not perform well because of the absence of an effective school culture. Scholars mention many aspects such as ineffective school leadership, the type of community in which the school is built and non-involvement of other role-players. Yet, all these can be referred to as subsets of culture. Zhu et al. (2011:320) contend that

[s]chool culture is closely related to the healthy and sustainable development of a school, the development and well-being of the school members, and objectives of the school and education. An important dimension of school culture is the multiple interactions among groups and individuals.

To achieve the above, participative decision-making is encouraged as this will ensure that teachers air their views in contribution to decisions made. This will create a shared responsibility for innovation as it will empower stakeholders on all levels, and will support team spirit (Zhu et al., 2011).

Methodology

In the study reported on here we followed a qualitative research approach and used the interpretive epistemology. A qualitative research method focuses on the phenomenon that occurs in natural settings and data are analysed without the use of statistics (Maree, 2007).

The purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants for this study. We hand-picked the participants for this study based on our judgment of their suitability for the study. Four principals from four high schools in the Hlokozi area in the KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa, were selected as participants in the study. These principals had different teaching experiences and qualifications and they acted in managerial positions for different periods of time. We used the following pseudonyms to refer to the participants in order to protect their identities: Mdabe, Melusi, Hleziphi and Methusi. We also used pseudonyms for the participating schools: Dumehlezi, Mdala, Mlaku and Bhece high schools.

The data were generated using three tools: narratives, observations and document analysis. Narratives were used as the main source of data to explore the perspectives of school principals on school management and learner performance. The narratives were audio-recorded, transcribed and confirmed by the participants for credibility and trustworthiness. Observations were conducted to gather more insights into the relationship between school management and learner performance and

how the two enforce one another. Observations were conducted early in the morning just before the start of the school day and also in the afternoon when the learners had been dismissed. Occasionally, principals were observed while addressing assemblies and teachers' meetings. Document analysis was used to triangulate the other sources of data as well as a way of double-checking the data generated from the interviews. Data were analysed thematically using a grounded approach. The theoretical frameworks used in the study were engaged in making sense of the findings. The data were analysed, presented and supported with direct quotations from the participants.

Findings and Discussions

The participants articulated multiple perspectives on the performance of their learners across a broad spectrum. Learner performance was viewed in line with national benchmark testing, like the Grade 12 National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations, the Annual National Assessment for Grades 6 and 9 learners and other international comparative assessments like the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Based on the outcomes of these national and international assessment systems and as articulated by the principals, learner performance is constantly in a state of flux. Within the South African education system, schools that underperform are identified by the DBE and are regarded as underperforming schools resulting in greater oversight, external interventions, and close monitoring. School leaders and the school community are concerned with learner performance as these are indications of poor school leadership and management as well as an indication of the school's image in the public domain. The nature of learner performance, therefore, points towards leadership, learner preparedness, quality of teaching and learning, and appropriate allocation of resources that cater for and support better learner performance. In this article learner performance is assessed principally on the Grade 12 pass rates as this is the principal yardstick for measuring schools' and learner's performance. This pass rate is significant as it contributes to the image of the school within the community. Schools in rural areas are assumed to be educationally disadvantaged due to poor infrastructure and educational facilities, lack of career guidance, and are less likely to produce good results as their geographic location is under-resourced (Malia & Ross, 2018). Noting that the selected schools were all located in rural communities, the only assessment that mattered was the Grade 12 result.

All four participants expressed concerns about the changing nature of learner performance. For instance, Mdabe pointed out that her school scored

100% in 2004, but the performance has been very unstable since then with the pass rate going as low as 40.7% in a particular year. When Melusi was appointed as principal, the school's pass rate was 80% but declined to 47.5% in 2015. Hleziphi left a school which obtained a 100% pass rate for a school that currently scored 81.8%. The principals therefore left better-performing schools to take up positions in their current schools, and have since been struggling with the fluctuating performance of learners which has been more on the decline.

Dhurumraj (2013) argues that learner performance in South African schools has been an issue of concern for over a decade. The performance of learners has been fluctuating and most often gone from bad to worse as pass rates have been declining almost every year. Fomunyam (2017) further argues that the quality of learner performance has been poor as pass grades have been lowered to as low as 30% in some subjects. The reasons, he says, are varied. However, the scarcity of qualified teachers in critical subjects like mathematics, natural sciences, and physical sciences are among the causes of poor learner performance. As pointed out by all the participants, the lack of qualified teachers was a major challenge as the qualified teachers were leaving for schools with better pass rates or schools located in better neighbourhoods or with higher quintile rankings. All the participating schools in this study were in rural areas where very few qualified teachers wanted to teach for a prolonged period. As the data for this paper show, the results improve when qualified teachers come, and drop when they leave. The identity and quintile ranking or location of schools indirectly influence the performance of the school since these factors dictate the calibre of teachers who remain at these schools. Fomunyam (2017:110) confirms this and adds that "experienced and qualified teachers are scarce in South Africa creating room for inexperienced and unqualified teachers, especially in learning areas like chemistry, biology and mathematics to take the reins and dabble with the future of learners. The result of this most often is poor learner performance." While some researchers (Rammala, 2009; Spaul, 2013) argue that this is a challenge in most countries in Africa, the situation is dire in South Africa in general and in rural South Africa in particular.

All of the principals blamed past leadership, management, and staffing issues for the decline of learner performance in their respective schools. Some were concerned that their schools' learner performance had declined substantially, but others were consistently low. The continuous fluctuation in the performance of learners within these schools constitutes part of the reason why these schools were ranked as Section 20 schools in Quintile 1. The identity of the school reinforces the performance image of the learners, and learner performance

contributes to the poor image of the school. Wedekind (2010:1) argues that "strong leadership is the key to school efficiency, which is ultimately reflected in learner performance. Schools that produced poorly performing learners were identified and labelled (non-performing schools) and interventions made to assist the schools to improve their learner performances." If a principal, therefore, lacks leadership skills, this would be seen in the performance of the learners within his or her school. The findings from our study confirm the role of school leadership in learner performance outcomes as suggested by Wedekind (2010). Principals of the respective schools took vital steps to ensure that learner performance improved. Some principals encouraged and co-opted staff and students in their quest to improve the image of the school, while others sought internal and external support for the changes required to improve the schools' image and learner performance. Varying degrees of success were noted in the learner performance of Grade 12 learners as a result of the interventions that the participating principals claimed to have made since their appointment as principals. However, it is critical to note that the reasons for this are varied, and some of these reasons could be explored in further research.

Noting that the researched schools were secondary schools located within rural communities, the literature on learner performance in rural schools is extensive and the reasons articulated are substantive. These include access to appropriate resources for schooling, a lack of adequate parental support, low teacher qualifications, high turnover of teachers, lack of finances, lack of adequate support from the DBE, discipline problems and low-socioeconomic conditions of the community that impact on schooling (Dhurumraj, 2013; Fomunyam, 2017; Rammala, 2009). School education was viewed as almost fatalistic based on the analysis of the vast amount of literature on rural school education, both nationally and internationally. Hence expectations of high learner performance in rural schools may be considered a myth, but the principals of the researched schools identified localised reasons for their schools' low learner performances and attempted to address these in incremental ways that brought some positive outcomes in terms of learner performance; these positive outcomes had become motivators for persevering. Ramrathan (2017) argues that within the general South African schooling landscape a combination and a complexity of factors, rather than individual factors, can explain poor learner performance in South African schools. The principals' testimonies regarding learner performance at their respective schools support Ramrathan's (2017) notion of complexity and confluence of factors that inform learner performance in South African schools.

Rural schools are not immune to such a confluence of factors.

The issue with regard to human resources was common to all schools. Lempota (2014) affirms that the school functions very well when all resources (human and physical resources) are well established. In some schools the school management team was either not present or dysfunctional, and in others, increased learner performance. Fomunyam (2017) believes that educators' teaching experience is a major component in delivering better learner performance since educators had undergone certain experiences in subject content knowledge. Taole (2013) emphasises that through an effective school-based management system, principals become more accountable internally and externally for the school's performances. For example, at Dumehlezi Secondary School, there were no heads of department for science, humanities and languages. The principal of Bhece High School believed that poor teacher discipline caused a decline in learner performance. Mncube (2009) attests that the principal's leadership is key in developing the school. Before Methusi was appointed, Mdala Secondary School had no principal for 3 years. In addition, there were no heads of department nor a management team. The first thing that the newly appointed principals of these schools embarked on was to put a school management team in place that would assist them in managing the school. Managing the teachers then became a manageable and achievable task for the principals.

Another issue that emerged from the principals' narratives on how they accounted for the learner performance was the low levels of discipline among learners and teachers. The level of discipline exhibited by learners contributes to the way people view the school (identity) and the learners' performance in the NSC, Grade 12 examinations. Learners' poor discipline and their attitudes towards the school may be understood as a result of the socio-economic background from which they come. It is not uncommon for learners to fight with teachers in rural areas (Fomunyam, 2017) and when such happens, the teacher is always considered to be at fault. One of the participants recalled an incident in which a learner harassed a female teacher in class to the point of kissing her. When the learner was disciplined, the principal was denigrated by the learners and the community for letting the police handle the matter. Poor discipline and high attrition rates of learners are among the reasons for poor learner performance in rural schools (Marais & Meier, 2010; Mathaba, 2014; Modisaotsile, 2012). In the participating schools, poor learner discipline was noted as a concern for the principals, and some found ways of addressing such disciplinary challenges. One of the principals encouraged learners to participate in various extra-mural

activities, including sports and cultural activities. When the participating learners started winning in these activities, it drew much learner support and interest and learners continued participating these activities. Poor learner discipline was managed through channelling the learners' interests to successes outside of the academic field as a way of re-directing learners' interest and discipline.

Methusi, Hleziphi and Melusi consider parental involvement and social issues as factors in learners' low discipline levels. The socio-economic status of parents in these rural communities is low. The parents' educational levels are low and many of the children live with their caregivers and not their parents. The situations at these schools are consistent with those in many studies (Fomunyam, 2017; Makgato & Mji, 2006) that have shown that the parents' living conditions, educational qualifications and academic outcomes have a significant predictive impact on children's educational development and attainment. Tungata (2006), for example, argues that children coming from homes with no tradition of valuing education often develop learning problems. He continues to argue that such children mostly fail to see the value or importance of education, and this failure negatively influences the child's interest in education. Parents who are alcoholics, abusive to their children or absent for long periods often cause children's poor intellectual, academic and socio-emotional development (Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2004). Eloff and Ebersöhn (2004) also argue that the constant harsh living conditions of lower-income parents, the powerlessness they feel, the lack of confidence they have in their jobs, the authoritarian model presented by employers, and the lack of higher education that would reform values into abstract ideas, may result in such parents using authoritarian methods to enforce external characteristics in their children such as obedience, neatness and cleanliness. Children who grow up in such situations are likely to be troublesome at school and add to learner discipline problems. Socio-economic conditions of families in rural communities influence the interest and discipline of learners in these communities, which all of the researched principals have noted as a major concern in their schools.

Parental socio-economic status within communities is among the criteria used in profiling or categorising schools into quintiles. If the neighbourhood is poor, then the school falls within Quintiles 1, 2 or 3 and if the parents are wealthy, then the school falls within Quintiles 4 or 5. Spaul (2013) argues that two school education worlds exist within South Africa. One world comprises Quintiles 1 to 4 schools that are characterised by low learner performance, poor school infrastructure and low interest in schooling; and the other world comprises Quintile 5 schools

with higher learner performance, good teaching and learning infrastructure and greater interest in teaching and learning. The socio-economic status of the parents as well as their educational background, which by and large determines their socio-economic status, influence the image and identity of a school as well as its predictive learner performance. The data in our study confirm Spaul's (2013) perspective of the existence of two distinct school world types. In this research, the principals of the researched schools alluded to both the socio-economic situation of the communities as well as the lack of interest by parents or caregivers in the education of their child/ward, which is consistent with the school worlds of Quintiles 1 and 2 schools. The principals of the researched schools acknowledged the influence of the impoverished community and the lack of support by parents as being among the reasons for the state of their schools and the performance of their learners.

Learner interests, attitudes to schooling and behaviour in school and classrooms have been noted as a concern by the principals of the researched schools. Mdabe blamed the level of violence experienced in the communities as influencing unruly behaviour in schools, while Hleziphi felt that learners were not fully integrated into school life and, therefore, misbehaved. In attempting to change the attitude towards schooling, these principals engaged the learners and teachers gainfully to manage discipline issues by either introducing them to extra-curricular activities in which they could excel and be recognised or by increasing the teaching and learning time through additional early morning and late evening classes. In some instances, learners were encouraged to live in or near the school so that they could be engaged in further learning to enhance their chances of passing the NSC. The participating principals thus recognised that learner discipline needed to be addressed and found innovative ways of managing learner discipline productively.

The principals also acknowledged learners' subjects choices and the constant turnover of experienced staff as reasons for poor learner performance. Two aspects are relevant here. Firstly, the various changes in curriculum policy over the last number of years (which teacher struggled to assimilate) had a huge impact on learner performance. Participants agreed that most of the educators were still struggling to master the curriculum. Nkzela (2015) argues that teachers should be appropriately qualified to teach specialist subjects based on the knowledge of the content to be taught and of the kinds of teaching methods that would optimise learning. Spaul (2013) attests that South Africa's education system is in a state of crisis, and that the instability of the school curriculum is one of the reasons for this state. Educators struggle to master the ever-changing

curriculum without adequate and proper training. Ntombela (2011) agrees when she argues that the government invests more money in curriculum innovations in order to improve the state of education in the country. However, the ongoing curriculum innovations are impacting on the teachers' knowledge and teaching skills. Educators find themselves in limbo as they are not properly trained on the implementation of the new curriculum. In addition, the focus on curriculum innovations is largely related to the envisaged skills shortage in the country, and in most cases, it relates to mathematics, sciences and technology. The principals of the researched schools indicated that many learners tended to avoid physical science and mathematics because of their fear of the subjects and a lack of self-confidence. This negative attitude can result in learner underperformance, and as a result, they are unable to achieve the required results for university entrance (Mullins, 2005:45). The fear of physical science and mathematics has resulted in a decrease in the number of learners taking the subject at secondary and tertiary levels (DBE, RSA, 2015). The constant curriculum changes have not produced the desired results. Neither teachers nor learners benefit from constant curriculum changes and this is reflected in the performance of learners in these schools (Ntombela, 2011).

The second issue related to curriculum and learner performance is the subject choices taken by learners. Learners are encouraged to take subjects that have been promoted through curriculum change as a pathway to social and economic development. These subjects include mathematics and sciences which the principals of the researched schools indicate as a serious concern to both the learners and learner performance. For learners, the fear of failing and not achieving a passing grade to enter into university renders taking these subjects as high risk and impediments for the learners' future trajectory beyond school education.

In addition, support for learners who take mathematics, science and technology is minimal in rural contexts resulting in lower learner performance. These principals, therefore, thought that they should have a say in the subjects that learners choose to take, so that they could be sure to be able to provide learners with the kind of support they needed. Therefore, it is difficult for a principal to implement the curriculum policy as planned if there are no expert teachers in that particular curriculum. When the principal monitors the curriculum and participates in the supervision of learners' work and follows up on learners' progress, it may influence the school's success to a great extent, reaffirming the principal's role in the learners' subject choices.

Drawing from the above engagement on principals' accounts of learner performances in

their respective schools, it is clear that the variables are all-encompassing, interrelated and complex. This means that a holistic analysis of the school, which takes the realities of the school, the learners, the community and the homes of the learners into consideration, is needed. However, it is worth noting here that principals are aware of the wide-ranging issues that plague their schools and have identified school issues that can be addressed under their locus of control.

Conclusion

In this article we explored the perspectives of school leadership and management with emphasis on the role of school principals on learners' academic achievement. The narratives of principals of rural schools were explored to show how each of them responded to their respective schools' challenges to improve learner performance at their schools. Noting that learner performance was one of the key indicators of school management, the principals took a situated approach to their leadership to make substantial changes to learner performance as measured by the Matric results. We advance a notion of a strong leadership style by principals drawing on the work of Msila (2013) and Ntombela (2011) who suggest that school leadership and management and the principal's strong leadership values create a positive culture in schools and results in improved learner performance. Principals should be empowered to generate new content and pedagogical knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to manage curriculum matters effectively and efficiently. This is achievable through well-constructed professional development programmes.

Authors' Contributions

Data were generated by Shile Memela; the data were analysed by Labby Ramathan and Sihle Memela who also wrote the manuscript. The final manuscript was reviewed by both authors.

Notes

- i. This article is based on the doctoral dissertation of Godfrey Khululekani Sihle Memela.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- iii. DATES: Received: 21 April 2020; Revised: 10 December 2020; Accepted: 16 March 2021; Published: 31 May 2022.

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