



Multi-domain examination of school decline causality: A narrative inquiry into stakeholders

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Abstract

The Department of Basic Education in South Africa continually strives to improve the quality of education it provides to learners in public schools. One of the primary yardsticks used to gauge the department's progress in providing quality education is the matriculation examination results. While many schools across different contexts have shown improvements in matriculation results, there are still pockets of schools that appear to be on a backward trajectory. This paper reports on a study that focused on these schools in one of KwaZulu-Natal's townships to understand the causality of their decline. Critical realism constituted the theoretical framework through which we understood the causes of school decline. The narrative inquiry, a qualitative way of studying human life, was adopted to engage narratively with the lived experiences of key stakeholders in declining schools. The findings revealed several mechanisms indicating a paralysis of the structure, culture, and agency domains of the sampled schools

Keywords: agency, culture, leadership, learner academic performance, narrative inquiry, school decline, school stakeholders, structure

Introduction

In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) strives to continually improve learner academic performance in public schools. Grade 12, the school-exit grade, is mainly used to gauge the performance of not only schools but also education districts, provinces, and the nation. While many public schools endeavour to improve or maintain their performance levels yearly, there are concerning schools whose performance is gradually declining (Khuzwayo, 2023; Mthiyane et al., 2014). This occurrence is against the nation's

commitment and attempts to achieve Goal 4 of the United Nations' (2015) Sustainable Development Goals, which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. Again, this decline is a threat to the achievement of the African Union's (2013) Goal 2, which aims to achieve well-educated citizens and skills revolution underpinned by science, technology, and innovation by 2063.

Herein, we report on a study that focused on the declining schools in a township in the KwaZulu-Natal province. From the South African perspective, the term township is used to refer to low-cost, non-White neighbourhoods (Jürgens et al., 2013) located on city peripheries. While the post-apartheid government has made and continues to make attempts to improve the conditions of schools in previously disadvantaged areas, traces of inequalities still linger (Blose, 2024). Schools in affluent communities have adequate, if not plentiful, resources, while those in township communities have inadequate and sometimes a lack of resources and facilities (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; White et al., 2015). Among other challenges, the working conditions in these schools are still deplorable—learners are overcrowded in classrooms, the culture of teaching and learning is waning, and teachers have excessive workloads (Khuzwayo, 2023). Apart from this, issues such as learner indiscipline, crime, and vandalism, among others, compound the challenges (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; White et al., 2015).

Against the above challenges, a reasonable number of schools in townships demonstrate a high level of resilience regarding learner academic performance. Some of these schools perform on par with affluent schools (Chikoko et al., 2015; Maringe et al., 2015). These schools have shown that the challenges of township contexts do not merely translate to underperformance. Even the schools constituting this study's research sites previously performed well against all challenges and obstacles. Hence, their gradual decline in learner academic performance is puzzling and worth examining. Framed by the critical realism theory, we engaged in a multi-domain examination of school decline to gather a precise understanding of different contributors to this occurrence.

The literature has largely addressed school effectiveness and improvement, while school decline received less attention (Hochbein & Duke, 2011). Thus, the scholarship on school effectiveness and improvement is extensive (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Myende & Chikoko, 2014; Shava & Heystek, 2018). In this study, we shift the focus and cast our gaze in the opposite direction to scrutinise factors hindering schools from achieving the desired learner academic performance. The limited studies that have been done on the phenomenon of school decline have examined it from different perspectives. These include factors and models associated with declining schools, sociological perspectives on declining schools, complexities of studying school decline, and general causes of school decline (Allodi, 2013; Duke, 2008; Hochbein, 2012; Mthiyane & Chiororo, 2019). While the causes of school decline have been explored, none of the studies engaged in a dissected examination of school decline to clinically establish the causes. Also, we have not encountered a study that brought together the voices of multiple stakeholders to understand this phenomenon. Thus, we engaged with circuit managers, school governing body (SGB) chairpersons, principals,

departmental heads, and teachers to solicit multilevel perspectives on the causes of the school decline.

Research puzzle

What are the structural, cultural, and agential mechanisms contributing to learner academic performance decline in township secondary schools?

Unpacking the concept of school decline

School decline is an established concept in the literature, with different scholars contributing to its definition. Duke (2008) defined school decline as the inability of a school to maintain the effective academic performance of learners over a long period. This occurrence suggests a continuing failure of a school to respond adequately to challenges that threaten learner academic achievement. In line with this definition, Mthiyane et al. (2014) looked at school decline as academic performance deterioration in schools that were previously performing well. The above definitions inspired our understanding of school decline in this paper, and we perceive school decline as academic performance deterioration over a long period in schools that once performed well. Numerous causes of school decline are recurring in the literature; these include, among others, ineffective leadership of school principals, learner indiscipline, teacher burnout, and disturbances by teacher unions. For this paper, only the above-mentioned factors are discussed.

Firstly, although principals do not lead schools alone, their impact on effective teaching and learning in schools is key (Blose et al., 2022). As instructional leaders, principals should define the school mission, manage instructional programmes, and promote a positive learning space for their schools to be effective (Hallinger, 2010). Poor exercise of instructional leadership can negatively affect the school's academic performance; Bayat et al. (2014) supported this view maintaining that principals who are not good instructional leaders are likely to struggle to ensure quality teaching and learning in their schools.

Secondly, learner indiscipline is another challenge many scholars identify as contributing to school decline. Indiscipline in schools displays itself in different forms; Simelane (2015) posited that learners use cell phones without permission during lessons, leave classrooms without a teacher's permission, distract fellow learners by making noise and funny sounds, abuse teachers verbally, and come to school drunk. Adding to the above indiscipline conduct, Makhasane and Chikoko (2016), Mthanti and Mncube (2014), and Segalo and Rambuda (2018) identified violent behaviour, disrespect, neglect of assessment tasks, bunking of lessons, and possession of weapons, among others, as forms of indiscipline teachers contend with in schools. Such behaviours lead to poor academic performance (Simelane, 2015).

Thirdly, many scholars pointed out teacher burnout as one of the causes of school decline; they claimed that teacher burnout results from poor working conditions in previously disadvantaged schools (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Okeke & Mtyuda, 2017; White et al., 2015). Challenges such as water shortages, poor electricity supply, and lack of proper

sanitation contribute to teacher dissatisfaction in previously disadvantaged schools (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019), which in turn, constrains their performance. Apart from contextual challenges, there are challenges internal to schools that also add to teacher burnout and contribute to academic performance decline; these include, among other things, a shortage or lack of teaching resources such as textbooks and laboratories, deficient parental interest in children's education, and overcrowded classrooms (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Harley & Wedekind, 2004; Mthiyane & Chiororo, 2019; Okeke & Mtyuda, 2017).

One more contributor to school decline is the disturbance by a teacher union. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996b, Chapter 2, s. 23.3) proclaims that "every worker has the right to form and join a trade union; to participate in the activities and programmes of a trade union; and to strike." While teachers have the constitutional right to belong to a teacher union, there have been numerous complaints about disruptions caused by a dominant teacher union in South Africa to teaching and learning in schools. Among other things, teachers hold union meetings during instructional times, leaving learners unattended (Gobingca et al., 2017). Also, there have been reports that the dominant union influences the appointments of principals (Zengele, 2013). Such disturbances affect the teaching and learning processes and may lead to a learner academic performance decline.

Critical realism: A theoretical framework

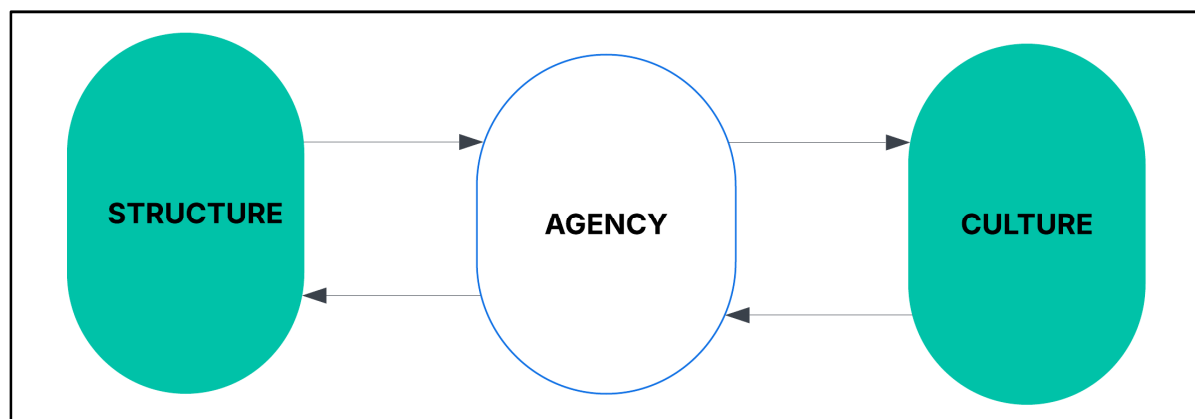
Several theorists have contributed to the development of critical realism theory; these theorists provide somewhat related but different approaches to understanding and analysing societies. In the study reported herein, we drew on the work of a well-established and exceptional theorist, Margaret Archer (1985), whose work foregrounded a morphogenesis approach to understanding social systems. In explaining this approach, she dissimilated it from the structuration approach by Giddens (1979). Archer's premise was that the structuration approach hinges on overcoming or rejecting three dichotomies: voluntarism and determination in human agency, subject and object in society, as well as synchrony and diachrony of structure and action. She went on to explain that the rejection of the three dichotomies in the structuration approach suggests that the approach is concerned with duality, not dualism. Therefore, the central notion within the structuration approach is the duality of structure, which looks at social life as a recursive process; the structure is perceived as both the medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices (Archer, 1985; Stutchbury, 2021).

Contrary to the structuration approach, Archer (1985, p. 60) introduced the morphogenesis approach, which she defined as "a process, referring to the complex interchanges that produce a change in a system's given form, structure or state; this process has an end product, referred to as structural elaboration." While the structuration approach foregrounds the duality of structure, the morphogenesis approach argues for analytical dualism. The analytical dualism involves two propositions: first, that structure predates the actions that transform it, and second, that structural elaboration post-dates those actions (Archer, 1985). The morphogenesis approach assumes that action is never-ending and essential to the continuation

and further elaboration of the system. Still, subsequent interactions will differ from the earlier actions owing to the structural consequences of prior actions (Archer, 1985). For this reason, the morphogenesis approach embraces the dynamism of structural conditioning, social interaction, and structural elaboration, thereby clarifying the interplay between structure and action (Archer, 1985).

In her initial work, Archer foregrounded two concepts—structure and agency—and suggested an interplay between the two. She later introduced the third concept, culture, which she believed had been neglected. In unpacking the concept of culture, Archer (2005) made two propositions; first, there is no reason why the constituents of culture should be presumed to be coherently integrated rather than harbouring ideational contradictions. Second, there is no reason to assume that all members share a common culture. She then argued that if the aforementioned assumptions are suspended, it is impossible to theorise about variations in cultural integration and their relationships to variations in social integration. She suggested that there is an interplay between culture and agency.

Figure 1
Structure—agency and agency—culture interplay



We hinged on the interplay of structure, agency, and culture (Figure 1) to understand the causality of the decline of schools in a township. Considering that these schools previously performed well and later declined suggests a dynamism of structure. Thus, we embrace the belief that action is never-ending and essential both to the continuation and further elaboration of the system. However, subsequent interactions will differ from the earlier actions owing to the structural consequences of prior actions (Archer, 1985).

Methodology

In carrying out the inquiry reported herein, we located ourselves within the interpretive research paradigm, which enabled us to engage deeply with participants' lived experiences and subsequently gathered a deeper understanding of how they make sense of their world and how they make meaning of their particular actions (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Consistent with our paradigmatic positioning, we adopted the narrative inquiry design, a qualitative way of studying human life. This research design is conceived as a way of honouring lived experiences as a source of critical knowledge and understanding (Clandinin,

2013, 2022). It is defined as a way to inquire into individuals' experiences narratively through a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places and in social interaction with milieus (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

We purposefully selected 10 participants, including principals, circuit managers, SGB chairpersons, departmental heads, and post Level 1 teachers, from five declining schools. Two participants were selected per school. These stakeholders were selected based on the key roles they play in schools and the knowledge we deemed they possessed on the studied phenomenon, of school decline (Cohen et al., 2018). In addition to the purposive sampling method, we used convenient sampling and chose five declining schools within close proximity (Etikan et al., 2016). The participating stakeholders were given false names to conceal their identities. Table 1 shows the pseudonyms of the schools and participants, as well as the roles of the stakeholders.

Table 1
Details of participants

Name of school	Name of participant	Role of participant
Phakathwayo High School	Khaya	Principal
	Melusi	SGB chairperson
Star High School	Harriet	Departmental head
	Rani	Teacher
Mnguni High School	Andile	Departmental head
	Thabiso	Teacher
Khondlo High School	Sbusiso	Principal
	Fikani	Circuit manager
Yeyeye High School	Mpiyakhe	SGB chairperson
	Siyanda	Circuit manager

Considering that narrative inquiry inquires into people's lived experiences narratively, we used narrative interview, a narrative way of generating field texts, allowing participants to freely tell their stories of lived experience (Adler & Clark, 2008; Clandinin, 2022; Olive, 2014). The generated field texts were subsequently analysed using two methods: narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. The narrative analysis involved studying transcriptions and identifying plots that captured important aspects of the stakeholders' lived experiences; we then used the plots to construct a unified episode (re-storied narrative) of each participant (Polkinghorne, 2002). The analysis of narratives was applied to further analyse the re-storied narratives. To this end, we closely examined each stakeholder's narrative and also looked across the narratives to identify themes responding to our research puzzle (Polkinghorne,

2002). Owing to this process, seven themes addressing our research puzzle emerged, and are presented in the subsequent section.

In line with the narrative inquiry standards, two measures were applied to ensure trustworthiness of the findings, namely, verisimilitude and utility. First, verisimilitude centres on a good literary study, in which the writing seems real and alive, transporting the reader directly into the world of the study (Loh, 2013). To achieve this, a descriptive language was used in reporting the inquiry; we chose each word deliberately to convey meaning clearly, thereby ensuring that readers gain access into the world of the study. Furthermore, extensive extracts from participants' narratives are included in the findings section to retain and foreground their voices. Second, utility emphasises the relevance and usefulness of the study (Loh, 2013). This inquiry addresses the critical issue of school decline, a concern not only for basic education in South Africa but also in other countries. While the findings are specific to the study's site and participants, they offer valuable insights that may inform similar contexts elsewhere. To ensure rigor, we applied both peer validation and member checking. For peer validation, sections authored by one researcher were reviewed and verified by the other. For member checking, we shared the manuscript with an academic colleague who provided constructive feedback.

Findings

Below, we present findings in three sections, each addressing one of the domains identified in the research puzzle.

Structural mechanisms contributing to school decline

Three themes reflecting structural mechanisms emerged from the stakeholders' narratives: transitional challenges following principal's departure, parent governors' limited understanding of school governance roles, and teacher union's interference in instructional and teacher appointment processes. These themes are presented in detail below:

Transitional challenges following the principal's departure

A school principal plays a pivotal role in a school's success and in ensuring learners receive a quality education (Blose et al., 2022; Shava & Heystek, 2018). Departure from this position can lead to instability if an effective succession plan is not in place. The stories of stakeholders who participated in this study show that challenges arise during the leadership transition following the departure of predecessors in schools. Harriet, a departmental head, mentioned that challenges began when the new principal took over in her school. She explained:

Mr. Sheokarah [pseudonym] was an exceptional principal with great leadership qualities. During his tenure, this school performed very well, with a pass rate ranging between 90% and 100% in the Grade 12 final examinations. Following his retirement, a new principal was appointed. The new principal's leadership skills seem to be weak.

For example, teachers are no longer involved in decision-making, their interests are disregarded, and their concerns are often overlooked when it comes to matters concerning teaching and learning.

Fikani, a circuit manager, shared a similar sentiment; he explained:

I have observed that the exit of a strong principal affects the school. Such principals would have played a key role in sustaining a teaching and learning culture, so when they leave, things start to fall apart. It then becomes a challenge for the new principals and other members of the SMT [school management team] to maintain the performance of the school, while trying to find their fits in terms of instructional leadership practices such as curriculum management, monitoring learner progress, and professionally developing teachers.

Siyanda, who is a circuit manager held a similar observation, and he had this to say:

When the principal leaves the school for whatever reason, it could be due to attrition, retirement or resignation, things take a different direction in the school. The new principal and the current management members struggle to keep the school functional since they are not well conversant with the systems in the school. For this reason, there is a subsequent decline in academic performance in the school.

The stakeholders who participated in this study agree that the principals' departure contributed to the decline in their schools. The extracts above revolve around leadership; this resonates with the notion by Blose et al. (2022) that principals do not lead schools alone, but their leadership is key for effective teaching and learning. While newly appointed principals are not expected to exercise leadership approaches similar to those of their predecessors, their approaches to leadership must maintain effectiveness. This is unfortunately not the case in this study's research sites, as stakeholders complain about principals' leadership competencies.

Parent governors' limited understanding of school governance roles

The literacy and socioeconomic status of parent members in governing bodies play a significant role in their ability to carry out their expected functions (Ogina, 2017). The narratives of SGB chairpersons who participated in this study show that they do not fully understand their role as the parent component of school governing bodies. For instance, Melusi, a SGB chairperson, indicated that he does not know how to manage the school finances because he has not received any training. He lamented:

As a chairperson of the SGB, I do not know how to manage the finances of the school since I have not received any form of training. Some SGB members have instructed me to check if the principal is stealing money from the school. This has caused conflict between these SGB members and the principal and has subsequently hindered the performance of this school.

Adding to the above view is Mpiyakhe, another SGB chairperson, who said:

I have observed that some of the members that I serve within the governing body do not know what their role entails. . . . The role of SGB members is actually in the boardroom where they should be developing school policies and supporting the principal. However, this is not the case at this school because SGB members frustrate the principal since they do not play an active role in drawing up the code of conduct for learners, admission policy, finance policy, and maintenance of school buildings.

Mpiyakhe believed that the principal has abused her power in school governance matters owing to parent governors' illiteracy, explaining:

As SGB members, we were not consulted on the dismissal of dedicated teachers. When we questioned her regarding this matter, she said that there was no need for her to consult us. From my knowledge, the SGB should have a say in the appointment and dismissal of SGB teachers. This principal abuses her power by virtue of her position and as a result, this school is subsequently declining in academic performance.

The SGB chairpersons who participated in this study were adamant that they, together with fellow parent governors, do not fully understand their roles. The SGB is a significant structure in schools, involving different stakeholders who are democratically elected; it stands in a position of trust towards the school (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). According to the latter source, SGBs are entrusted with numerous governance functions, which are key to the existence and success of a school. The full potential of SGBs cannot be realised if parents, who form a larger component of this structure, do not have a clear understanding of their role. While scholars (e.g. Mestry, 2018; Ogina, 2017; Xaba, 2011) have reported on the capacity of SGB members, this finding goes one step further to show the consequence of the capacity lack, which is its contribution to school decline.

Teacher union's interference in instructional and teacher appointment processes

Teacher unions are legally recognised as organised labour in education with specific responsibilities including securing better working conditions for teachers and engaging them in innovative teaching methods to enhance educational quality (Mafisa, 2017). Stakeholders who participated in this study lamented the teacher union's interference in instructional processes as a contributor to school decline. Khaya, a school principal, had the following to say:

SADTU is radical and it is sometimes difficult to work with members of this union. For example, they rejected every proposal that I put forth to remedy the decline in the school. One of the proposals that I had put forth was intervention classes to provide academic support to learners. SADTU members (teachers) abused their power by influencing other teachers in this school not to participate in the intervention classes without compensation. Due to financial constraints, the school does not have the funds to compensate teachers. SADTU members have turned most teachers into

radicals who do not commit themselves to improving the academic performance of the school.

Melusi, a SGB chairperson, also expressed his discontent about a teacher union's interference at this school. He had this to say:

As a SGB chairperson, I spend most of my time at this school and I have observed the abuse of power by teacher unions and the implications thereof. Union meetings take place on weekdays during instructional time. The teacher union influences all teachers at this school to attend these meetings. When this occurs, learners are left alone in classes with no teachers to teach them. . . . Unfortunately, we cannot prevent teachers from attending union meetings since the Employment of Educators Act gives them the right to do so.

Fikani, a circuit manager, brought out a different interference by teacher unions:

The South African education system has been prone to the deployment of union leaders in schools. I have observed that teachers who hold leadership positions in teacher unions get promoted to departmental heads, deputy principals, and principals. . . . As a result, newly appointed leaders struggle to maintain the status quo in terms of performance and subsequently, schools begin to sink. . . . Sadly, I cannot challenge the promotion of these candidates because they go through the interview process and are awarded high scores by the interview committees to get the leadership positions.

In line with Fikani's view, Siyanda, a circuit manager, implied that candidates who are union affiliates influence the selection processes:

Some of these parent governors are illiterate or less literate and the South African Schools Act affords them powers to select and recommend a candidate to be a principal of a school. Sometimes candidates use the literacy status of the parent component of SGB to their advantage, and this is done behind closed doors. Parents are offered bribes and considering that some of them are unemployed and have no source of income, they accept the bribes. From my observation, the candidates who get promoted through manipulating parents do not have an excellent track record of producing remarkable learner academic results. Their appointment normally lowers the morale in the school.

The above extracts reveal a teacher union that seems to overstep its mark by interfering with other stakeholders' roles to achieve its agendas. Holding meetings during instructional times and leaving learners unattended are not desired in schools, but this happens under the banner of teachers' rights to participate in a union. Again, the reported interference with the appointments of school leaders would be a disservice to teachers, learners, and communities who would subsequently work with a less competent principal. Scholars such as Msila (2014) and Zengele (2013) have also reported on the interference of unions in schools.

Cultural mechanisms contributing to school decline

Two themes related to cultural mechanisms emerged from the participants' narratives, namely, teacher misconduct owing to a lack of accountability, and learners' exposure to drugs.

Teacher misconduct owing to a lack of accountability

Teacher misconduct appeared to be a common concern among stakeholders. The stakeholders' narratives suggest that teachers are behaving inappropriately in their schools because principals are not holding them accountable. Thabiso, for instance, indicated that the principal does not question teachers who are consistently absent from work:

The principal at this school fails to hold teachers accountable for unprofessional conduct. Some teachers are consistently absent from school and their conduct is not questioned. The principal allows these teachers to sign the time book despite not reporting to work. The continuation of this practice enables teachers to do as they please because they know that there is a lack of accountability in the school.

Andile has also observed teachers' misbehaviour at his school:

At this school, we have teachers who bring intoxicating substances to the school premises, deliberately stay away from school, refuse to go to class to teach, and challenge the management authority of departmental heads and the deputy principal. Based on the examples that I have cited, the Employment of Educators Act clearly states principals can charge teachers for insubordination. However, this has not happened.

Fikani also identified teacher misconduct as a challenge in schools under his district:

As a circuit manager, I have observed that, in my district, there is a lot of inappropriate behaviour among teachers in declining schools and this is not in line with the Employment Educators Act. . . . teachers report to work and do not honour their periods, and this subsequently affects teaching and learning time.

Harriet, a departmental head, explained a different form of misconduct perpetuated by SMT members:

The departmental heads and the principal in this school, force teachers to inflate marks so that learners have good continuous assessment [CASS] marks. This practice backfires because the CASS marks are not a true reflection of the learners' performance. I have observed this when learners perform badly in their final examinations, and we see a huge discrepancy between their CASS marks and the final examination marks.

The above excerpts show that principals fail to hold teachers accountable for misconduct, which has become a norm in declining schools. This is concerning because principals should be applying relevant laws and policies to eradicate such misconduct but are not. In support of this, Ayechew Ayenalem et al. (2023) asserted that the lack of proper accountability measures in schools causes teacher misconduct.

Learners' exposure to drugs

Townships are characterised by numerous social ills, including drug abuse (Motseke, 2013). The stakeholders who participated in the inquiry reported herein also observed the detrimental effect of learners' exposure to drugs. Sbusiso, a principal, explained that some of his learners are using drugs excessively and, as a result, are unable to concentrate in class:

Khondlo High School is facing an enormous challenge of learners coming to school intoxicated with drugs. Some of our learners use drugs, particularly *insangu* [marijuana] before they come to school. When they enter the school premises, they are highly intoxicated. For this reason, these learners are unable to concentrate in class when teachers are teaching.

Thabiso, a teacher, shared a similar sentiment:

Drug dealing in this school has had a negative impact on the academic progress of learners . . . [this] reminds me of an incident that took place in February 2019 when a learner was caught with a bag full of drugs. When questioned, the learner revealed that he had been selling drugs to learners on behalf of drug merchants from the community. The police were called into the school to handle the matter as it was beyond the teachers' control. After the police had left, matters got worse at the school. The learners who were supposedly customers of the drug dealer got violent and were throwing stones at teachers. That being the case, the school was closed for three days.

Rani, another teacher, explained that drug dealing continues despite police intervention:

The use of drugs by learners in this school has hindered our teaching and learning. There is a lot of drug dealing in this school, and it is done by learners. As much as we have security systems in place, they are ineffective as we are not allowed to search learners. We also call police officers to do raids, however, drug dealing still carries on. This negatively impacts teaching and learning.

Khaya, a principal, was also frustrated by learners' exposure to drugs:

I have observed that these learners fall into the trap of using and selling drugs. The academic performance of these learners has declined since they divert their attention from learning to using and selling drugs. It is quite disturbing because some of these learners are highly intellectual. As a principal, I have tried to intervene by involving parents in addressing the inappropriate behaviour of these learners. However, some parents are not supportive in assisting me to correct such behaviour.

Drug usage and drug dealing appear to be an overwhelming challenge faced by educators in the sampled declining schools. The narratives suggest that educators in these schools feel helpless because their attempts to fight the drug scourge have been in vain. The drug scourge is difficult to eradicate in township schools because learners can easily access drugs from their homes and communities (Maserumule et al., 2019).

Agential mechanisms contributing to school decline

Two themes emerged regarding agential mechanisms contributing to school decline. These themes are compromised teacher agency, and poor instructional leadership by school leaders.

Compromised teacher agency

Teacher agency refers to the capacity for a teacher, in consultation with learners and colleagues, to act wilfully and intentionally to achieve predetermined educational purposes and goals (Spink, 2021). The stories of stakeholders suggest that a lack of resources and overcrowded classrooms in the declining schools compromise teacher agency. Rani, a post Level 1 teacher, lamented the shortage of teaching resources, which she believed is a limitation:

I teach about 200 Grade 9 learners in this school and the school could only afford to buy 35 textbooks. I am at my wit's end because I do not know which criteria to use in distributing the textbooks to learners considering the amount of units I have.

Sbusiso, a principal, identified overcrowding as a challenge teacher battle with in his school:

These working conditions, particularly overcrowded classes, have brought many challenges for teachers at this school. Firstly, in overcrowded classrooms, teachers are unable to give learners individual attention. Secondly, teachers are unable to discipline unruly learners in overcrowded classrooms. Thirdly, monitoring the work done by learners during lesson time is a challenge for teachers since there is not enough space in the classroom for them to walk around.

From the above extracts, we learn that a shortage of resources and overcrowded classrooms constrain the teacher agency in declining schools. While teaching is a core responsibility of teachers, the shortage of resources appears to lead to loss of morale that subsequently constrains teacher performance (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

Poor instructional leadership by school leaders

Poor instructional leadership by school leaders appears to be a recurring problem in schools, which constitutes this study's research site. Andile, the departmental head, indicated that his principal and deputy principal did not support the academic intervention programme he devised with his colleagues to enhance the school's academic results:

There was a time when I drew up a study timetable for Grade 12 learners where they would attend afternoon classes so that their teachers could assist them. I stayed in the afternoons to monitor these classes. Unfortunately, that came to an end when the principal stripped me of this duty and assigned it to the deputy principals who failed to sustain this programme.

Thabiso, a teacher, complained about his principal who fails to protect instructional time:

It is concerning that learners are not afraid of the principal, they just go into his office and demand for the school to close early. Instead of disciplining learners for making such demands, the principal gives a go-ahead for the school to close. The SGB does not hold the principal accountable for closing the school early since they are in cahoots in pocketing the funds of the school.

Interestingly, Sbusiso, a principal, blamed himself for his failure to provide professional development opportunities to his teachers:

Some of our teachers are not doing justice in terms of teaching and learning during intervention classes. When I question them regarding this matter, they say that professional development workshops conducted by the DBE do not capacitate them enough with teaching skills. I am partly to blame as I have not done anything from a school level to enhance the teaching skills of these teachers.

The preceding excerpts reveal that school leaders lack instructional leadership competency, which is the principals' core function. They show that a principal's incompetence could be a setback in a school's attempt to achieve effective teaching and learning. This finding is in line with that of Bayat et al. (2014), who maintained that principals who are not good instructional leaders are likely to struggle to ensure quality teaching and learning in their schools.

Discussion and conclusion

In presenting the findings, we adopted a dissected approach and discussed the mechanisms contributing to school decline around the three subsets of the research puzzle (structural, agential, and cultural). In this section, we continue with the dissected approach to present lessons drawn from the findings. Firstly, the finding relating to structural mechanisms centred on three critical structural components in schools: principal, SGB, and teacher union. Archer (1995) stated that a structure comprises roles, positions, policies, and systems. It constitutes a foundational arrangement of an organisation. In this study, the newly appointed principals, parent governors, and teacher union representatives appeared to lack role clarity or were confused; as a result, they were not effective at their roles. The confusion observed in these stakeholders reflects role ambiguity, which occurs when a person is confused about how to perform their role, or when they are assigned a role without clear direction (Jalagat, 2017).

Secondly, two cultural mechanisms emerged as findings, namely: teacher misconduct owing to a lack of accountability, and learners' exposure to drugs. These findings reflect toxic

behaviours by key stakeholders (teachers and learners). Toxic behaviours were defined by Kusy and Holloway (2009) as behavioural patterns that impede organisational productivity and work-life effectiveness. We conclude that the prevalent toxic behaviours by teachers and learners in the declining schools constitute a toxic culture that is counterproductive to the schools' core business, hence the decline.

Finally, the findings also revealed two agential mechanisms that seem to contribute to school decline in township secondary schools: compromised teacher agency, and poor instructional leadership by school leaders. Archer (1995) described agency as the human ability to act, influence, and manipulate a situation. Our findings show that teachers are compromised by a lack of resources and overcrowded classrooms, and cannot teach effectively. Also, principals lacked leadership skills and competencies; this compromised their agency, which is significant for the effectiveness of schools. Archer (1985) asserted that agency is never-ending and essential to the organisation's continuation. Ideally, the agency should transform the structure (Archer, 1995), however, this was not the case in the township secondary schools where the study took place. Instead, we learned that a constrained agency may set the structure to imperfection.

Structure, culture, and agency are key subsets of every institution, and they operate in tandem with one another (Archer, 1995). The findings of this study show paralysis across the subsets, leading to school decline in the sampled declining schools. The paralysis in one subset led to paralysis in another; for instance, the incompetence of a principal in the structure led to a toxic culture where teachers do as they please. This resonates with Archer's (1985) notion that an interplay exists between culture, structure, and agency. Apart from presenting a clinical understanding of school decline causes, the findings of this study suggest that intervention initiatives must also be multi-domain in nature. Given that paralysis appeared to be prevalent across domains, interventions must be directed to different subsets to mend the structure, culture, and agency in these declining schools.

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